



# Exploring the Pay Gap Faced by Lesbians in the Hong Kong Workplace: A Pilot Study

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**Abstract:** This study explores the pay gap experienced by lesbians in the Hong Kong workplace, highlighting the intersection of sexual orientation and discrimination. Despite existing legal protections in Western countries, sexual minorities in Hong Kong face significant challenges due to limited legal frameworks and cultural stigma. A pilot study assessed the feasibility of a larger investigation into the factors contributing to pay disparities, workplace discrimination, and their psychological impacts on lesbian employees. Results indicated that 100% of participants experienced discrimination, with 70% reporting psychological distress linked to workplace conditions. Furthermore, many felt underpaid compared to market standards, revealing a pervasive sense of inequity. The study underscores the need for comprehensive workplace policies and legislative reforms to address discrimination and its consequences on productivity and mental well-being. By providing insights into the unique challenges faced by lesbians in Hong Kong, this research aims to inform future research as well as policy-making and foster a more inclusive work environment.

**Keywords:** LGBT, Lesbians, Pay gap, Work place discrimination

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The term "LGBT" encompasses lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender individuals, as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2023). A defining moment for LGBT rights occurred in June 1969 when a routine police inspection at the "Stonewall Bar" in New York ignited conflicts with the local gay community, leading to riots and demonstrations. At that time, homosexuality was a criminal offense, subjecting the gay minority to inhumane treatment, harassment, and police entrapment. Though the unrest lasted only a week, it catalyzed a global movement for LGBT rights (Walsh, 2021). Subsequently, the US government expedited anti-discrimination legislation, and the push for equality and justice spread across the US and Europe (Blakemore, 2023).

To protect the interests of the LGBT community and prevent unfair treatment based on identity and sexual orientation, the United States (US EEOC, 2021) and the European Union (European Commission, 2008) have implemented laws against sexual orientation discrimination. These regulations address unfair practices in job applications, promotions, and job titles, where employers may inadvertently or intentionally violate discrimination laws by treating applicants unreasonably. However, the enforcement and cultural acceptance of such laws vary globally, particularly in regions like Hong Kong, where legal protections for sexual minorities remain limited.

This research report seeks to investigate the pay gap experienced by lesbians in the Hong Kong workplace, explore potential links to their sexual orientation, and evaluate the consequent effects on company productivity and psychological well-being. A pilot study conducted from 13 November to 24 November 2023 assessed the feasibility, time, cost, and potential negative impacts of the full-scale research. This pilot effort reviewed the research design, methodology, data collection approach, and questionnaire validity, providing insights to refine the study. The integrated findings aim to offer a comprehensive understanding of the issue, contributing to policy and organizational improvements.

### 1.1. Background

Despite legal protections against discrimination in Europe and the United States, sexual minorities continue to face "special" treatment in both personal and professional spheres. Even in relatively open social and cultural environments, they encounter discrimination, stigmatization, and violence (Diplacido, 1998). In Asia, conservative patriarchal societies such as China, South Korea, Japan,

Indonesia, and Malaysia—where Islamic values often prevail—present heightened challenges for LGBT individuals due to their identity (Root, 2022). Hong Kong, with its blend of Eastern traditions and Western influences, occupies a unique position, where societal attitudes toward sexual minorities remain complex and underexplored.

Scholarly research on LGBT discrimination identifies two primary categories: discrimination against physical and mental conditions, and discrimination in workplace treatment. The former directly affects victims' health, while the latter influences income, social status, and psychological well-being (Semlyen et al., 2016). This study focuses on the latter, specifically the pay disparities faced by lesbians in Hong Kong, a demographic often overlooked in local research despite its relevance to broader equality discussions.

