

Examining LGBTQ Workplace Dynamics: A Systematic Review Of Discrimination's Detriments And Inclusion's Strategic Imperatives

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Abstract

As visibility of LGBTQ individuals continues to rise globally, workplaces remain critical sites where inclusion can either be realized or denied. This study presents a systematic literature review that discusses the dual landscape of workplace experiences—discrimination and inclusion. Employing the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analysis (PRISMA) statement, a total of 122 studies were reviewed. Findings highlight that the discrimination, both formal and informal, including microaggressions, is deeply rooted in cultural factors and reinforced by structural or organizational deficiencies. The discriminatory practices not only limit the personal and professional development of individuals but also hinder overall organizational effectiveness. In light of this scenario, the review underscores the critical importance of fostering workplace inclusion in enhancing psychological safety, innovation, job satisfaction, and business performance. Further, the evidence affirms that LGBTQ inclusion is not merely a matter of human rights but also holds strategic importance for sustainable organizational success. The study offers theoretical and practical insights while underlining the exigent need for deeper empirical research, especially in non-Western contexts. Future research directions are also proposed by the study to address current gaps and foster more inclusive work environments globally.

Keywords: LGBTQ, PRISMA, Workplace discrimination, Workplace inclusion, Strategic tool

1. Introduction

Among the various social movements that have shaped modern history, the LGBTQ community stands as one of the most prominent and enduring struggles for acceptance, equality, and human rights. LGBTQ people are increasingly becoming vocal about their diverse identity and sexuality due to evolving political dynamics (Wald et al., 1996) and growing societal tolerance (Goryunova et al., 2021). Estimates suggest that there are approximately 8.8 million LGBTQ people in the United States, 3.7 million in the United Kingdom (Gates, 2006), and over 488,000 individuals who identify as third genders in India (Census 2011). Recent demographic trends further reflect an increase in individuals openly identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual in different countries.

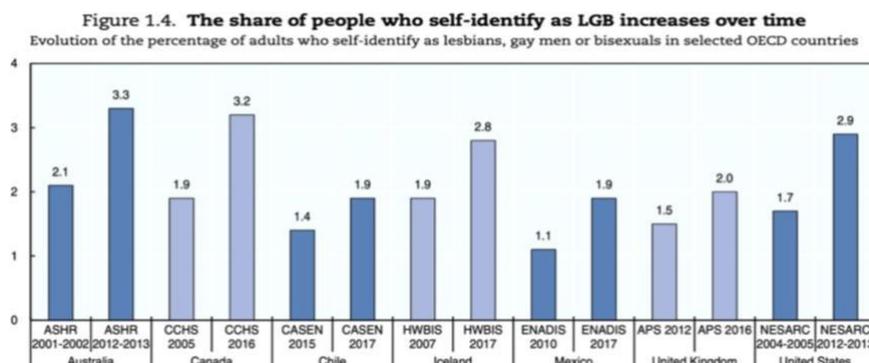


Figure 1: Increasing visibility of LGBTQ people across different countries (OECD, 2019).

As LGBTQ visibility rises, workplaces have emerged as a critical site for either reinforcing exclusion or advancing inclusion. Workplaces function as a significant source for social status, economic independence, and personal dignity, highlighting the importance of inclusion. However, LGBTQ people continued to face discrimination, harassment, lack of representation in leadership positions, and other employment-related obstacles (Sears et al., 2009; Papadaki et al., 2021; McKinsey, 2022; CAP, 2023). For instance, the Trevor Project found that over one-third of LGBTQ youth reported discrimination from supervisors, co-workers, and in the hiring process (The Trevor Project, 2021). Similarly, a study conducted by the Williams Institute at UCLA in 2021 indicated that 67.5% of the respondents had been exposed to negative comments, slurs, or jokes about LGBTQ identities (Sears et al., 2021). This indicates the significant void on inclusion system of organizations which began implementing policies and practices (HRC, 2022) and lack of engagement by other organization toward inclusion.

The non-acceptance and discrimination against LGBTQ people not only limit its ill effects to individual well-being but also extend to the success and performance of organizations (Zlateva et al., 2022; Brahma et al., 2023). So, the current landscape calls for a comprehensive understanding of two interrelated phenomena: workplace inclusion and workplace discrimination. The paper through systematic review seeks to address this scholarly need by exploring both the constructs in depth.

