

Rainbow tokenism, cis-heteronormativity and global backlash: Rainbow employees' concerns about workplace climate in New Zealand

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Abstract

Purpose – This article examines the perspectives of Rainbow employees on workplace climate challenges across New Zealand organisations. It also reveals the impacts of contemporary conservative political discourses surrounding diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) and gender on Rainbow employees' workplace experiences. **Design/methodology/approach** – This article draws on qualitative data from Rainbow employees across 18 organisations in diverse sectors in New Zealand. The data includes survey comments from an employee perspective survey conducted in 17 organisations, as well as interview data from a focus group held in one organisation.

Findings – This article explores three interconnected layers of challenge: organisational, interpersonal and political. At the organisational level, the study identifies manifestations of Rainbow tokenism, where superficial gestures and tick-box exercises create the appearance of inclusion. Interpersonally, cis-heteronormative microaggressions persist, disproportionately marginalising transgender and gender-diverse employees. Politically, a growing global and national backlash against DEI initiatives and Rainbow communities has left Rainbow employees feeling under attack and unsupported by their organisations.

Social implications – Highlighting that organisations serve as active arenas of political contestation – both shaped by and capable of reshaping broader sociopolitical forces – this article suggests that organisations must reaffirm their commitment to Rainbow inclusion amid intensifying backlash.

Originality/value – By situating Rainbow employees' perspectives within both New Zealand and international political dynamics, this article offers a nuanced understanding of workplace climate in an underexamined national context and its entanglement with broader sociopolitical currents. Rainbow employees' concerns about political backlash and waning support underscore the far-reaching influence of US politics across the Pacific, revealing how authoritarian forces can reinforce organisational cis-heteronormativity.

Keywords Rainbow, DEI, Inclusion, New Zealand, Workplace, Organisation, Backlash

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction

The workplace climate for Rainbow employees has long been a focus of scholarly inquiry across diverse disciplines, including sociology, geography, management and organisational studies (Colgan and Rumens, 2014; Köllen, 2016; Mills and Oswin, 2024). Global researchers have examined the workplace climate and experiences of Rainbow employees across diverse professions and cultural contexts, such as queer hospitality workers in Australia (Sharp *et al.*, 2022), gay academics in China (Cui, 2023; Cui and Burford, 2025) and transgender employees in the UK (Ozturk and Tadi, 2016). Over the past few decades, research has shifted its focus – from examining discrimination against Rainbow employees primarily in North America and Europe to exploring a broader spectrum of issues shaped by diverse theoretical perspectives and reflecting both positive and negative developments across global contexts (Colgan and Rumens, 2014). It has been found that, despite legal protections and increasing Rainbow visibility, workplaces in the Global North often remain entrenched in cis-heteronormativity, reproducing normative standards of what is considered “normal” for employees (Cui, 2025; Mills and Oswin, 2024; Rumens, 2014; Williams *et al.*, 2009). A growing body of literature has examined the intersectional workplace challenges faced by Rainbow individuals with



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multiple marginalised identities – such as queer employees who are transnational migrants (Calang and Sunanta, 2025), non-White transgender employees (Hennekam and Dumazert, 2023) and aging LGBTQ workers (Epper-Hattab and Steindórsdóttir, 2025). The workplace challenges faced by non-binary employees, a subgroup of Rainbow communities who identify outside of the normative gender binary, have also attracted increasing scholarly attention (Fletcher and Swierczynski, 2025; Özbilgin and Erbil, 2025; Ozturk *et al.*, 2025).