### 1.2. Literature Reviews

Extensive research has demonstrated that LGBT individuals face significant discrimination in the workplace, encompassing various forms of harassment. This includes receiving harassing emails, verbal and physical abuse, and the use of vulgar and inappropriate language directed toward the LGBT community. A notable controlled experiment conducted by researchers involved sending two distinct sets of CVs to companies, where the content—such as work experience, education, skills, and language proficiency—was nearly identical, with the sole difference being the disclosure of sexual orientation. The results indicated that applicants who identified as LGBT on their CVs had significantly fewer interview opportunities compared to those who did not disclose their sexual orientation. Although the researchers did not delve into an in-depth discussion following the experiment, this finding highlights the unfair challenges faced by LGBT individuals during the recruitment process (Badgett et al., 2008).

A quantitative study conducted in Chicago offers valuable insights into the experiences of stigmatization and stigma consciousness among LGBT workers. This study, with a sample size of 215 participants aged between 18 and 64, aimed to examine employment discrimination against LGBT individuals. The results showed that stigma varied across demographic characteristics, providing some understanding of the barriers LGBT workers face due to stigma. However, the researcher cautioned that the findings might not be broadly generalizable, as the sample relied on a convenience sampling method (Gates, 2013). Further research by Badgett (2008) revealed that nearly 70% of LGBT people have experienced employment discrimination, as identified through interviews with targeted questions. Common forms of discrimination included being denied employment, promotions, receiving negative appraisals, and facing unequal pay and benefits (Ahmed, 2013). Building on this, Sear (2014) noted that workplace discrimination can lead to adverse effects on LGBT employees, including psychological issues, reduced promotion opportunities, pay gaps, and diminished job satisfaction and productivity. These findings underscore the multifaceted impact of discrimination on both individual well-being and organizational performance.

Studies have long focused on gender differences in income, with Blau and Kahn (2017) observing that men generally earn more than women, while lesbians tend to earn more than non-lesbians. The wage gaps are attributed to direct discrimination and personality differences. Concurrently, workplace stigma remains a prevalent issue within the LGBT community. Sociologists define stigma as a trait that sets an individual apart from society, often leading to disdain and negative perceptions. This stigma toward LGBT individuals is evident, with more than 70% of respondents in a related study reporting at least one instance of stigmatization (Mize, 2016). Another significant study from Sweden, conducted by Ahmed (2013), utilized a field experiment to investigate sexual orientation discrimination in the labor market. The findings confirmed the presence of discrimination, particularly in the private sector, where gay men earned less than heterosexual men. In contrast, lesbians earned the same as or, in some cases, more than heterosexual women, suggesting context-specific wage patterns. Strunk (2017) further suggested that workplace discrimination leads to employee distraction and fatigue, resulting in mental health challenges. Mize (2016) reinforced this through an extensive review, highlighting negative sentiments and disadvantaging stereotypes that contribute to inequitable treatment. The review noted that gay men consistently earn less than similar heterosexual men, though findings for lesbians remain inconsistent, with some instances showing higher earnings than heterosexual women. Driscoll (1996) argued that employment discrimination is typically linked to lower earnings but questioned the generalizability of this trend, given the variable earnings of lesbians.

In the Hong Kong context, the HKSAR government commissioned a consulting company to survey public views on homosexuality. The results showed that more than 80% of respondents believed there is no connection between work ability and homosexuality. However, 40% considered homosexuality a psychological abnormality that violates family values. Those with open-minded and positive attitudes were predominantly students and respondents aged 18 to 24, who frequently interact with homosexuals. In contrast, the elderly, less-educated, and religious respondents tended to hold negative views (HAB, The Government of HKSAR, 2006). A study titled "Legislation Prohibiting Discrimination on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Intersex Identity" highlighted that LGBT individuals face discrimination during job interviews, while on the job, and at dismissal (Tang et al., 2021). For instance, lesbians dressed in masculine clothing were often rejected post-interview, possibly due to company policies against accepting lesbians or due to appearance and dress code issues. Those discovered to be gay after joining a company faced worse treatment, including verbal attacks, sexual harassment, and disapproval from employers and colleagues (Yeo, 2017). Additionally, some LGBT individuals reported being fired based on their sexual orientation and gender identity, with transgender people particularly vulnerable to contract termination upon identity disclosure. Some companies even labeled these individuals as "potential sexual offenders" (Lee, 2022; Suen et al., 2016).

