

Sexual orientation discrimination

What the law says

Sexual orientation is one of 9 'protected characteristics' covered by discrimination law (Equality Act 2010).

Sexual orientation discrimination includes direct and indirect discrimination, harassment and victimisation.

Discrimination can happen in any area of work. It can result from decisions made at work or from how people behave towards each other. This includes homophobic language and behaviour.

It could be a regular pattern of behaviour or a one-off incident. It can happen in the workplace, at work social events or when people are working remotely.

Terms used around sexual orientation

The language around sexual orientation changes over time. Terms that some people are comfortable with might be offensive to others.

In this advice, we use the terms gay, lesbian, heterosexual and bisexual. We also use the terms sexuality and sexual orientation.

There are many other terms people use to describe their sexual orientation. We mention some of them in this advice.

How the law defines sexual orientation

The Equality Act 2010 defines sexual orientation as a person's sexual orientation towards:

- people of the same sex
- people of the opposite sex
- people of either sex

This means being gay, lesbian, heterosexual or bisexual.

The law might not reflect the language people now use to describe their sexuality.

People with other sexual orientations might still be protected by discrimination law. This could be if they experience less favourable treatment because of their sexual orientation.

Who is protected by discrimination law

At work, the law protects the following people against discrimination:

- employees and workers
- contractors and self-employed people hired to personally do the work

- job applicants
- former employees

Understanding more about discrimination

[Find out about the different types of sexual orientation discrimination](#)

If you need more general discrimination advice, you can read [discrimination and the Equality Act 2010](#). This includes advice on employer responsibilities and on other protected characteristics.

Contact the Acas helpline

If you have any questions about sexual orientation discrimination at work, you can [contact the Acas helpline](#).