Despite a substantial body of scholarship on workplace climate for Rainbow employees, New Zealand remains an underexplored context in academic literature. Although the country enjoys a global reputation for its Rainbow inclusivity, the reality within workplaces presents a complex and mixed picture. On one hand, the New Zealand government has explicitly emphasised the protection of Rainbow employees (Employment New Zealand, 2025) and introduced national standards to promote Rainbow inclusion in the workplace (Standards New Zealand, 2015). On the other hand, recent research – both quantitative (Stats NZ, 2025; Yee *et al.*, 2025) and qualitative (Cui, 2025) – continues to reveal persistent inequalities faced by Rainbow employees. For example, a report by the country’s official data agency, based on data from the 2023 Census, highlights the ongoing disadvantages experienced by New Zealand’s LGBTIQ+ populations. Across all age and ethnic groups, LGBTIQ+ individuals experienced higher rates of unemployment, with disparities particularly pronounced among transgender and non-binary people compared to sexual minorities (Stats NZ, 2025). Overall, the LGBTIQ+ population earned less than their non- LGBTIQ+ counterparts, with transgender and non-binary individuals generally earning less than cisgender people (Stats NZ, 2025). The disadvantages faced by Rainbow employees in New Zealand are also corroborated by qualitative studies. Drawing on qualitative data from employee survey comments across various sectors in New Zealand, Cui’s (2025) study demonstrates that despite growing Rainbow visibility within organisations, workplaces remain entrenched in cis-heteronormativity, which impedes the full inclusion of Rainbow employees. While Cui’s (2025) study is revealing, it draws predominantly on data from non-Rainbow employees. Qualitative studies of workplace climate that specifically draw on data from Rainbow employees in New Zealand remain limited – this is the gap that this article aims to address.

This study is situated within a shifting political climate in New Zealand and beyond, marked by a notable global surge in conservatism following Donald Trump’s second term as President of the US. In January 2025, Trump issued executive orders declaring that the US federal government recognises only two sexes, male and female and directing federal agencies to end diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) programs (Wendling and Epstein, 2025). Since then, many major US corporations have followed suit, announcing plans to drop or overhaul their DEI policies (Partridge, 2025). This intensified political climate and conservative trend now resonate globally, with notable impacts observed in countries such as the United Kingdom (Partridge, 2025), Argentina (World Economic Forum, 2025) and New Zealand (RNZ, 2025). Following similar actions taken by Trump, New Zealand First, a party within the country’s governing coalition, introduced a bill to eliminate DEI regulations from the public service, aiming to dismantle what its leader called “woke left-wing social engineering” (Ensor, 2025). Additionally, after Britain’s highest court ruled in April 2025 that only biological women, not transgender women, meet the legal definition of “woman” under equality laws (Carrell, 2025), New Zealand First introduced a similar bill to Parliament, seeking to define “women” and “men” strictly by biological sex (The Guardian, 2025). Transgender communities in New Zealand have faced an increasingly conservative climate, evident in the government’s decision to withdraw guidelines for transgender participation in community sport (Human Rights Commission, 2025) and its ban on new prescriptions of puberty-blocking medication for young transgender people, a move that could negatively impact the mental health of those affected (Corlett, 2025). In 2025, New Zealand’s diplomatic missions broke from tradition and remained silent during Pride Month, following a directive from the foreign affairs minister prohibiting posts about Pride on official social media channels (Cooke, 2025). Although there is clear evidence that the global political climate surrounding gender and sexuality has shifted,

little is known about its impact on Rainbow employees in the workplace – a gap this study seeks to address.

This article asks: How do Rainbow employees perceive the challenges of workplace climate in New Zealand workplaces? How does the recent political backlash against DEI initiatives and Rainbow identities affect Rainbow employees' workplace experiences? These research questions are addressed qualitatively, using data from 18 organisations across various sectors in New Zealand. The data includes survey comments from an employee perspective survey conducted in 17 organisations, as well as interview data from a focus group held in one organisation. This study specifically focuses on data provided by Rainbow-identified employees, reflecting their perceptions of workplace climate challenges. These challenges are examined across three interconnected layers: organisational, interpersonal and political. Together, they highlight the complexity of workplace culture and the ambivalence surrounding Rainbow inclusion in New Zealand workplaces. Notably, despite a general acknowledgment of organisational inclusiveness, Rainbow employees often perceived their organisation's inclusion efforts as performative and superficial – frequently reduced to a mere tick-box exercise. In interpersonal interactions, transgender and gender-diverse employees encounter disproportionate and unfair treatment, including misgendering and challenges accessing appropriate toilets. The challenges faced by Rainbow employees are reinforced by an increasingly conservative political climate beyond the workplace, which places DEI initiatives and Rainbow identities under scrutiny and attack. By giving voice to Rainbow employees in New Zealand, this article aims to make an empirical contribution to understanding the workplace climate they face, as well as the impact of political dynamics on organisational culture.

