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Fair Forward: Shaping Inclusive Workplaces in Poland – Report from the Focus Groups

1. Executive Summary

This report presents a comprehensive analysis of the systemic challenges confronting foreign and LGBTQ+ workers, drawing extensively from the focus groups conducted under the auspices of the Fair Forward project by the All-Poland Alliance of Trade Unions (OPZZ). The focus group with the migrant workers was held on June 18, 2025, in the Multicultural Center in Warsaw (the meeting was organized in cooperation with the Polish Migration Forum Foundation). We met two groups: one in English and one in Polish (with Ukrainian translation). By doing so, we could reach two different communities of foreign workers in Poland. The third focus group was organized with the support of Campaign Against Homophobia on July 9, 2025, in the OPZZ's headquarters in Warsaw. While legal frameworks ostensibly exist to safeguard workers' rights and promote equality, a critical disparity emerges between statutory provisions and their practical application. This report elucidates a "two-tiered" reality for marginalized groups, where *de jure* equality often fails to translate into *de facto* experience. The profound human and economic costs associated with these exclusionary practices are underscored, alongside an exploration of emergent positive developments, termed "glimmers of hope," which are primarily driven by intentional inclusivity. The overarching objective of the Fair Forward project, as highlighted herein, is to foster more equitable and welcoming work environments throughout Poland.

The fundamental observation is that the mere presence of protective legislation is insufficient. For instance, Ukrainian citizens, despite possessing legal rights akin to those of Polish citizens under "Status UKR," frequently encounter employer rejection. Similarly, while anti-discrimination laws are in place, the persistent call for the introduction and rigorous enforcement of penalties for discriminatory acts suggests a significant deficiency in current enforcement mechanisms. These instances reveal that even when designed with inclusive intent, the system falters due to many factors, including bureaucratic inefficiencies, deeply ingrained employer biases, and an apparent lack of political resolve to ensure regulatory compliance. This situation implies that policy alone cannot resolve the issue; genuine inclusion necessitates robust enforcement, accountability, and profound cultural shifts that transcend the letter of the law. The challenge is thus not solely legislative but deeply institutional and societal, demanding a multifaceted approach for meaningful change.

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2. Challenges Faced by Foreign Workers in Poland

Foreign workers in Poland encounter a formidable array of challenges, from their initial attempts to secure entry into the Polish job market to their day-to-day experiences within the country. These hurdles significantly impede their professional integration and overall well-being.

Bureaucratic Hurdles: The "Documentation Nightmare"

One of the most significant impediments for foreign workers is the labyrinthine bureaucratic process associated with work permits, often described as a "documentation nightmare". Individuals face long waiting times for permit approvals, ranging from three months to a year, and in some extreme cases, considerably longer. For instance, in Mazowieckie province, near Warsaw, the waiting period can extend to 350 days, while in Zakopane and Opole, it can reach an astonishing 560 days—a duration vividly likened to "two normative pregnancies". These prolonged delays create significant apprehension among prospective employers, frequently leading to lost job opportunities. A poignant example is Mustafa, a participant who, despite submitting over 10,000 CVs, lost two promising job offers specifically due to the confusion and delays between his student visa status and the requisite work permit.

Participants consistently reported a pervasive lack of clarity and a „murky” legal framework governing work permits, which inevitably fosters suspicion and uncertainty among applicants. A concerning sentiment expressed by some non-European workers was the belief that these bureaucratic delays might constitute an "unspoken policy"—a subtle, systemic mechanism designed to channel them towards less desirable jobs, such as warehouse work or delivery, potentially reserving more advantageous positions for Polish citizens or other Europeans. The convergence of extreme bureaucratic delays, concerns about "overqualification," and the perceived "unspoken policy" to channel foreign workers into lower-skilled jobs creates a de facto system that actively discourages highly skilled foreign workers from fully integrating into the Polish professional landscape. This effectively pushes them into underemployment or out of the country entirely. These are not isolated problems but interconnected barriers forming a coherent pattern. The delays make employers hesitant to hire, "overqualification" acts as a subtle gatekeeping mechanism, and the "unspoken policy" suggests a deliberate, albeit covert, strategy to segment the labor market. This integrated set of barriers forms a systemic disincentive for skilled foreign workers. If they face such formidable hurdles and underutilization, they are less likely to choose Poland as a long-term

destination, or if they arrive, they may eventually depart. This has profound negative implications for Poland's economic competitiveness, innovation capacity, and ability to address demographic challenges, such as an aging population.