Specifically, the objectives of this review are

1) To map and critically synthesize scholarly evidence on the concept of workplace discrimination and its fallouts.

2) To examine workplace inclusion with respect to LGBTQ people and its strategic significance.

Unlike other reviews addressing singular aspects of LGBTQ workplace dynamics, this review, utilizing academic articles as well as reports, has addressed both crucial aspects. The study has highlighted the urgent need to work on the loopholes in inclusion systems of organizations deemed progressive. Also, the study issues a cautionary note for organizations exhibiting passivity to engage in LGBTQ inclusion as a means to improve organizational performance and reputation.

2. Research Methodology

To conduct a systematic literature review, The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) statement is used (Page et al., 2021). Papers related to the workplace discrimination and workplace inclusion in terms of LGBTQ workforce are reviewed. To identify the relevant articles, the online database search was undertaken on Scopus.

2.1. Keywords

- “LGBT” OR “LGBTQ” OR “Queer” OR “Transgender” OR “Sexual orientation” OR “Gender Identity” OR “Sexual Minorities”
- “Workplace Discrimination” OR “Employment Discrimination”
- “Workplace Inequality” OR “Workplace Inclusion” OR “Workplace Inclusivity” Or “Employment Inclusion” Or “Workplace Diversity”

2.2. Screening process

An initial search using the aforementioned keywords led to 742 articles. Inclusion and exclusion filters within database were applied, resulting in removal of 519 articles and retrieval of 223 articles for further screening. After removing 7 duplicate articles, 216 articles were collected. Based on title, 41 articles were excluded, leaving 175 articles for further screening.

At this stage, 111 articles were removed, and 64 articles were retained. Further, the review has identified studies from supplementary sources (i.e.) 39 articles from cross referencing, 17 reports, 01 policy document and 01 web-article. Finally, 122 studies in total were reviewed. The final set of

articles were categorized into two major areas: workplace discrimination and workplace inclusion. All selected studies were recorded in an excel sheet along with their key description.