Experts like Chan (2018) suggest that unfair workplace treatment is a key factor influencing mental health, with over half of LGBT respondents reporting unequal treatment due to their sexual orientation, leading to feelings of loneliness. Other contributing factors include social acceptance, stress, and depression, often stemming from identity rejection. A study by Lingnan University in 2021 on inclusive workplaces for the LGBT group supported these findings, noting that the lack of an inclusive and friendly work environment, coupled with employment discrimination, negatively impacts personal health and work performance. This, in turn, hampers company productivity and cost-effectiveness. The study also identified invisible restrictions on career advancement for lesbian and bisexual women, pointing to a glass ceiling phenomenon, with over half believing their lesbian identity posed advancement difficulties. However, the research focused solely on the finance and banking industry in Hong Kong, leaving gaps in other sectors. This study aims to build on this by examining salary inequality and exploring whether pay disparities are linked to lesbian identity (Tang et al., 2021).

Similarly, Shalini and Kate (2010) compared survey results with interviews of LGBT employees in Hong Kong, revealing stress related to identity and sexual orientation that decreases workplace effectiveness, often exacerbated by colleagues' behavior. Summarizing the literature, LGBT activities were illegal in the United States before the 1969 Stonewall incident, operating underground until the movement gained momentum. Despite subsequent legislation in Europe and America making discrimination illegal, LGBT groups continue to face challenges, with discrimination evolving from personal attacks to affecting job opportunities, income levels, and advancement prospects.

Interestingly, some European and American studies suggest that LGBT groups may not always be underpaid and, in some cases, benefit from premium pay (Martell, 2019). However, applying these findings to Hong Kong is challenging due to inconsistent patterns across regions with varying levels of diversity, openness, and public acceptance of LGBT individuals. Factors such as local government legislation, occupation type, age group, education background, and work experience must be considered when assessing their impact on income. Although some studies focus on Hong Kong's LGBT community, the limited research on the lesbian minority fails to establish a clear pattern or root cause of these issues. Distinguishing between TB (Tom Boy) and TBG within the broader LGBT context is difficult for the public, and TB individuals, with their more identifiable appearance, may face direct and explicit discrimination in the workplace. This warrants further investigation. This research seeks to address these gaps by providing insights to support the shortcomings of previous studies and answer unresolved questions.

### 1.3. Research Objectives and Questions

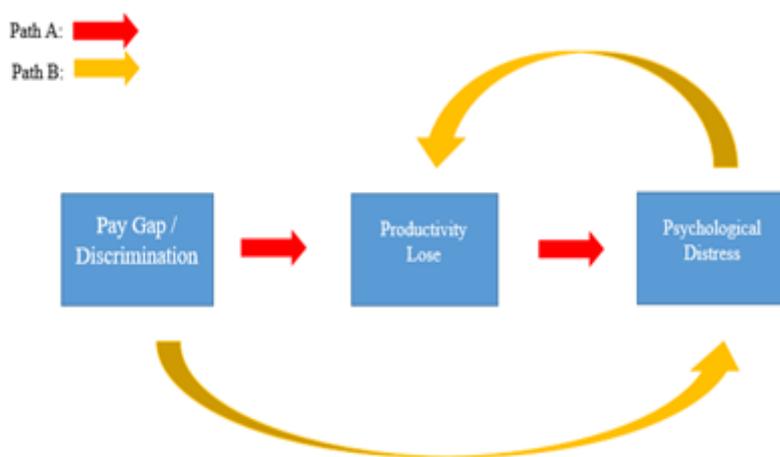
Based on the gaps identified in prior research, this study adopts perspectives from social psychology and industrial organization to explore the topic: "A Discussion on the Pay Gap That Lesbians Encounter in the Workplace in Hong Kong." It aims to address the following research questions:

**Pay Gap Factors:** By analyzing questionnaire results and wage and labor earnings data from the HKSAR government, this study will examine the factors contributing to the observed pay gap between lesbian and non-lesbian individuals within a specific demographic group. This includes assessing how sexual

orientation disclosure and workplace perceptions influence earnings. Productivity Impact: The questionnaire will investigate whether lesbians notice the pay gap and explore the forms and impacts of discrimination that affect company productivity within these specific groups. This involves evaluating how underpayment and unequal treatment correlate with reduced work output. Psychological Effects: This research will explore potential psychological issues identified within the lesbian demographic, such as anxiety or depression at work, potentially arising from the pay gap and treatment by colleagues. Understanding these effects is crucial for developing supportive workplace policies.