Overqualification and Structural Gatekeeping

Paradoxically, highly experienced foreign professionals often struggle to secure office jobs in Poland, with their extensive skills being perceived as a negative rather than an asset. Sean, a former prosecutor from Belarus, for example, questioned whether she was "too overqualified" for positions that aligned with her expertise, despite her considerable experience. This phenomenon suggests that the Polish system may be inefficient at recognizing transferable skills across different contexts or that there is an underlying reluctance to place foreign professionals in specific roles. This indicates a form of structural gatekeeping within the job market, limiting access for qualified international talent.

Manifestations of Discrimination

Discrimination against foreign workers manifests in various forms, from overt bias to subtle, everyday exclusions. Instances of blatant bias were reported, such as an Egyptian colleague being turned away from a job fair on-site, seemingly based solely on appearance, necessitating intervention from a Polish-speaking individual even to be heard. Even international companies sometimes impose a C2 level of Polish fluency (near-native) requirement, which can function as an exclusionary filter for foreign applicants, regardless of their professional competence in English or other languages.

The discrimination extends far beyond formal employment barriers, deeply permeating daily life and essential services, indicating a profound societal "othering" based on appearance, origin, and even language, irrespective of legal residency or contribution. Bolivian participants shared distressing experiences in daily life, including landlords abruptly becoming unresponsive after meeting them in person, or restaurants claiming to be full but immediately seating Polish friends. This creates a constant feeling of suspicion and exhaustion. Foreign workers reported feeling "put in one box" and were deeply hurt by anti-immigrant sentiment expressed in the news, perceiving it as directly targeted at them. Even a white Belarusian participant stated it took "like five meetings sometimes for people to stop being skeptical and see them as normal". An Indian participant explicitly spoke about experiencing discrimination based on skin color, highlighting a persistent feeling of being marked as different. This pervasive "othering" creates a hostile and exhausting environment that significantly impacts mental well-being and social integration, making it incredibly difficult for foreign workers to build a stable and fulfilling life, even if they manage to overcome employment hurdles. This underscores that legal reforms must be complemented by robust public education and anti-bias initiatives to address these underlying societal attitudes for true inclusion to take root.

A particularly ironic manifestation of discrimination is the "Status UKR" issue. Despite legal provisions granting Ukrainian workers' rights like Polish citizens, employers frequently reject them due to concerns about the temporary nature of their status, fearing risks like illness or status expiration. This effectively transforms a protective measure into an unexpected barrier. Furthermore, bias infiltrates essential services, as evidenced by a Russian-speaking permanent resident in Poland being refused a new bank account at Santander simply for being a Russian citizen. A Polish citizen born in Russia faced the same issue, illustrating how bias can permeate unexpected and essential services.

The Human Cost

The cumulative impact of bureaucratic inefficiency, pervasive bias, and constant rejections exacts an immense psychological toll on foreign workers. The Indian participant who sent over 10,000 CVs described how it "grinds you down" and profoundly affects one's "mental condition" and "basic ability to function". At this point, the struggle transcends merely finding a job; it becomes a constant battle to maintain hope in the face of overwhelming adversity.