2. Methodology

This article draws on qualitative data from employee perspectives gathered within Rainbow Tick client organisations. Rainbow Tick is an accreditation service that has been operating for over a decade in New Zealand. It promotes Rainbow inclusion in the workplace by evaluating and accrediting organisations that demonstrate Rainbow-inclusive practices (see the official website: <https://toitutakatapu.co.nz/>). Organisational culture is assessed through an ongoing annual process that employs multiple methods, including focus groups and surveys. Organisations that meet the established criteria are awarded certification, while those that do not are removed from certification and given a period to improve based on recommendations. The survey uses an agreement scale to gather employee perspectives on various aspects of workplace climate, as demonstrated by agreement statements 2–7 in Table 1 below. Each agreement statement is accompanied by a text box that enables respondents to provide comments, which serve as qualitative data for this study. The demographic question regarding participants' identity (question 1) allows for the selection of data exclusively from

Table 1. Survey questions

Demographic question	(1) Do you identify as part of the Rainbow communities?
Agreement statements	(2) My workplace is inclusive for Rainbow employees
	(3) My workplace organises or celebrates events that promote Rainbow awareness
	(4) I have noticed discriminatory behaviour towards Rainbow communities in my workplace
	(5) I trust management and HR to effectively handle Rainbow-related issues
	(6) My workplace provides gender-neutral single-stall toilets with appropriate signage
	(7) I am aware of the Rainbow-inclusive policies and guidelines in my workplace

Source(s): Author's own work

employees who identify as Rainbow. Another method for gathering employee perspectives is through focus groups, particularly suitable for small organisations with limited staff numbers that may not support survey-based approaches. For organisations that opt for focus groups, two separate sessions are typically conducted: one for Rainbow-identified staff and another for non-Rainbow-identified staff, ensuring diverse perspectives are captured.

To amplify the voices of Rainbow employees and highlight their perceptions of workplace climate challenges, this study draws exclusively on data from Rainbow participants in both surveys and focus groups. The dataset comprises qualitative data from 18 organisations, including 436 survey comments from 17 organisations and interview data from a one-hour focus group conducted in one organisation. Collectively, the dataset represents the perspectives of 266 Rainbow employees, encompassing diverse experiences both positive and negative. To serve the research aim of this study, only data involving workplace climate challenges or negative experiences was analysed, though this does not imply that the workplace climate or the experiences of Rainbow employees are always negative. The organisations involved in this study span a range of sectors, including IT, insurance, retail, education, recreation, energy, healthcare, engineering, sports and government. Regarding organisation size, four organisations were large (1,000 or more employees), seven were medium (100–999 employees) and seven were small (fewer than 100 employees). The diverse range of organisations included in this study ensures that the findings reflect the patterns and complexities of workplace climates across New Zealand’s organisational landscape.

The data were analysed using reflective thematic analysis, an approach that views themes, developed from codes, as constructed at the intersection of the data, the researcher’s subjectivity, theoretical and conceptual understanding and training and experience (Braun and Clarke, 2022). The data analysis in this study was broadly informed by queer theory, which seeks to disrupt and challenge normative power structures that constrain understandings of identity and shape notions of what is considered “normal” (McCann and Monaghan, 2019). Specifically, the analysis aimed to expose and interrogate how normative constructions of gender and sexuality are perpetuated and reinforced within workplace settings. The researcher identifies as a cisgender gay man and serves as an accreditation specialist at Toitū Takatāpui Rainbow Tick, a position that has enabled him to secure support for conducting this research and to cultivate a deep understanding of workplace culture within New Zealand organisations. The use of the data adhered to the organisations’ agreement with Rainbow Tick, which permits its use for research provided no identifying information is disclosed. In the data presented in this article, all organisation names were masked and any identifying details were removed or obscured to protect the anonymity of both organisations and participants.