### 1.4. Implications of the Research

The research results will serve as an essential reference for formulating legislation to prevent discrimination against minorities. They will also provide insights for companies, demonstrating that salaries below market averages can lead to decreased productivity. Additionally, psychological problems caused by discrimination are shown to further impact employee productivity. These three elements—pay gaps, productivity, and psychological well-being—are interlocked, as illustrated in Figure 1 (not included due to document limitations but implied as a conceptual model). Addressing these interconnected issues can foster a more equitable and efficient workplace environment in Hong Kong.



**Figure 1.** *Interlocked of Pay gap / Discrimination, Productivity Lose and Psychological Distress*

### 1.5. Theoretical Framework

Industrial and organizational psychology highlights similarity as a key factor in interpersonal relationships, influenced by age, gender, personality, ability, interests, and values. Similarity fosters good relationships, while differences, such as sexual orientation, can lead to stigma and reduced job satisfaction (Wesolowski & Mossholder, 1997). Salary perception versus actual pay also affects job satisfaction, with underpayment linked to reduced effort (Dyer and Theriault, 1976; Yao et al., 2018). Fair corporate policies and organizational justice, including recruitment and promotion procedures, can mitigate discrimination (Donovan, Drasgow, and Munson, 1998; Masterson et al., 2002). Sociologist Erving Goffman (1973) defines stigma as a devalued social status, with coping strategies varying by context. Low self-esteem, linked to stigma, further impacts job satisfaction among sexual minorities (Srivastava et al., 2010). These theories provide a foundation to explore how pay gaps, discrimination, productivity loss, and psychological distress interlock among lesbians in Hong Kong.

## 2. METHODS

### 2.1. Study Design

This exploratory research uses a cross-sectional study to understand ongoing phenomena, collecting quantitative data via an anonymous questionnaire. The target group is lesbians, particularly TB (Tom Boy) individuals aged 20-30 working in Hong Kong, recruited via Facebook groups using probability sampling (Anderson & Gerbing, 1984; Babbie, 2013) between September to October. The questionnaire, in simple English, is based on validated surveys from the World Bank, US, UK, and EU, including JDI and MMPI scales, ensuring reliability and validity (Theodosios Tasios & Vaita Giannouli, 2017). The questionnaire is divided into three sections: demographic and income data to identify pay gaps,

workplace status (e.g., "Which kinds of discrimination have you encountered?"), and psychological issues were asked to indicate whether the item choosing from "yes" or "no" (e.g., "Have you been absent due to mental issues?"). Job satisfaction was assessed using the question: "How satisfied are you with your current job?" Respondents rated their satisfaction on a 5-point scale, ranging from "0" (strongly disagree) to "5" (strongly agree). The experience of discrimination or harassment was measured with the question: "How often do you experience discrimination or harassment at work?" Participants responded on a 5-point scale, where "0" indicated that discrimination or harassment was infrequent, and "5" indicated that it was frequent. These responses will explore pay gap correlations with productivity and psychological distress (Michael Hyman & Jeremy Sierra, 2016).