Table 1: Key Bureaucratic Hurdles for Foreign Workers

| Type of Hurdle | Specific Examples/Data | Consequences/Impact |
|--------------------------------|--|--|
| Work Permit Waiting Times | 350 days in Mazowieckie province (Warsaw area); 560 days in Zakopane/Opole; likened to "two normative pregnancies". | Lost job offers (e.g., Mustafa lost two offers despite 10,000 CVs); employer apprehension due to uncertainty; significant disruption to life planning. |
| Visa vs. Work Permit Confusion | Mustafa's experience of confusion between student visa and work permit requirements. | Disqualification from suitable employment opportunities; prolonged periods of unemployment or underemployment. |
| Lack of Legal Clarity | "Murky" legal framework surrounding work permits; over 50 categories of foreigners. | Fosters suspicion among applicants; difficulty navigating the system; contributes to prolonged processing times. |
| Perceived Policy of Sidelining | Non-European workers felt bureaucratic delays might be an "unspoken policy" to push them towards lower-skilled jobs (e.g., warehouse, delivery), reserving | Hindered career progression for skilled workers, underutilization of talent, and a feeling of being deliberately sidelined contribute to the psychological toll. |

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| | "better jobs" for Poles or other Europeans. | |
| Status UKR (for Ukrainians) | Employers reject Ukrainian workers despite legal rights similar to those of Polish citizens, fearing the temporary nature of their status (illness, expiration). | Protection measures ironically become a barrier; job insecurity for a vulnerable group; loss of potential workforce contribution. |
| Banking Discrimination | Russian-speaking long-term resident denied a bank account; Polish citizen born in Russia faced the same issue for being a Russian citizen. | Exclusion from essential services; pervasive bias seeping into unexpected places; reinforces feeling of "othering" and lack of acceptance. |
| Overqualification | Highly experienced foreign professionals (e.g., a former prosecutor from Belarus) struggled to get office jobs, wondering if they were "too overqualified". | Skills are paradoxically seen as a negative; structural gatekeeping prevents recognition of transferable skills, and underutilization of valuable human capital. |
| Psychological Toll | An Indian participant sending 10,000 CVs spoke of being "grind[ed] down," affecting "mental condition" and "basic ability to function"; constant battle for maintaining hope. | Severe impact on individual well-being; reduced productivity; potential for talent to leave the country; broader loss of potential for society. |

3. Challenges Faced by LGBTQ+ Individuals in the Polish Workplace

LGBTQ+ individuals in Poland face a distinct set of challenges within the workplace, ranging from overt hostility to subtle, yet pervasive, systemic exclusions.

Direct Discrimination and Job Insecurity

Participants recounted disturbing instances of blatant hate speech, such as a colleague in a corporation in 2015 making the abhorrent statement, "too bad Hitler didn't finish off LGBT". Despite management being informed of such incidents, "nothing significant happened," and the issue was "brushed aside," indicating

a severe lack of accountability and support for LGBTQ+ employees within organizations. Furthermore, job security for LGBTQ+ individuals is often precarious. Reports indicate that they have been "Trans people fired from jobs," particularly in state media outlets like TVP, often in direct response to shifts in the political climate. This highlights how broader political changes can directly impact the employment stability of LGBTQ+ workers.

Pressure to Disclose Identity ("Outing")

A complex and ethically fraught issue arises from specific EU funding programs that offer "extra points if organizations show LGBTQ+ representation" for inclusivity. While ostensibly designed to promote diversity and inclusion, these initiatives can inadvertently create new forms of pressure and harm. This can compel individuals, particularly "trans individuals who are navigating identity changes," to disclose personal information they may not be ready to share, simply to help their organization secure funding points. This situation forces individuals to compromise their privacy for the organization's benefit, leading to struggles such as attempting to get their names changed on professional platforms, sometimes resulting in "two names listed simultaneously" for their professional identity. This process is described as "incredibly difficult and invalidating". The intent behind such programs is undoubtedly positive – to foster inclusivity. However, the mechanism by which this is achieved can be problematic, as it shifts the burden of demonstrating inclusivity onto the individual, making their personal identity a commodity for the organization's benefit rather than a protected attribute. This can feel exploitative and undermine true empowerment. This reveals a crucial challenge in designing effective Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) policies. Policymakers and organizations must meticulously consider the practical implications and potential unintended consequences of their initiatives to ensure they genuinely empower and protect marginalized groups, rather than creating new forms of subtle coercion or exploitation. True inclusivity should be about creating a safe space for authenticity, not demanding disclosure for external validation or funding.

