

Why it's important to me to be a strong trans ally

18 Nov 2020

**GMB National Equality Forum Women's Lead Sarah James
writes on why it's important to be a strong trans ally**

Transgender Awareness Week is a time where we share and uplift the voices and experiences of the trans community, which includes celebrating the victories of trans folk while also remembering all those who have lost their lives to anti-trans violence.

Cis folk or people who do not identify as trans or non-binary, have an important part to play in supporting trans people, just as active straight allies have been for other parts of the LGBTQ+ community.

For many straight or heterosexual allies, knowing someone who is Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Queer and being aware of how to support LGBTQ+ in the workplace, is much more commonplace now.

And yet, when we discuss inclusion of our trans friends and family, there is much less certainty and confidence.

Trans employees often face distinct challenges in the workplace with recent research carried out by Stonewall highlighting that half of trans people (51%) have hidden their identity at work for fear of discrimination.

According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS) transgender people are "significantly more likely" to have been a victim of crime in England and Wales in the past year, with more than one in four people who are transgender (28 per cent) experiencing crime



compared with 14 per cent of cisgender individuals.

We have seen attacks on trans people increasing in 2020.

Now more than ever I am proud as GMB's elected National Equality Forum Women's Lead to say that GMB stand in solidarity with our trans sisters, brothers and non-binary siblings.

Like many cis people I admit that I had extremely limited knowledge on what being trans meant before I came into the trade union movement.

However, just because I had never knowingly met someone who was trans does not mean that those identities have never existed.

I remember listening to one of my trans sisters who made a very powerful statement at our regional womens' conference which has stayed with me over the past few years.

She showed a picture of a tin can marked sweet peas, but inside there were carrots and said:

"For me, this is what it's like to be transgender. Sometimes the wrong label just ends up on the wrong product. There's nothing wrong with the label it's self and there's nothing wrong with what's inside the can, they just don't match up. Yet at the end of the day what matters is what is inside of the can and no amount of stubborn denial by anyone will change what's inside from carrots to peas."

By working with and showing up to support our trans family I have learnt so much.

I am comfortable to take action about things that may affect trans people, such as the language people in a given space use, having bathrooms accessible to people of all genders (all-gender or gender neutral bathrooms), and creating an environment that feels comfortable for trans people to speak their truths.

I am not saying I am perfect and I will never be completely knowledgeable about the lived experiences of trans folk, but I have been taught that what's important is that, as an ally, I am putting in effort to understand and to amplify the voices of our trans and non-binary siblings and I call upon all cis members to do the same.

So what steps can we take to be a good trans ally in the workplace?

Listen

The first and easiest step to be an ally is to listen with an open mind to transgender people speaking for themselves. Talk to transgender people in your community.

Educate yourself

Check out books, films, YouTube channels, and trans blogs to find out more about



transgender people and the issues people within the community face.

Help to make your workplace truly trans-inclusive

Many employers will have an equality & diversity policy, but are the policies truly inclusive?

I am pleased that in my workplace, after working in conjunction with the organisations' LGBTQ+ Employee Network and the trans members, GMB have helped create a Trans Equality Guide and its associated Transition Support Plan which will be launched this week.

But being a good employer does not start and end with a policy, but it's good place to demonstrate that you want to be a truly inclusive employer

Sarah James

GMB National Equality Forum Women's Lead

