

AWARE's position on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression (SOGIE)

AWARE supports individual autonomy and non-discrimination. Although our work focuses on gender-based barriers to equality, our overall human rights orientation means that we must recognise human rights as interlinked and indivisible. Gender equality cannot be achieved without also understanding and addressing other forms of discrimination. For instance, many gender stereotypes are constructed in relation to one's sexuality (e.g. girls must be feminine and pretty to attract boys). An individual expressing a non-heterosexual orientation is not just discriminated against for their sexual orientation but often also penalised for not conforming to expectations of their gender, and vice versa. Such links make it important for us to treat discrimination along the lines of sexual orientation and expression as seriously as we do along gender, ethnicity and religion. Similarly, we should also be mindful of discrimination based on gender identity and expression. Gender identity is defined as how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves, which may or may not conform to their sex assigned by others at birth (typically based on their genitals and other secondary characteristics).¹ There is still immense societal, peer and sometimes even state pressure for one's gender identity and expression to conform to normative notions of masculinity and femininity. Such pressures are often restrictive and limit one's autonomy to work and live freely.

377A, Pink Dot and media censorship

We oppose S377A and censorship of LGBT experiences and material in the media. S377A unfairly criminalises and stigmatises sexual activity between men. Our SACC experience reveals that such stigma also discourages men who engage in same-sex relations from reporting sexual violence against them to the police. Censorship of materials that 'promote homosexuality' in the media also serves to stigmatise LGBTs as the only LGBT-related materials allowed are ones that portray them in a negative light. We oppose such laws as they go against our goal to build a more inclusive and equal society, in which discrimination of any kind have no place. As such, we have also been vocal about a need for comprehensive anti-discrimination laws that recognise the need to protect against discrimination on grounds of SOGIE.

¹ Human Rights Campaign, <http://www.hrc.org/resources/sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity-terminology-and-definitions>

Objections to the LGBT 'lifestyle' have often come from the segments of society who hold up conservative religious standards as a universal basis for morality. As a secular organisation in a secular society, we uphold the view that no religion's beliefs and views should be prioritised over another in matters of law and governance. Cultural or religious beliefs should also not be a basis and legitimate excuse for discrimination.

To truly meet the objectives of our organisation, we must consider the existence and needs of diverse groups. Though 'LGBT issues' per se are not the main focus of our work at the moment, many of the issues we base our work around do affect the LGBT community, ranging from sexual violence in relationships to ageing and poverty. We seek to be mindful of the intersections of gender equality with LGBT equality and to take an inclusive approach in our advocacy. Our services and programmes are also provided on an inclusive and non-discriminatory basis.