Lack of Recognition for Diverse Family Structures

LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly same-sex parents, face significant challenges in accessing basic benefits and leave that heterosexual parents often take for granted. An employee at one of the major public universities in Warsaw struggled to obtain "reduced hours or parental leave" despite raising a child. Their boss had to "really fight" just to secure them "eight weeks of paid leave" and other family-related benefits like "kindergarten subsidies, Christmas bonuses for families". These benefits are frequently excluded for same-sex parents because the existing rules typically specify "own children, adopted or taken for upbringing," which does not efficiently cover a partner's child in a same-sex relationship. This systemic lack of recognition for their family structure creates a feeling of indebtedness to their supportive boss, making it harder for them to advocate for broader workplace improvements or other issues, as they

fear jeopardizing their already tenuous access to benefits. This is not always a case of active, malicious discrimination, but rather a passive exclusion built into the outdated language of legal and policy frameworks. The system simply does not "see" or acknowledge non-traditional family units, rendering them invisible regarding rights and benefits. This legal and institutional lag creates significant practical disadvantages for LGBTQ+ families, reinforcing the idea that specific family structures are less legitimate or deserving of support. This underscores the urgent need for proactive legal reform to update definitions and reflect the full spectrum of contemporary family diversity, ensuring equitable access to rights and resources for all citizens.

Table 2: Forms of Discrimination Experienced by Foreign Workers and LGBTQ+ Individuals

| Category of Discrimination | Target Group | Specific Examples | Impact |
|----------------------------|--------------------|--|---|
| Bureaucratic | Foreign Workers | 560-day work permit waits; confusion over visa types; murky legal framework; "unspoken policy" for lower-skilled jobs. | Lost job opportunities; employer apprehension; psychological toll; hindered career progression; systemic disincentivization of skilled migration. |
| Direct (Overt) | Foreign Workers | Job fair rejection based on appearance (Egyptian colleague); C2 Polish language requirements as a filter. | Exclusion from employment; feeling of being "othered"; reinforces prejudice. |
| | LGBTQ+ Individuals | Blatant hate speech in the workplace ("too bad Hitler didn't finish off LGBT"); "Zuolnion fired" from jobs, especially in state media. | Unsafe work environment; lack of accountability; job insecurity; severe psychological distress. |
| Structural/Systemic | Foreign Workers | Overqualification paradox (skills seen as negative); structural gatekeeping in the job market. | Underutilization of talent and inability to secure appropriate roles reinforce the perception of foreign workers as less capable. |
| | LGBTQ+ Individuals | Pressure to "out" for EU funding points; struggle | Compromised privacy; invalidating identity; |

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| | | to change names on professional platforms. | exploitation of personal information for organizational gain. |
| Social/Everyday | Foreign Workers | Landlords going silent after meeting; restaurants claiming to be full but seating Polish friends; anti-immigrant sentiment in the news; needing "five meetings to be seen as normal"; skin color discrimination. | Constant suspicion and exhaustion; feeling "put in one box"; pervasive "othering" beyond legal status; significant psychological toll. |
| Legal/Institutional Exclusion | Foreign Workers | Status UKR is leading to employer rejection despite legal rights; banking refusal is due to being Russian. | Protection measure becomes a barrier; bias seeps into essential services, reinforcing the feeling of being an outsider. |
| | LGBTQ+ Individuals | Lack of recognition for same-sex family structures in parental leave/benefits ("own children, adopted or taken for upbringing" clause). | Denial of fundamental rights; financial and practical disadvantages; feeling indebted to supportive individuals; silenced advocacy. |
| Internal Bias | LGBTQ+ Individuals | Discrimination experienced within unions themselves when seeking support. | Undermines potential allies; creates further isolation; highlights need for internal education within advocacy organizations. |

4. The Role of Trade Unions: Current State and Potential for Advocacy

The role of trade unions, particularly the All-Poland Alliance of Trade Unions (OPZZ), in advocating for the rights and inclusion of foreign workers and LGBTQ+ individuals in Poland presents a complex picture, marked by both a foundational mandate and significant practical limitations.