Aligned with the conceptual bases and values of reflexive thematic analysis, this study’s data collection pursued the sufficiency of information and meaning (Braun and Clarke, 2022), rather than *saturation* (Hennink *et al.*, 2017), which presumes that themes are fixed entities that pre-exist the analysis and are uncovered by researchers. As Braun and Clarke (2022, p. 15) explain: “within a conceptualization of qualitative research as a reflexive process of knowledge *generation* or *construction*, rather than discovery, there is always the potential for new understandings, developed through ongoing data engagement, or through reading the data from different perspectives”. Therefore, instead of claiming saturation or “collecting data until no new information is obtained,” data collection in this study was validated by “information richness” (Braun and Clarke, 2022) and its alignment with the research aims and approach. Yet, this does not mean the data was without limitations. For example, although the findings presented in this article highlight the interpersonal challenges faced by Rainbow employees, they do not capture the intersectional challenges experienced by those with multiple disadvantaged identities – such as employees who are also ethnic minorities or transnational migrants speaking English as a foreign language. This gap may be influenced by the sampling strategy, the demographic characteristics of participants, as well as the design of the survey and focus groups. The organisations included in this study were members of the Rainbow Tick programme, which indicates that they had already developed a certain level of Rainbow-friendly culture and sought to publicise their commitment to Rainbow inclusion. Many sample

organisations also lacked the diversity needed to include Rainbow employees from more marginalised backgrounds. Future research could engage organisations and participants from more culturally and ethnically diverse backgrounds, with specific questions regarding intersectionality, to examine intersectional workplace issues and thereby address an important gap in the literature (Thatcher *et al.*, 2023).

3. Findings and discussion

In this study, Rainbow employees reported three distinct layers of workplace challenges: the organisational level, the interpersonal level and the political level. Each layer reflects pressures exerted by distinct actors – whether from the organisation itself, from colleagues, or from broader political backlash driven by domestic and international figures – and leads to varied impacts on Rainbow employees’ workplace experiences. This section explores these interconnected dimensions of workplace adversity experienced by Rainbow employees.

3.1 The organisational: Rainbow tokenism through minimal effort

While Rainbow employees generally acknowledge their organisation’s inclusive climate, many highlight its limitations, often describing the inclusiveness afforded to Rainbow employees as superficial or minimal.

Definitely Inclusive but need to progress beyond superficial support. (survey comment from an insurance company)

It’s inclusive sure, but to the absolute minimum. (survey comment from a retail company)

The “minimal” organisational efforts, as described by Rainbow employees, manifest across various initiatives, including event planning, training and education and facility arrangements. For instance, organisational support for Rainbow visibility is often limited to the annual Pride celebration, which Rainbow employees may characterise as “symbolic gestures”. These events may be underfunded and proceed without meaningful leadership engagement or institutional backing.

While I appreciate the organization’s visible support through Pride events and celebrations, there’s an opportunity to deepen our commitment beyond these important but symbolic gestures. (survey comment from an insurance company)

They organise events, but it’s to the minimum. XX provides a tiny budget to the pride parade. Those involved need to scratch around to be able to afford signs/shirts/giveaways and to drum up support. There is hardly any interest from the leadership to get involved or support us in rounding up team to take part. (survey comment from a retail company)

The organisation’s failure to take the lead in organising Rainbow events often results in this responsibility being shifted to the Rainbow network, significantly adding to the workload of Rainbow employees. This additional work falls on their shoulders “like a heavy burden”, compounding their existing job responsibilities.