In this pilot study, invitations for the survey were sent to members of a lesbian group on Facebook as well as individuals from WhatsApp. We clearly stated our identity and the purpose of the research. Ethical considerations, including anonymity, were fully addressed throughout the study. According to Julious (2005), a meaningful sample size for pilot studies is essential. Her findings suggest that a sample of 12 participants in the target group is practical and manageable, in our pilot study, a total of 50 individuals were invited, and we successfully collected 15 questionnaires. Of these, 10 were deemed valid, resulting in a response rate of 30%. Feedback received prompted several adjustments, including the addition of a free-text question ("Any comments on salary, benefits, and mental well-being?") and an expansion of recruitment efforts beyond Facebook to include forums and media advertisements through snowball sampling (Babbie, 2013; Goodman, 1961). The observed 30% response rate is consistent with studies addressing sensitive topics (Catania et al., 1990; Lee et al., 2018), to deepen insights, qualitative methods such as focus groups and interviews are recommended (Ouimet et al., 2004; Rouder et al., 2021). Given the limited sample size of this pilot study, which did not meet the prerequisites for using inferential statistical methods, this study primarily employed descriptive statistics to provide a preliminary summary and presentation of the data and to provide testable hypotheses for subsequent research.

## 2.2. Pilot Study Findings

Among the 10 participants, all identified as lesbian and were employed. The findings revealed that only 2 respondents earned salaries exceeding HKD 40,000; both were in the 41-45 age group, while the remaining respondents earned below HKD 30,000. Notably, 6 respondents reported salaries below HKD 20,000, particularly in the 18-25 to 36-40 age groups (Figure 2). This aligns with government statistics indicating a median wage of HKD 19,100 for labor earnings at the supervisory level (CSD, the Government of HKSAR, 2023). Regarding employment status, 70% of respondents were full-time employees, while 10% worked part-time and 20% were freelancers (Figure 4). However, 70% indicated their current salaries were below market standards, suggesting a gap between perceived and actual pay.

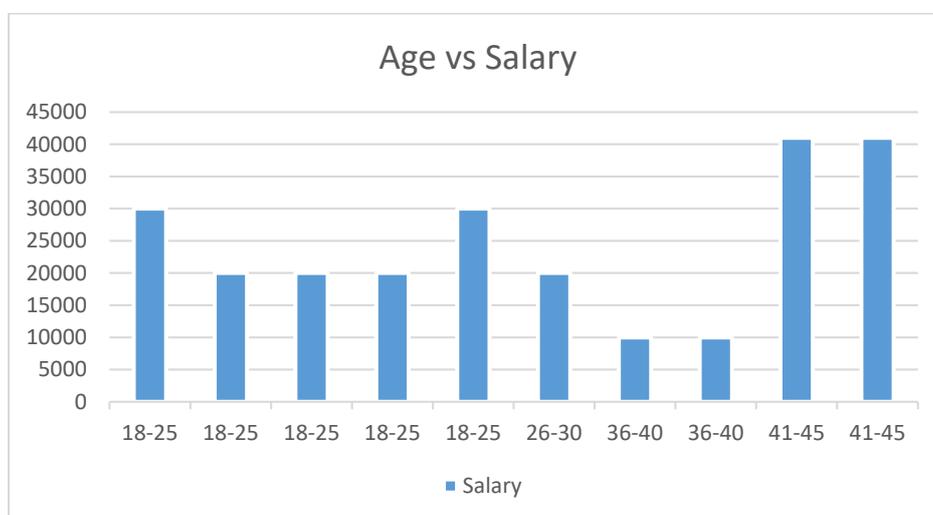
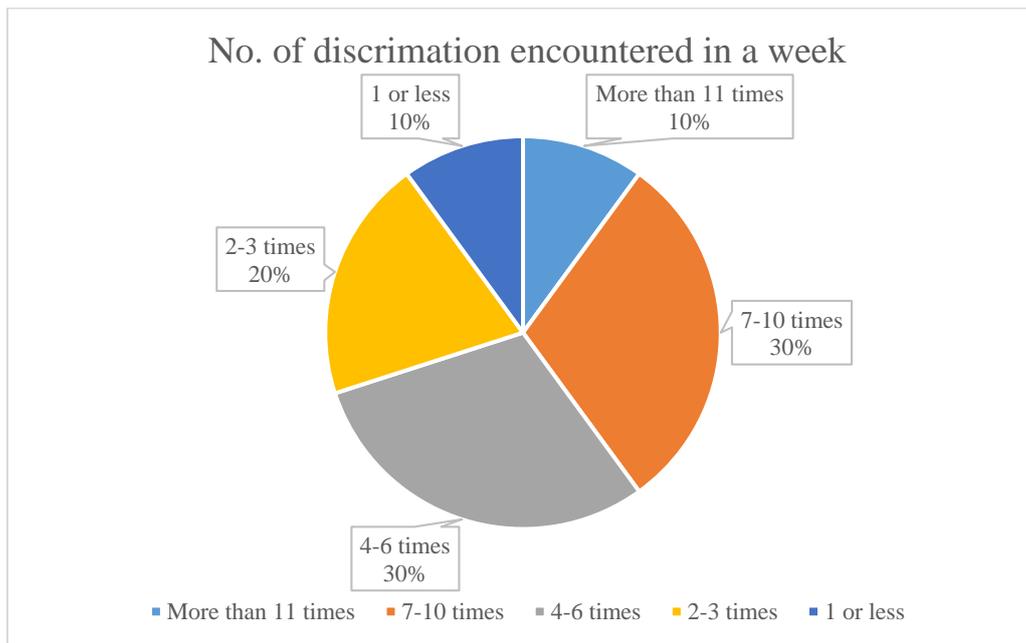