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The Disconnect between Unions and Marginalized Communities

Discussions highlighted a significant disconnect, asserting that "unions and LGBTQ+ communities like function in different orbits," implying a notable lack of direct engagement or collaboration between these entities. This separation is further exacerbated by Poland's relatively low overall union membership, standing at approximately 12%, which inherently curtails its broad influence and reach across the workforce. Unlike their counterparts in some European countries, where unions visibly champion LGBTQ+ rights by participating in pride parades or prominently displaying rainbow flags at their events, Polish unions typically do not engage in such public and active advocacy for LGBTQ+ issues.

This stark contrast between the core role of unions—to "represent all workers" and "fight discrimination"—and their observed limitations highlights a fundamental paradox. The unions' inherent mission and organizational structure position them as ideal advocates for marginalized workers. Yet, internal inertia, a historical focus on traditional worker demographics, and a lack of proactive engagement with emerging social justice issues prevent them from fully realizing this potential. Their low membership further weakens their collective bargaining power and public influence. For unions to become effective change agents for foreign workers and LGBTQ+ individuals, they must undergo a significant internal transformation. This includes education and awareness programs for their members and strategically re-evaluating their outreach and advocacy priorities to build trust and legitimacy with these marginalized groups. Their formal "seat at the table" may not translate into meaningful, broad-based advocacy without addressing these internal shortcomings.

5. Pathways to Inclusion: Proposed Solutions and Recommendations

The focus groups and subsequent analysis yielded a series of forward-looking proposals and recommendations, designed to address the multifaceted challenges faced by both foreign workers and LGBTQ+ individuals. These solutions collectively aim to foster a more equitable and inclusive working environment across Poland. The collective proposed solutions clearly understand that addressing deep-seated workplace exclusion requires a multi-pronged, holistic strategy. This approach extends beyond mere legal amendments to encompass profound cultural shifts, comprehensive bureaucratic overhaul, and active enforcement, recognizing that no single intervention is sufficient.

Ending Discrimination and Shifting Public Perception

A fundamental call emerged for an end to negative propaganda and a concerted societal effort to encourage open-mindedness. A crucial shift is advocated in the perception of foreign workers, moving from viewing them as competition to recognizing them as a necessity for Poland's aging population and economic vitality. This breadth of recommendations indicates that the participants and project organizers acknowledge the interconnectedness of the issues. Legal changes, such as more vigorous enforcement and more explicit rules, are deemed necessary but are explicitly linked to societal attitude changes, such as open-mindedness and viewing foreign workers as required, practical integration support, and institutional reform.

Streamlining Bureaucracy and Legal Frameworks

There were strong calls to significantly simplify and accelerate the work permit process, with an ambitious target of reducing decision times to one week—a truly revolutionary change compared to the current delays spanning months or even years. Furthermore, implementing clear, transparent legal rules is essential to simplify the current "mess" of potentially "50 plus categories of foreigners," making the system more workable and understandable.

Fostering Genuine Integration and Language Support

Providing free, state-funded Polish language courses at higher levels, beyond just basic instruction, is recommended to facilitate the genuine integration of foreign workers into Polish society and the workplace.

Strengthening Anti-Discrimination Laws and Enforcement

A critical proposal involves introducing and actively enforcing penalties for discrimination, thereby giving anti-discrimination laws more "teeth" and ensuring robust accountability for discriminatory practices.

Recommendations for Unions: Internal Reform and External Advocacy

Unions are urged to acknowledge the need for internal education to help their members become more open and accepting of non-Polish workers and LGBTQ+ colleagues. Crucially, they should leverage their

status as official social dialogue partners to advocate directly for systemic changes with policymakers, effectively translating the lived experiences from focus groups into actionable policy demands. This implies that effective and sustainable change requires coordinated efforts across various sectors: government, civil society, employers, and trade unions. It is not merely about fixing individual laws or processes but transforming the underlying societal attitudes and institutional practices perpetuating discrimination. While making the task more complex, this holistic understanding also promises more enduring and comprehensive positive impacts on workplace inclusion.