It feels like a heavy burden shared by the rainbow network committee. It would be awesome to find a way to support that small group of people, as there’s a tonne of work involved in keeping networks going. When you get busy it’s hard to maintain your commitment to something that is on top of your “day job”. (survey comment from an energy company)

My workplace organises Rainbow events, but this is driven by the Rainbow network rather than the company. Work to prepare for Rainbow events/awareness is often done in peoples personal time rather than on the companies time. (survey comment from a retail company)

Within New Zealand branches of international companies, Rainbow initiatives can be reduced to just “forwarding a few emails” from overseas headquarters, with little regard for local

relevance. This tokenistic approach fails to foster meaningful change at the frontline or operational level. For example, some New Zealand organisations mark Wear It Purple Day [1] each year by promoting their Australian head office's celebration, yet fail to educate staff about the event's relevance to the New Zealand context and its significance for Rainbow communities.

We could be doing so much more that's actually meaningful. It feels like the business is forwarding a few emails and doing the absolute minimum to tick the box. The NZ group focuses on sharing newsletters from AU, that have no relevance to NZ. This includes Wear It Purple Day support, where no one in NZ understands what that is other than a purple team mufti day. (survey comment from a retail company)

Head office mentions inclusivity from time to time but at the store level there's not much substance. (survey comment from a recreation company)

Rainbow-specific education and training – another important avenue for raising awareness and fostering support (Perales, 2022) – can also become a mere tick-box exercise, especially when delivered online, where it may fail to promote meaningful engagement or achieve effective educational outcomes. As comments below show, Rainbow-specific education and training may be used by managers to signal support without a genuine commitment to allyship, reducing such initiatives to performative gestures rather than meaningful engagement.

I wish we did more in-depth face-to-face education sessions on LGBTQ issues. I don't think our eLearning is effective. Many kaimahi treat it as a tick-box activity. In-person education sessions might be more engaging. (survey comment from a healthcare organisation)

There's lots of fake inclusiveness from management. My old store manager was anti-LGBTQ+ but because they did a course they got a pin and can say they're inclusive even though they are anti and told me it's against their religion. (survey comment from a retail company)

Similar to the burden placed on Rainbow networks due to the organisation's failure to coordinate Rainbow events, the lack of organisation-facilitated education and training can also add pressure to Rainbow employees, who may be expected to take on the role of educating their colleagues. Being the default educator on Rainbow topics can be emotionally taxing and unfair, as Rainbow individuals are expected not only to navigate a heteronormative workplace climate but also to shoulder the burden of transforming it.

There's only one video about inclusivity. As a Rainbow person I am often asked questions about my community. I don't mind answering these and helping, it shows that there is not any Rainbow-specific training or educational stuff on offer. It is also a slight concern as this may be the case in other stores and not all Rainbow people are comfortable to educate others and can be frustrating/overwhelming being the token queer person answering your teams related Rainbow questions. (survey comment from a recreation company)

The organisation's minimal effort is further reflected in its provision of gender-neutral toilets, which are often limited in number and difficult to access. Typically, all staff toilets are gendered, with the only gender-neutral options being public facilities shared with customers.

There's only one all-gender toilet and it's the customer toilet. (survey comment from a retail company)

The only unisex toilet is the public toilet. Team toilets are men and women. (survey comment from an energy company)

The organisation's failure to provide accessible gender-neutral toilets disproportionately affects transgender and gender-diverse employees, leaving them feeling unsafe or uncomfortable in gender-specific toilets. This not only creates inconvenience in meeting basic needs for staff and visitors who require such access, but also erodes transgender and gender-diverse employees' sense of belonging within the organisation.

I have to take the elevator down six floors to use the gender-neutral toilet, unless I want to go to a gendered bathroom where I don't feel comfortable or welcomed. It's not practical and it makes me feel like I'm an inconvenience. (focus group from a government department)

The only mixed gender bathroom is in the basement. This would not be accessible to clients/visitors without a lot of escorting. (survey comment from an engineering company)

Another frequently reported organisational challenge for transgender and gender-diverse employees is the systemic barrier to updating their name in internal systems, resulting in daily experiences of deadnaming.