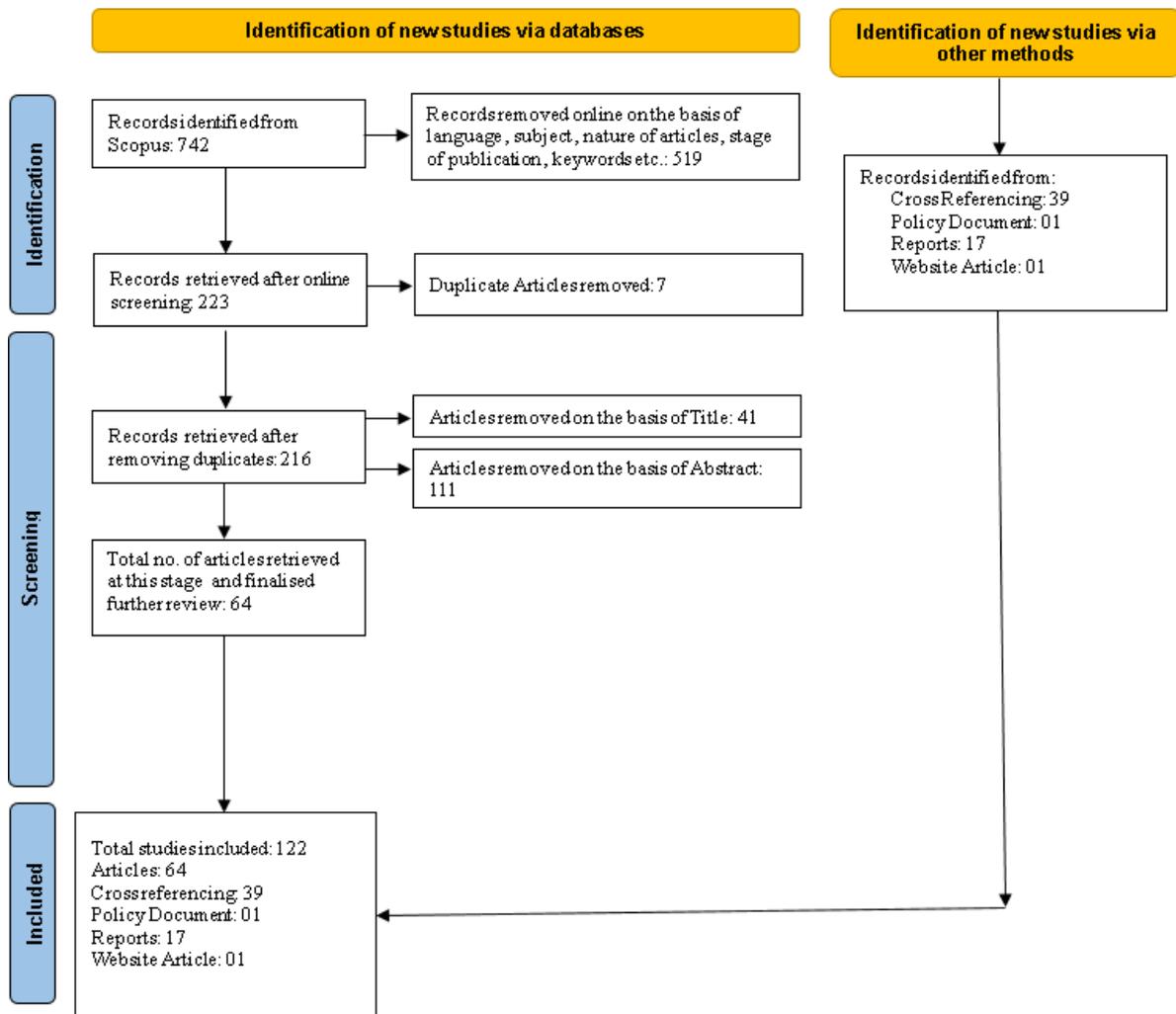
2.3. Inclusion criteria

- Participants in this research comprise working professionals who identify as LGBTQ or queer.
- This study includes empirical and review articles.
- Only the English-language articles were included.
- Articles consisting of terms ‘employment’ or ‘workplace’ or organization’ were included, with no specific focus on sectors.

2.4. Exclusion Criteria

- Irrelevant disciplines like mathematics, Psychology, Art & humanities etc. were excluded.
- Studies consisting of keyword like ‘parents’, ‘HIV’, ‘clinical study’, ‘medical’, ‘marriage’, ‘housing’ were excluded.
- Publications related to students, children, and juvenile.
- Articles addressing school, hospital, universities, sports related workplace were also excluded.

Table 1: The PRISMA Statement



3. Results:

The results section is organized into two sub-sections. The first sub-section discusses about workplace discrimination and its implication for both employees and employers. The second sub-section examines workplace inclusion and highlights its strategic significance and associated benefits.

3.1 Workplace Discrimination:

Discrimination is the unequal treatment of individuals or groups based on certain characteristics or perceived differences like sexual orientation, gender identity, ethnicity, religion, social class, etc. (Mishra & Mishra, 2015). Workplace discrimination presents as unjust or unfair treatment of job applicants or employees based on attributes that are unrelated to the job performance (Chung, 2001). Workplace discrimination generally affects minority groups such as women, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, and LGBTQ individuals.

Workplace discrimination occurs in two forms, i.e., direct or formal discrimination and indirect or informal discrimination. Formal discrimination involves systematic practices within an institution that limit the employment opportunities, promotions, equitable compensation, and professional development (Levine & Leonard, 1984; Bhankaraully et al., 2023). According to several studies, discrimination related to hiring is the predominant form of formal discrimination (Drydakis, 2015; Laurent & Mihoubi, 2017). A study highlighted that gay males are disproportionately excluded from job invitations, receiving only 1% compared to 64% extended to cisgender males (Badgett et al., 2021). Wage inequality has also been found in fewer studies (Chen & Zhou, 2021). In contrast, informal discrimination arises from a lack of formal policies, enabling harassment, exclusion, and other forms of ill-treatment caused by unconscious biases or latent prejudice (Ozeren, 2014; Bhankaraully et al., 2023). This includes derisive laughing (Klages & Wirth, 2013), incorrect use of pronouns leading to misidentification (Gordon & Pratama, 2016), instances of both physical and verbal mistreatment (Hadden et al., 2020). Subtle forms also include discriminatory dress codes and binary gender forms (Maji et al., 2023).