Table 3: Proposed Solutions and Their Anticipated Impact

| Area of Reform | Specific Proposed Solution | Anticipated Impact |
|-----------------------------------|---|--|
| Bureaucracy | Reduce work permit decision times to 1 week; implement clear, transparent legal rules for foreigners. | Attract and retain skilled talent; reduce lost job opportunities; boost economic growth and efficiency; alleviate psychological toll on foreign workers. |
| Discrimination Enforcement | Introduce and actively enforce penalties for discrimination; give anti-discrimination laws "more teeth". | Create fairer and more just workplaces; deter discriminatory practices; improve employee well-being and productivity; enhance social cohesion. |
| Public Perception | End negative propaganda; encourage open-mindedness; shift the view of foreign workers from competition to a necessity for the aging population. | Enhance social cohesion; foster a more welcoming society; optimize human capital allocation; reduce "othering" and daily life discrimination. |
| Integration Support | Provide free, state-funded Polish language courses at higher levels. | Facilitate genuine integration into society and the workplace; improve communication and cultural understanding; enhance professional opportunities for foreign workers. |
| Trade Union Role | Implement internal union education on diversity (non-Polish | Strengthen advocacy for marginalized groups; translate |

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| | workers, LGBTQ+ colleagues); leverage status as official social dialogue partners. | lived experiences into policy demands; foster internal inclusivity within unions; drive systemic changes at the government level. |
| Corporate Practices | Encourage proactive, inclusive benefit packages (e.g., parental leave for all partners, menstrual leave for all menstruating persons); implement anti-discrimination training and employee surveys. | Increase employee well-being and productivity; attract diverse talent; demonstrate intentional inclusivity; set new benchmarks for workplace norms. |

6. Glimmers of Hope: Exemplars of Progress and Intentional Inclusivity

Despite the formidable challenges, the focus groups illuminated several "glimmers of hope" and compelling examples of inclusive practices already in motion. These exemplars demonstrate that positive change is achievable and offer valuable models for broader adoption. The common thread among all positive examples is a conscious, proactive, deliberate commitment to inclusivity. These instances move beyond compliance with existing laws to actively dismantle barriers, redefine workplace norms, and create genuinely welcoming environments.

Individual Champions and Their Impact

A compelling illustration of individual advocacy is the employee of one of the major public universities in Warsaw. This individual actively fought for his gay employee's parental leave and reduced hours, thereby cultivating a visibly supportive environment. This demonstrates how one individual's determined advocacy can make a significant difference in navigating and overcoming systemic barriers. These are not passive responses to external pressures or minimal legal requirements. Instead, they represent active choices by individuals and organizations to prioritize and implement inclusive practices, even when it

requires going beyond the norm or challenging existing systems. This signifies a shift from a reactive to a proactive and values-driven stance on Diversity & Inclusion. This suggests that sustained progress in workplace inclusion will depend less on external mandates (though these can provide a baseline) and more on cultivating an internal organizational culture and leadership that genuinely values, prioritizes, and actively champions diversity and equity. It highlights the profound power of leadership, organizational values, and individual agency in driving meaningful and lasting change.

Progressive Corporate Policies and NGO Practices

International companies operating in Poland often introduce higher standards from their home countries, such as London. These companies provide comprehensive benefit packages, including health insurance and parental leave, that are inclusive of partners regardless of their marital status. Some even subsidize fertility treatments, illustrating how corporate policies can drive inclusion ahead of national laws.

A progressive NGO was highlighted for its forward-thinking approach to employee well-being. This organization offers menstrual leave not exclusively for women, but for any person who menstruates, thereby recognizing gender diversity. This policy even extends to supporting employees whose partners require support during their menstruation, demonstrating a holistic view of the family unit and support system. On a more local and practical level, some companies are implementing simple yet essential measures like annual anti-discrimination training and employee surveys that specifically inquire about experiences of discrimination, indicating a proactive stance on workplace equity.

These examples are significant not just in themselves but for their potential to influence broader change. They demonstrate that inclusion is achievable and beneficial, providing concrete models that local companies, NGOs, and even unions in Poland can emulate. The success of one initiative can de-risk similar efforts for others. This underscores the importance of identifying, documenting, and disseminating best practices. By amplifying these positive stories and demonstrating their feasibility and benefits, projects like Fair Forward can encourage a wider adoption of inclusive policies and behaviors, fostering a positive feedback loop for societal and workplace transformation. This creates a virtuous cycle where initial successes inspire further progress.

