

## PRIDE MONTH STORIES

## “One does not have to be gay to defend gay rights”

A couple of weeks ago, as I was having a quick lunch alone in between client meetings at a chic restaurant in Port-Louis, I could not help but overhear some loud cheery conversations amongst a group next to me. They seemed to be colleagues, possibly from the legal profession or professional services consultants. Amongst the diverse group, gender and ethnic mix, one middle aged man was clearly overpowering the conversation and banter – possibly the manager or lead partner – and went on to tell a story.

I was not really listening to the details but what really caught my attention was the punch line “*bé parski li p\*\*\*\* li?*”. The *p\*\*\*\** was a “*gro zoure?*” referring to a gay man in a pejorative way. At that point, I wanted to check his colleagues’ reaction – a couple of them chuckled but it was clear that the punch line was uncomfortable for most and they perhaps felt compelled to fake it to laugh, albeit subdued, at the boss’s joke... This made me wonder how many homophobic jokes are told blatantly in Mauritian businesses and workplaces every day; how many are called out and how many people really feel empowered to speak up...

In contrast, the next day, as I was connected to Teams for a videocall with a client, a head of ethics and compliance, I noticed that my client’s Teams background had changed to a picture of very colourful umbrellas – similar to the ones we see at Caudan Waterfront from time to time. “*Oh! That’s a very colourful background!*”, I remarked.



Rainbow colours, which represent togetherness, is a universally recognized symbol for LGBTQIA+ pride.

“*Of course! It’s Pride Month!*” my client replied. Rainbow colours are symbolical to support for gay rights. I then went on to tell my client about the restaurant incident of the day before, and my client was clearly shocked. Gasp, gasp, on both sides.

Interestingly, at the beginning of the month, when I was finalising the draft for a new code of conduct for another client with operations in Africa, I was pleasantly surprised to find that my client had expanded the anti-harassment section to make specific reference to a commitment to ensuring that there is no form

of harassment in the workplace towards “LGBTQIA+ people”. I must admit, despite having written several codes of conduct in my career, I had to go look up the full definition of the acronym: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex or asexual persons. It was clear to me that such was a company that wanted to stress the point about a current social issue and not shy away from mentioning it in a board-level policy document, published publicly.

In our pursuit to achieving the protection of human rights, a hot

topic in Mauritius currently, given the recent scandals related to law enforcement, children, women and vulnerable people, we should make sure that we do not pick and choose what human rights mean. Pride Month (June) is here to remind us about the rights of the LGBTQIA+ community but also the rights of any group of people vulnerable to criticism, abuse, mockery, bullying, violence, harassment or intimidation.

In business, drafting a code of conduct, giving everyone a copy, and conducting training on what is acceptable and not acceptable in

the workplace goes some way to contributing to a country’s progress on human rights. It should really be common sense not to make derogatory, homophobic, racist, sexist or other unwanted jokes at work but I keep hearing horror stories from friends – one is too many already.

*P\*\*\*\** and other pejorative words should not be normalised as acceptable or tolerated in business and our society. Mauritian businesses have a duty to spell out the obvious to their staff and the tone should really come from the top. Assuming the man at the restaurant who uttered the bad word is the team manager, then he is really not leading by example and his colleagues might only feel able to tell him off if the company policy was clear and applicable at all levels of seniority.

By ensuring that there is an inclusive culture at work, staff will feel wanted, be happier and not bitter towards one another because of malicious, clumsy or ill-thought comments passed by a colleague, or worse, the boss! One does not have to be a woman to defend women’s rights. In the same way, one does not have to be gay to defend gay rights. Not everyone is brave or vocal enough or wants to be an advocate for human rights, but the least we can do is not say anything hurtful.

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