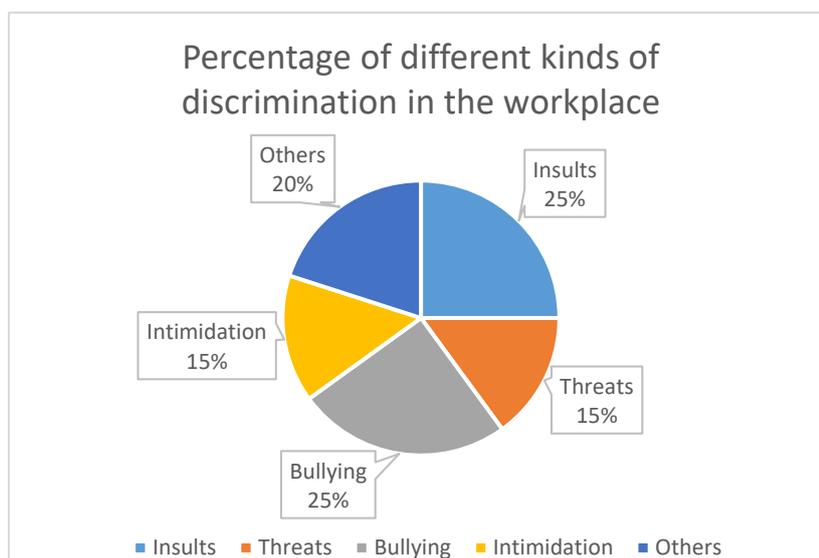
Figure 2. Distribution of Age and Salary

Figure 3 indicates that all respondents (100%) experienced discrimination, with 70% facing it more than five times weekly. The survey also found that 60% reported unhappiness at work, and 65% noted invisible barriers to career advancement for sexual minorities. Additionally, 32% to 46% agreed that it is harder for lesbians to "come out" than for gay men, and 66% reported a lack of inclusive training at work.



**Figure 3.** Numbers of discrimination encountered in a week

When inquiring about types of harassment, an average of 20% reported experiences of bullying, threats, and insults. In terms of job satisfaction, 60% of respondents expressed unhappiness with their work, with only one respondent claiming to be happy (Figure 10). None believed their salaries were above the market range, although one participant indicated uncertainty about her salary status. Seventy percent of respondents reported feeling underpaid (Figure 11). Research by Dyer and Theriault (1976) supports the notion that job satisfaction is linked to employee perceptions of pay compared to actual compensation (Yao et al., 2018; Mowday, 1999; William, 2006). This aligns with the theoretical framework proposed in the research, suggesting that low productivity in the respondents' companies may be associated with the pay gap. Figure 5 illustrates the frequencies of psychological distress encountered in the workplace, with over 20% reporting distress, anxiety, and low self-esteem, and 18% indicating depression. Furthermore, 70% reported that their work is strongly affected by psychological conditions, while 30% believed they were partially affected. Overall, all participants reported being affected at work. Regarding workplace cohesion, the survey shows that none of the respondents perceived their colleagues as unfriendly or lacking kindness and support. However, 60% stated they typically have lunch alone, while only 40% reported having lunch with colleagues fewer than two times a week. Based on Goffman's (1973) theory and findings from the World Health Organization (2022), these results suggest that respondents' lesbian identities may be stigmatized, leading to social isolation.



