

LGBT aid workers: deployment dilemmas

LGBT aid workers and their managers confront a number of dilemmas in deciding whether LGBT staff will be safe – and accepted – working in certain countries.

The deployment manager's perspective

It was 5pm on a Friday night and I was dropping off my new colleague, Markus¹, at the guesthouse after a briefing for his forthcoming deployment to the field. He would be on a plane early the next morning. As Markus stepped out of the car he turned and said, "By the way, you do know that I'm openly gay, don't you?"

Well, actually, I didn't. Or rather I simply hadn't thought about his sexuality. But the field posting Markus was about to take up was in a country where homosexuality is criminalised and our organisation had a rather precarious relationship with a hostile and aggressive government that frequently harassed our national and international staff on the flimsiest of pretexts. The national media also publicised the government line that we were all spies, or immoral and sexually promiscuous.

As an adviser at headquarters, I felt very ill-equipped to deal with the situation. The time frame made it impossible to seek advice before Markus departed and none of the internal training I'd had had dealt with this issue.

I sat down to chat with Markus, and used carefully worded open questions to ask him what he thought the risks might be and how they could be managed. He didn't want to end up in a foreign jail, nor did he want to compromise the safety of national staff or our organisation. He decided that 'being discreet' was the only course of action – essentially, hiding his sexuality from everyone except those he was sure he could trust. He would have to tell his line manager, though, and I couldn't be sure whether that would be problematic.

We are all required to follow the law of the country in which we are operating but what if that law is at odds with our rights-based

approaches? My organisation supports work to challenge discrimination and prejudice on the basis of sexual orientation in some countries, and then essentially asks staff to hide their sexuality – and possibly lie to their colleagues – in others. When the going gets tough, does pragmatism win over principles?

What I would have liked from my organisation is advice on what he should expect: the risks to him, a partner, his colleagues and the organisation, the support he would need from his manager in-country, and what we should do if the in-country manager was not supportive, and what we would do if he was subjected to any kind of discrimination, abuse, was arrested or detained. The maximum sentence for 'sodomy' in the country when Markus was going is up to 100 lashes and five years in jail.

A year or so later, as I arranged a secondment for a staff member who is gay to another part of the world, a friend of his took me aside. She told me: "I know the team he's been sent to. They won't accept him – and I don't think he could cope with it." The secondment was cancelled due to a security incident but again I wondered... We would not accept discrimination and harassment on the grounds of race within our staff teams, yet in terms of sexuality we expect gay staff to change their behaviour, lie, hide their partner and relationships. In our programmes we challenge homophobic attitudes; but we seem far less willing to challenge it within our staff teams, or to help managers to support staff in dealing with homophobia within the workplace and in the countries where they work. However, although there are many questions we struggle to answer right now, at least in the organisation where I work the majority of people are committed to challenging discrimination both internally and in the outside world too.

Markus completed his deployment without problem. He's since worked for other aid agencies in countries where homosexuality is criminalised. All his postings so far have been unaccompanied but now I hear he's looking for a post where his partner can join him and they are considering adopting a child. But it's not just in the developing world that Markus will face challenges about his sexuality. As I write these final sentences, hundreds of thousands of people are protesting on the streets of Paris about their government's plans to give gay couples the right to marry and adopt children.²

The gay humanitarian's perspective

I have always chosen to keep a low profile regarding my sexual orientation when working overseas, through a combination of self-preservation and recognition that being open could significantly compromise my ability to do my job. There may be those who would criticise me for it but unfortunately being openly gay and being able to do the work I have gone to these countries to undertake is not currently compatible. Of the six countries in which I have worked as an expatriate for NGOs, homosexuality is illegal in five of them; in the sixth, as with the other five, there is certainly a serious social and cultural taboo. In truth I have usually been more concerned with the more immediate potential risks of compromised working relationships, rejection, harassment, blackmail or worse, than the legal implications.

That said, I have lived with my partner in several countries and to date we have not experienced any problems, since two expatriates sharing accommodation is not in itself at all unusual. I also think that it is probably easier to fly under the radar as two women in a relationship, as opposed to two men, if only because suspicions about and hostility towards homosexuality in many places are frequently heightened towards men. Perhaps unfairly I generally work on the assumption that local colleagues probably don't have an entirely favourable attitude to homosexuality. I may have done some people a disservice by making these assumptions but until I have good grounds to believe

that they will be tolerant and accepting, and considering the potential risks, this is how I feel I need to proceed. I can count on one hand the number of local colleagues that I have been directly open with over the years.

If you were to ask me what my employer would or could do if it were the case that I experienced harassment inside or outside of work overseas due to my sexuality, the fact is I don't know. I remember the subject being directly addressed in orientation sessions; where it concerns the laws of a country, you have to accept that there is probably little an employer could do. Harassment inside the workplace is a different issue and – when dealing with very entrenched negative attitudes to homosexuality – can be very difficult to address. However, I do think it is important that when staff members are going overseas to places where being gay is not socially or legally accepted, there should be space for this to be discussed with managers and advisors if they want to. There is also room for improvement in the guidance and orientation available, including the expectations and responsibilities of both staff and employers, including on issues such as accompanied status.

It can be alienating working in a place where you could potentially be imprisoned for simply being who you are, and with the awareness that people you count as good colleagues and friends would struggle to accept you if they knew the truth – or might reject you completely. The compromises that have to be made are not always comfortable. My own experiences and those of others I have met demonstrate that with discretion and care these things can be managed, although I admit that I had to accept a long time ago that if I want a full and open life, including children, ultimately there will be countries where I will not be able to live.

The authors of this article have asked not to be named.

1. To protect privacy, names have been changed.

2. www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-21004322 'Mass Paris rally against gay marriage in France', 13 January 2013