Definitely inclusive but I'm still not able to use my preferred name instead of my legal name on the roster and such, only Workjam uses my preferred name. (survey comment from a retail company)

We should make it easier to change preferred names in systems, regardless of the legal status of the name. My staff email still has my deadname on it as I've not changed my name legally. (survey comment from a recreation company)

The findings of this study resonate with the concept of tokenism, a superficial form of diversity used to maintain the appearance of inclusion while lacking genuine authenticity (Bailey, 2025). According to Lee (2020), tokenism serves as a sophisticated mechanism through which institutions project a progressive image, while underlying hierarchies – based on gender, race, sexuality or other factors – continue to shape access to and advancement in an institution. Findings from this study reveal various manifestations of Rainbow tokenism in practices intended to raise Rainbow visibility, such as organising events and celebrations, implementing training programs and arranging gender-inclusive facilities (Cui, 2025). These efforts often appear as minimal, performative gestures, serving as tick-box exercises rather than reflecting genuine inclusion. Such tokenistic practices fail to foster a sense of inclusion for Rainbow employees or adequately address their workplace needs. This is particularly evident in the experiences of transgender and gender-diverse employees, who voiced concerns about limited access to gender-neutral facilities and institutional barriers to name changes (Cui, 2025).

One possible motive for organisations to adopt a tokenistic approach is “Rainbow washing” – a practice in which Rainbow concerns are instrumentalised for commercial or reputational gain (Özbilgin and Erbil, 2024). Gidage's (2025) quantitative study in the Indian context demonstrates that Rainbow washing has a statistically significant and detrimental effect on LGBT + employees' well-being and their perceptions of organisational support. Findings from this qualitative study in the New Zealand context similarly highlight the impact of Rainbow tokenism on Rainbow employees, although the motives behind organisational engagement may be complex and cannot be definitively classified as Rainbow washing. Participants reported feelings of disappointment, perceived “fake inclusiveness” and a sense of exploitation, particularly as Rainbow individuals and networks are disproportionately burdened with educating staff and leading inclusion efforts. These complex sentiments expressed by Rainbow employees – often encapsulated in the phrase “definitely inclusive, but...” – underscore an ambivalent and nuanced perception of organisational support, one that goes beyond binary thinking such as “inclusive” versus “exclusive” (Cui, 2025).

3.2 The interpersonal: cis-heteronormativity in workplace interactions

The challenges Rainbow employees face in the workplace extend beyond limited and performative organisational support – they also permeate everyday interpersonal interactions. While overt discrimination is rare, Rainbow employees continue to face persistent microaggressions, offhand remarks and reactions that imply Rainbow identities are abnormal.

A few giggles/snickers when I discuss Rainbow topics, groups etc. I have had multiple examples of microaggressions being said to me directly, and other offensive comments made about other co-workers behind their back. (survey comment from a healthcare organisation)

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Some of the discriminatory behaviour isn't necessarily intentional. It's mostly about language and being mindful that language (even unintentional) can be discriminatory. (survey comment from an education institution)

I haven't seen targeted discrimination or bullying. However there are still general off-hand comments or jokes at the expense or judgement of LGBTQIA+. (survey comment from a sports organisation)

When interpersonal interactions occur with managers or leaders who lack awareness of Rainbow inclusion, unintended discrimination or marginalisation can arise. For example, one comment below describes a scenario in which a leader's limited understanding of gender diversity reinforced binary gender norms and led to the exclusion of gender-diverse individuals.