3.1.1. Antecedents of Workplace discrimination:

Factors	
Cultural factors	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. False stereotype (Drydakis, 2025) 2. Religious Fundamentalism. (Huffaker and Kwon, 2016) These factors give rise to ideology of heteronormativity (Robertson, 2017), hegemonic masculinity (Rene Gregory, 2011) and also results in stigma against LGBTQ people (Lewis, 2009).
Organizational factors	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lack of awareness relating to diverse sexual orientation and gender identity (Vongvisitsin and Wong, 2021). 2. Resistance to change among people (Hill, 2009). 3. Lack of protocols to manage sexual prejudice (Priola et al., 2014). 4. Rigid power structures prioritizing heterosexual people and subordinating transgender people (Worst & O'Shea, 2020). 5. Symbolic inclusion with no real power and support to LGBTQ people (Calvard et al., 2020; Tyler & Vachhani, 2021).
Leader-specific factors	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Neglecting attitude towards diversity (Perry et al., 2021).

	<p>2. Biased management & insufficient commitment (Saunderson, 2004; Pulcher et al., 2022).</p> <p>3. Perception against LGBTQ people as less competent or inappropriate (Dray et al., 2020; Morgenorth et al., 2024).</p>
Economic factors	<p>1. Pandemic-induced constraint causing unemployment and under employment (Martino et al., 2021; Mendes & Pereira, 2021).</p>
Individual factors	<p>1. Disclosure & transitioning of one's identity as gay, lesbian or transgender (Parini, 2022; Voina et al., 2022).</p> <p>2. Intersection of marginalized identities (Cech & Rothwell, 2020; Kinitz et al., 2022)</p>

3.1.2. Consequences of Workplace Discrimination

Workplace discrimination not only makes LGBTQ people vulnerable (Peel et al., 2023) but also negatively impacts the success of organizations. Primarily, workplace discrimination compels LGBTQ employees to engage in identity management and disclosure dilemmas, navigating complex decisions about when, where, and how to reveal their identities (Tatum et al., 2017; Noronha et al., 2022). A discriminatory environment diminishes the commitment and job satisfaction among employees (Galupo & Resnick, 2016; Holmes, 2019; Opall, 2021; Rhead et al., 2021), which results in reduced creativity, innovation, decision-making, and productivity (Volpone & Avery, 2013; Bonaventura & Biondo, 2016; Ivanovic, 2023). Discriminatory experiences also contribute to withdrawal (Voina et al., 2022) and missed opportunities (Santos, 2023) in terms of career advancement. Further, prolonged exposure to discriminatory practices and their consequences causes minority stress among people, as conceptualized by Meyer (1995). This stress affects both, mental and physical health, causing depression, fear, helplessness, headache, fatigue (Cochran, 2001; Burgess et al., 2007; Okechukwu et al., 2014; Voina et al., 2022; Santos, 2023), and emotional exhaustion among people (Halliwell, 2018; Chen & Li, 2020).

For organizations, the loss of productivity, engagement, innovation, and creativity from LGBTQ employees (Gacilo et al., 2018; Krishnan, 2018) ultimately impairs overall organizational performance (Brahma et al., 2023). The negative effects of discrimination extend beyond, as it increases the attrition of skilled personnel through voluntary withdrawal (Ragins & Cornwell, 2001) and deters the prospective talent who seek inclusive workplaces (Suen et al., 2016; Bailinson et al., 2020). A study by McKinsey shows that nearly 40 percent of all survey respondents (LGBTQ & non-LGBTQ) had rejected a job offer or decided not to pursue a position because of lack of inclusion in hiring companies (Bailinson et al., 2020). With growing societal tolerance towards LGBTQ people, both customers and investors now favor organizations upholding inclusive and progressive values. Consequently, the failure to be socially responsible and accountable in managing a diverse workforce harms the reputation of the organization as well as limits profitability avenues (Li & Nagar, 2013; Baboolall et al., 2021; SHRM, 2023).

3.2 Workplace inclusion

The visibility of LGBTQ people in different spheres of society is steadily increasing, so is scholarly research on their equality and inclusion. In literature, inclusion has been conceptualized as a process (Dobusch, L. 2014), as a condition (Herek, 1993), and as a feeling or ability (Office of Personnel Management, 2011). Workplace inclusion, in a broader sense, refers to the integration of diversity into the organizational structure and the extent to which employees feel valued in the workgroup and in the organization as a whole (Shore, 2011). Although different authors offer varied interpretations, a common thread in all definitions is the sense of belongingness and uniqueness (Shore et al., 2011; Nishii, 2013; Hunt, 2023). Additional dimensions that make up workplace inclusion are: spaces free

from discrimination, organizational support for disclosure, instrumental & psychological safety, collaboration, participation and decision-making power (Pless, 2004; Roberson, 2006; Office of Personnel Management, 2011; Hirak et al., 2012; Nishii, 2013; Chanda et al., 2016; U.S. OPM, 2016; Roumpi, 2020; Hunt, 2023).