**Figure 5.** Distribution of harassments in the workplace

### 3. DISCUSSION

According to foreign experience, a low response rate was reported in the studies related to sexual harassment in the workplace. It might be due to the sensitivity of the research topic and the population of target participants (Catania et al., 1990; Lee et al., 2018). So too here, the pilot study has a fairly low response rate of 30%.

Considering that some issues cannot be fully reflected in the questionnaire questions, it is recommended that a free-text question be added to the large-scale research so that participants can freely express their opinions on the research topic (Rouder et al., 2021). An amended questionnaire with free question “Given the salary, benefits, and relations with colleagues as well as the mental well-being in your company, any comments you want to particularly discuss?” For the research to be able to analyze the participants' opinions in depth, it is recommended that random individual questionnaires be drawn out and participants be invited to conduct a qualitative research method using focused group discussions and in-depth interviews (Ouimet et al., 2004). To that end, participants were encouraged to speak freely on specific topics and express their ideas, thoughts, experiences and feelings to provide a variety of qualitative information. By extension, qualitative research methods such as focused group discussions and in-depth interviews allowed the study to provide an in-depth analysis of participants' opinions (Bojlén 1995). In addition to recruiting target interviewees in Facebook groups, targeting online forums which are exclusively for lesbian and placing advertisements in media to recruit interviewees can also be considered in the full-scale research in which the response rate is expected to increase (Babbie 2013).

As participation in the study was purely voluntary, the respondents were lesbians who responded positively. It can be inferred that they may be more concerned about issues such as gender equality and sexual minority discrimination. Invitees who did not respond may have placed less emphasis on the issue of sexual minority discrimination. As a result, the accuracy of the research results will be affected.

In the case of focus group discussions, a scientific sampling design is unnecessary and unfeasible, as it is not necessary and feasible to collect opinions from a representative sample of the target population. Therefore, it is ideal to ensure that focus group participants come from diverse backgrounds. For example, open recruitment and recommendation through sexual niche networks, and using snowball sampling methods to recruit individuals who do not belong to any sexual minority groups (Goodman 1961). This specific method is to invite participants to recommend sexual minorities outside the network/group to participate in this study. These are the preliminary results of a pilot study. Although the sample size was small, they validated the research instrument and confirmed that the questionnaire was clear, easy to understand, and free of ambiguous or leading questions. Furthermore, in terms of evaluating the research process, this pilot study confirmed that the distribution and return of questionnaires were smooth.

However, there are a couple of limitations in this research that we might face. Firstly, as we gather the participants on social media, they might not notice our invitation due to the privacy setting of individuals may vary, which can lead to difficulty in recruiting our participants. Secondly, although we select the participants randomly from social media as well as the groups from Facebook, conflicts on biased views as well as personal issues in the selection process might not be truly random. Lastly, it is uncertain if the time frame in this research is realistic throughout the data collection, analysis, and description cycles.

### 4. CONCLUSION

This study found that Tomboys commonly report being underpaid and persistently bullied in the workplace. This phenomenon may conceal deeper personal harm. According to social identity theory, chronically experiencing unfair treatment based on gender identity forces individuals to internalize this negative feedback, leading them to question their professional value and sense of belonging. Therefore, workplace inequality is not simply about pay and interpersonal relationships; it can also systematically undermine an individual's sense of self-worth and professional identity.

In sum, the questionnaire in this study will be slightly modified for further research. It will incorporate snowball sampling, interviews, and focus groups to gather more qualitative data for the study. On the other hand, data collection will not rely on a single source from the Facebook group but will expand to other possible lesbians' networks and groups.

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