The Influence of the Global Union Movement

Encouraging progress is evident within the global union movement, with unions in countries such as Canada, the UK, and the Netherlands making LGBTI rights central to their work. These European unions are visibly supportive, marching under banners that declare "LGBT rights are workers' rights," and prominently displaying rainbow flags at their own events, indicating growing international solidarity in advocating for LGBTQ+ rights as part of broader workers' rights.

Instances of Bureaucratic Wins through Persistence

A surprising positive example involved an individual filing a formal appeal after facing a protracted delay with their residence card and receiving it in just four days. This suggests that persistence and a strategic understanding of bureaucratic processes can sometimes cut through red tape, offering a small but significant victory against systemic inefficiency.

Table 4: Examples of Inclusive Practices

| Source of Inclusion | Specific Example | Inclusive Practice/Outcome | Key Principle Demonstrated |
|-------------------------------------|--|--|--|
| Individual Advocacy | Employee of one of the major public universities in Warsaw | Fought for gay employees' parental leave and reduced hours; created a visibly supportive environment. | Personal Courage; Proactive Allyship; Individual Impact on Systemic Barriers. |
| Corporate Policy | International Companies in Poland. | Offered comprehensive benefit packages (health insurance, parental leave) covering partners regardless of marital status; subsidized fertility treatments. | Proactive Policy; Beyond Compliance; Corporate Leadership in Inclusion. |
| NGO Practice | Progressive NGO. | Implemented menstrual leave for any menstruating person; extended support to partners during menstruation. | Holistic Employee Well-being; Gender Diversity Recognition; Innovative Policy. |
| International Union Movement | Global Union Movement (Canada, UK, Netherlands). | They made LGBTI rights central to their work and provided visible support (Pride marches, rainbow flags). | International Solidarity; Broadened Scope of Workers' Rights; Advocacy Model for Local Unions. |
| Bureaucratic Persistence | An individual with a Residence Card Appeal. | Obtained residence card 4 days after filing formal | Strategic Persistence; Navigating Bureaucracy; |

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| | | appeal, cutting through long delays. | Individual Empowerment. |
| Local Practice | Corporate Some Companies. | Implementing annual anti-discrimination training and conducting employee surveys on discrimination. | Proactive Measures; Awareness Building; Data-Driven Improvement. |

7. Broader Implications for Polish Society and Economy

The challenges faced by foreign workers and LGBTQ+ individuals in Poland carry significant broader implications for the nation's overall societal well-being and economic prosperity.

The Societal Cost of Exclusion: Loss of Talent and Human Potential

The challenges described represent a significant "loss of potential for society too". When highly skilled foreign workers, including PhD students, former prosecutors, and IT engineers, cannot secure jobs commensurate with their qualifications due to bureaucratic delays, overqualification concerns, or discrimination, Poland loses invaluable talent, expertise, and innovation. The excessively long waiting times for work permits, extending to 350-560 days, cause "lost opportunities" and make employers "nervous," directly hindering economic growth and efficiency. The perceived "unspoken policy" of channeling non-European workers towards lower-skilled jobs, while reserving "better jobs" for Poles or other Europeans, suggests a structural gatekeeping that prevents the optimal allocation of human capital across the economy. This directly links the social problem of exclusion and discrimination to a national economic challenge. Suppose Poland cannot effectively attract, integrate, and retain skilled foreign labor due to discriminatory practices and bureaucratic inefficiencies. In that case, its long-term economic growth, innovation capacity, and overall productivity will be severely hampered, especially as its native workforce ages and shrinks. This reframes the conversation from a purely ethical or humanitarian to a pragmatic economic argument. Policymakers and business leaders should understand that addressing discrimination and streamlining processes is not just a moral obligation but an essential strategic investment for national prosperity, competitiveness, and demographic resilience.