Furthermore, several authors in their reviews have offered approaches towards creating inclusive workplaces. Nishii (2013) emphasized that workplace inclusion begins with equitable employment practices to effective integration of individual differences and their participation in decision-making. Daya (2014) outlined a multi-level framework, beginning from the individual level and extending to the interpersonal level and organizational level at large. In a similar vein, Shore et al. (2018) focused on the work group level and organizational level. Nguyen et al. (2024) conceptualized inclusion at the individual level, the aggregate level, and as a process. Furthermore, Jennings et al. (2024) identified organizational climate, leadership, and practices as key components in fostering workplace inclusion. Below discussed are the policies and practices implemented by the progressive organizations to foster inclusive workplaces.

- **Workplace policies:** These policies convey the acceptable and unacceptable behavior, serving as formal expressions of organizational stance on social responsibility and commitment towards diversity (Galupo & Resnick, 2016; Pichler et al., 2018; Hossain et al., 2020). Majorly, these policies are of three forms: protection policies (Van den Bergh, 2004), process employment policies (Vongvisitsin & Wong, 2021), and work-life policies (Stavrou & Ierodiakonou, 2018).
- **Developmental initiatives:** Diversity trainings (Perales, 2022), mentoring (Shen et al., 2009), team-building activities (Zhou et al., 2021), sensitization programs, and counseling (Tshisa & van der Walt, 2021).
- **Voice mechanism:** A voice mechanism is a practice through which an organization allows employees to express concerns, share opinions, and participate in the decision-making process. Traditional ways to provide voices are, the grievance systems, collective bargaining, suggestion boxes, open-door policies, employee participation, participative performance appraisals, and computer-mediated communication (Bishop and Levine, 1999; Roberts, 2002). In contemporary workplaces, employee resource groups (Fraone et al., 2023) and allyship (Salter & Migliaccio, 2019) have emerged as key enablers.
- **Gender-Neutral Infrastructure:** This includes gender-neutral language (Roberson et al., 2024) and gender-neutral restrooms (Goryunova et al., 2021).
- **Public engagement:** Participation in events like pride parades, making donations to LGBTQ welfare groups, sponsor community events, and extending invitations to the same-sex partners (Van den Bergh, 2004; Vongvisitsin and Wong, 2021).

3.2.1 Benefits of LGBTQ workplace inclusion

Workplace inclusion, much like the detrimental effects of workplace discrimination, offers significant gains for both employee and organization. At the individual level, workplace inclusion has been found to alleviate stress among LGBTQ employees (Ragins et al., 2007) by creating awareness (Roumpi, 2022) and enhancing their social standing within the workplaces (Droogendyk et al., 2016). Numerous studies have highlighted the benefits associated with inclusive environments, like psychological & organizational safety (Hildebrand et al., 2020; Fletcher & Marvell, 2023), better interpersonal relations (Fletcher & Swierczynski, 2023), space for disclosure & authenticity (Jiang et al., 2019), opportunities for career advancement (Erskine & Bilimoria, 2019), and increased access to resources & networking (Wilkinson & Fay, 2011). These factors collectively foster the sense of belongingness & uniqueness (McNulty et al., 2018) and contribute to the health and well-being of LGBTQ employees (Chanda et al., 2016; Fletcher & Marvell, 2023).

The inclusive culture elevates job satisfaction (Cook & Glass, 2016; Vongvisitsin & Wong, 2021), leading to improved productivity, commitment, and creativity among LGBTQ employees (Badgett et

al., 2013). Such employees are more likely to demonstrate organizational citizenship behavior (Hyseni et al., 2023). At organizational level, the improved job experiences of employees, contributes positively to overall performance of the organizations (Pichler et al., 2018; Rahman et al., 2023). LGBTQ inclusion has also been found to enhance customer engagement. Pew Research Centre (2013) reveals that 25% of customers prefer brands that support gay inclusion, while Cooper (2017) reported a 39% increase in customer satisfaction linked to LGBTQ inclusion. The literature highlights that the pink market, or gay consumers with higher disposable income and strong brand loyalty, tends to prefer highly gay-friendly companies (Paul et al., 2011; Hildebrand et al., 2013; Open for Business, 2019). The positive impact extends to other profitability avenues in terms of higher stock market (Li & Nagar, 2013), positive return on investment (Opall, 2021), improved access to favorable credit environments (Jiraporn et al., 2019), higher future cash flows (Shen et al., 2017), and tapping into international markets (Open for Business, 2019). In line with these benefits, a study reports one standard deviation improvement in a company's Corporate Equality Index (CEI) corresponds to about a 7% gain in stock market valuation and a roughly 50 basis point boost in profitability (Fatmy et al., 2022). Similarly, Shanaev et al. (2023) found that LGBTQ-led firms generate excess returns ranging from 0.69% to 1.08%. In conclusion, LGBTQ inclusion yields multifaceted benefits, from a stronger public image and increased consumer demand to a lower cost of equity and reduced business (Hasan & Marwick, 2022).

4. Discussion

In a society where women's empowerment and other minority groups like disability and ethnic groups are getting acknowledgement (McKinsey, 2020; 2023), diverse sexual orientation and gender identity are often misunderstood dimensions. The systemic barriers and unconscious biases continue to hamper the inclusion of LGBT people and make them subjected to discrimination. Detailed research for understanding workplace discrimination and workplace inclusion with respect to LGBTQ people is not just a matter of academic interest but also a critical step for building an inclusive culture. So, the study, in order to add on to existing theory and to convey real-time picture, provides a comprehensive and evidence-based review of workplace discrimination and workplace inclusion as they pertain to LGBTQ individuals. The review also delves into the impact of both workplace discrimination and workplace inclusion on employees and organizational effectiveness. The study employed the PRISMA statement to address the overarching objectives. The findings from the review are summarized in the flowcharts given below.

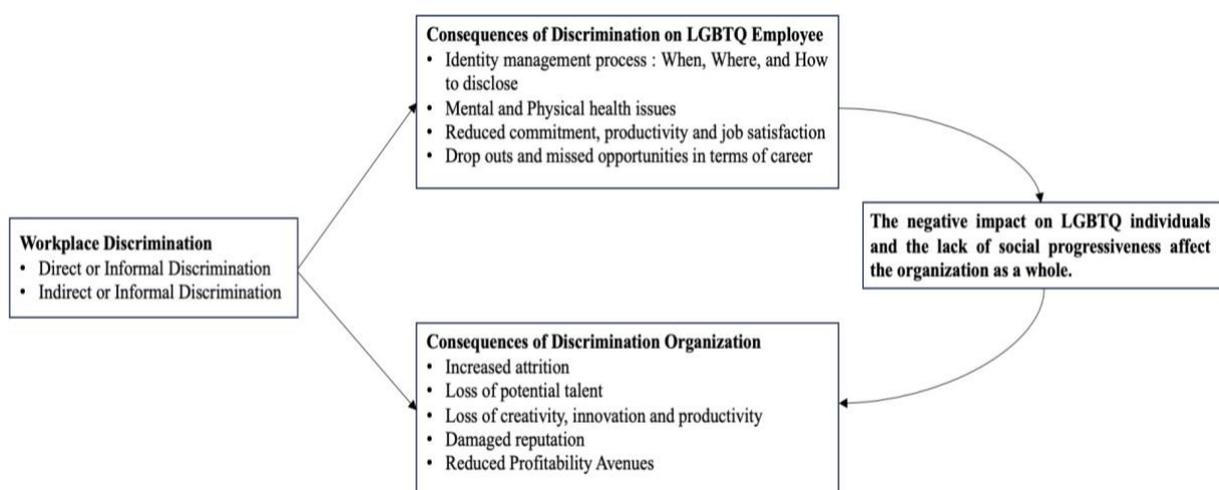


Figure 2: Consequences of Workplace Discrimination for Employee and Organization (Figure by Author)