The immense psychological toll on individuals, leading to them being "grind[ed] down" and affecting their "mental condition" and "basic ability to function," directly translates into reduced productivity and societal contribution. This highlights that a nation's human capital and economic vitality are intrinsically linked to its social equity and inclusive practices. When individuals are mentally and emotionally drained,

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facing constant rejection and invalidation, their capacity for productivity, creativity, and active participation in the economy significantly diminishes. This creates a negative feedback loop where social injustice directly undermines the collective human capital and, consequently, the nation's economic output. This emphasizes that a healthy, thriving economy is predicated on a healthy, well-supported, and included populace. Investing in social inclusion, combating discrimination, and promoting mental well-being for all workers is therefore not merely a social expenditure but a crucial investment in human capital and, by extension, in the nation's long-term economic vitality and sustainability. It makes a compelling case for a comprehensive approach, recognizing the symbiotic relationship between social justice and economic prosperity.

Economic Benefits of Inclusion: Growth, Innovation, and Talent Retention

Fostering a more inclusive workplace substantially benefits Polish society and its economy. Streamlining bureaucracy, such as reducing work permit decisions to one week, would be "revolutionary". This would significantly enhance Poland's attractiveness for skilled foreign workers, directly addressing its "aging population" and reframing foreign workers as a "necessity" rather than competition, thereby boosting productivity and innovation. Ending negative propaganda and encouraging open-mindedness would shift the perception of foreign workers from competition to valuable contributors, fostering greater social cohesion and a more harmonious society.

Implementing and enforcing penalties for discrimination would create a fairer, more just, and more attractive working environment for all, leading to increased employee well-being and productivity. Companies that proactively offer inclusive benefits, such as health insurance and parental leave covering all partners regardless of marital status, or even menstrual leave for any menstruating person and their partners, demonstrate a "different way of thinking about employee well-being". This intentionality in fostering inclusivity leads to a more supportive, engaged, and productive workforce. The growing international solidarity within the Global Union movement can inspire and support Polish unions to become stronger allies. When unions, like OPZZ, engage in "internal education" and leverage their position as "official social dialogue partners" with the government, they can advocate for "bigger systemic changes" that benefit all workers and society. Finally, the surprising success of an individual who filed a formal appeal and received their residence card in just four days, after potentially months or years of waiting, highlights the potential for greater efficiency and fairness within bureaucratic processes, which can unlock significant economic benefits.

8. Conclusion: Charting a Fairer Forward

This report has underscored the urgent need to address the systemic challenges faced by foreign workers and LGBTQ+ individuals in Poland. The evidence reveals a significant chasm between legal provisions

and their practical implementation, creating a reality of pervasive discrimination, bureaucratic inefficiency, and profound psychological toll for marginalized groups. The economic implications are equally stark, as the nation risks losing vital talent and hindering its growth potential by failing to cultivate truly inclusive workplaces.

Despite the daunting nature of these challenges, the groups have illuminated "sparks of hope". These positive developments, driven by dedicated individuals, progressive companies, and potentially evolving trade unions, demonstrate that intentional efforts can pave the way for a more equitable and prosperous future. The transformative power of individual acts of courage, advocacy, and deliberate inclusivity within systemic constraints is evident. These are not merely isolated incidents but crucial catalysts for broader societal change, demonstrating that meaningful transformation can be initiated from the ground up. The report mentions "sparks of hope," such as "the dedicated boss, the inclusive company policy, the union starting to engage more directly". This acknowledges that while top-down policy changes and institutional reforms are vital, they are often insufficient. Bottom-up initiatives, individual acts of allyship, and micro-level organizational changes are critical in creating momentum, demonstrating the feasibility of inclusion, and challenging existing norms. These individual actions, when aggregated, can contribute significantly to systemic shifts.

As echoed in the focus groups, true inclusion transcends mere laws or economics; it is fundamentally about changing "hearts and minds". The path forward requires concerted, collective action across government, civil society, employers, and trade unions. Every act of inclusion, acceptance, and advocacy contributes to the larger goal of a fairer society. Ultimately, the Fair Forward project's mission is to ensure that every worker in Poland feels "truly seen, truly valued".