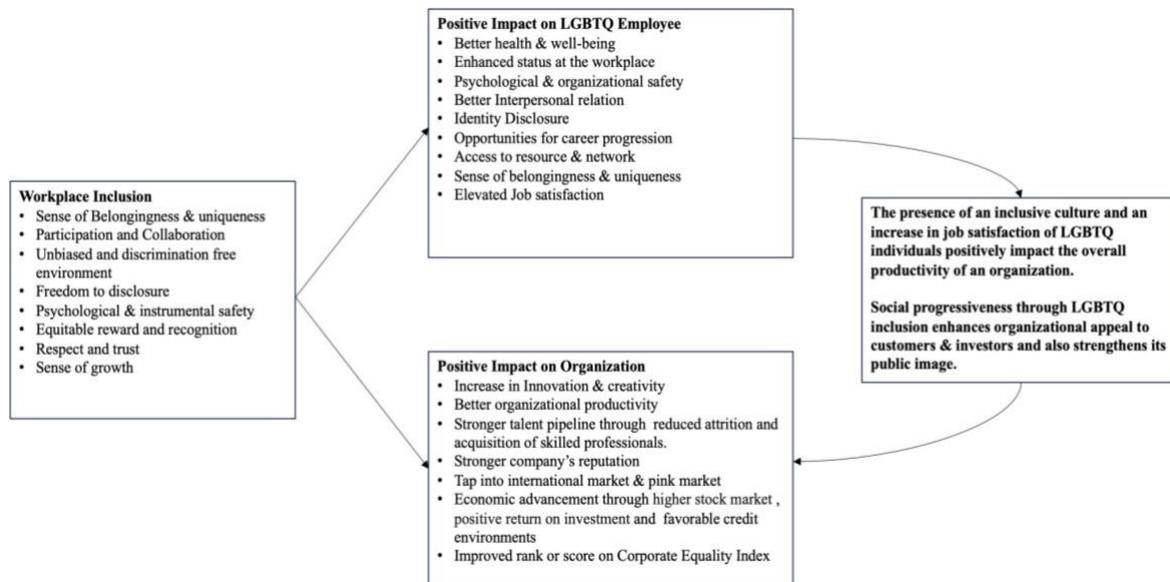


Figure 3: : Benefits of Workplace Inclusion for Employee and Organization (Figure by Author)

Review reveals that workplace discrimination, whether direct or in the form of microaggression, impacts not only the individual employee but also the organizational performance at large. The performance of the organization gets affected directly as well as through the way of unsatisfied employees. In contrast, the review highlights that meaningful LGBTQ workplace inclusion generates overarching benefits. Inclusive organizations experience elevated job satisfaction, increased productivity, creativity, and organizational citizenship behavior not only among LGBTQ employees but also among other cis-gender employees. The internal gains are complemented by the external gains in the form of stronger brand reputation, greater consumer loyalty, and improved financial outcomes.

The review also reveals that the inclusion of LGBTQ people is not merely a human rights imperative but a strategic asset that contributes to sustainable business performance. The paper contributes to academic and practical discourse by synthesizing a wide range of scholarly research to offer a dual perspective: the cost of exclusion and the value of inclusion. The paper holds practical implications as it provides a roadmap for the cultivation of a truly inclusive culture. The paper demonstrates that creating inclusion is possible not only through policies but also through change management, inclusive leadership, and continuous engagement. For policymakers and HR practitioners, the evidence underscores the necessity of re-evaluating existing labor and anti-discrimination frameworks to address the evolving realities of gender and sexual diversity. The paper also conveys the urgent need to fill the void in the existing inclusion system of organizations and to adopt some innovative strategy to sensitize people and create inclusion at every level in the organization. This implication can help in reducing the instances of discrimination to a certain extent. Also, the study is useful for emerging scholars to understand vital aspects of discrimination and inclusion with less content.

5. Limitations and future research direction

The study is not without limitations, offering meaningful avenues for future research. This study relied solely on Scopus, which, while being comprehensive, may have limited the scope of literature surveyed. The review is restricted to English-language articles, potentially excluding important research published in other languages. The study has screened articles containing keywords ‘workplaces or ‘organization’; authors in the future can make the review sector specific.

Further, the findings underscore the need for in-depth investigation into lived experiences of individuals with intersectional identities. There is a need to examine how organizations shape the

visibility and acceptance of non-binary identities. Also, there is a need for longitudinal study on microaggression, the common form of discrimination in contemporary workplaces. This would provide empirical insights into whether the frequency and impact of microaggression have diminished over the years or are the same. At last, it has been found that most of the research around LGBTQ has been done in Western countries, so there is a pressing need for more studies from Western countries. This research would yield distinct inclusion challenges due to varied cultural norms and systemic structure.

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