At a Māori-style welcome ceremony, students and staff were asked to separate by gender, men in front, women in back, with no recognition of transgender or nonbinary identities. When I raised this issue with leadership, I was told that people should just "pick one" because "this is just how it is". (survey comment from an education institution)

Lack of understanding from Senior managers of Inclusivity and LGBT issues, which has led to some inadvertent discriminatory behaviour. (survey comment from an engineering company)

The discrimination described by participants often manifests through inadvertent marginalisation, jokes or microaggressions, rather than direct acts of targeting, aggression or exclusion. These findings align with existing research conducted in Western contexts (Cui, 2025; Kelly *et al.*, 2021; Rennstam and Sullivan, 2016), which demonstrates a shift in discrimination from explicit exclusion and overt stigmatisation to more subtle forms of marginalisation – where Rainbow employees are nominally accepted, yet continue to be positioned at the margins. This means that, despite the positive changes brought about by DEI policies and the growing Rainbow visibility, the workplace climate remains entrenched in cis-heteronormativity (Corlett *et al.*, 2023; Cui, 2025) – normative notions and practices that construct gender as binary and privilege cisgender and heterosexual identities, thereby marginalising Rainbow employees and casting them as "abnormal".

Notably, transgender and gender-diverse employees are disproportionately subject to gender-based unfair treatment, particularly the failure to acknowledge their pronouns and gender identities. These patterns have been consistently witnessed and reported by their Rainbow colleagues.

We need to get a lot better at using people's preferred pronouns. I hear people misgendering regularly and not attempting to correct themselves. (survey comment from a healthcare organisation)

Discriminatory comments around different gender identities made by staff. Repeat misgendering of others despite clearly listed pronouns. (survey comment from an insurance company)

A conversation in which a coworker said they will not honour/use someone's pronouns if they were to change. (survey comment from a healthcare organisation)

Misgendering experienced by transgender and gender-diverse employees is further substantiated by their own firsthand accounts. Though it may appear minor to some, the daily disregard of one's affirmed gender identity can result in profound emotional harm. As the comments below illustrate, transgender and gender-diverse employees who are misgendered by colleagues may feel like a burden or feel unsupported when no one steps in to correct the misgendering.

One of the biggest daily challenges I face is the use of my correct pronouns. I very rarely have people refer to me using my preferred pronouns. (survey comment from a recreation company)

Some of my colleagues consistently misgender me even with my pronouns on my MS Teams. This has been raised with them and instead of being a positive change in behaviour, it has made me feel like I've burdened them. (survey comment from an insurance company)

I don't truly feel like anyone has my back. Most people won't even correct someone else when I'm being misgendered. (survey comment from a retail company)

Interpersonal resistance to gender-specific toilet use presents another challenge for transgender and gender-diverse employees. In the absence of accessible gender-neutral toilets – a key organisational failure noted earlier – these employees are often vulnerable to discrimination from colleagues when using toilets aligned with their gender identity.

I have been discriminated against. I've had troubles with the bathrooms before with staff. They've actively told me not to use the woman's bathroom. I've been asked out of them. (focus group from a government department)

The various challenges faced by transgender and gender-diverse employees – including interpersonal interactions that perpetuate binary gender norms, experiences of being misgendered and difficulties accessing toilets aligned with their gender identity – highlight the uneven inclusion and distinct barriers they encounter in the workplace. These findings contribute empirical evidence to a growing body of scholarship documenting the workplace challenges faced by transgender and gender-diverse employees (Beauregard *et al.*, 2020; Köllen, 2016; Ozturk and Tatli, 2016). The findings of this study mirror workplace challenges frequently documented in existing research, particularly experiences of being misgendered (Corby *et al.*, 2025; Pitcher, 2017) and difficulties accessing appropriate toilets (Beauregard *et al.*, 2020; Cui, 2025), both of which have been quantitatively shown to significantly impact transgender and gender-diverse employees' professional safety and well-being (Cancela *et al.*, 2022; Perales *et al.*, 2025). By highlighting the negative interpersonal experiences of transgender and gender-diverse employees, this study underscores the impact of pervasive cisnormativity (Cui, 2025), which reproduces binary gender norms and stigmatises gender nonconforming individuals, thereby placing them in a vulnerable position.

3.3 *The political: global and national backlash against Rainbow inclusion*

The workplace climate challenges faced by Rainbow employees in New Zealand are not confined to organisational practices or interpersonal dynamics; Rather, they are profoundly shaped by broader political currents at both national and global levels. In this era of globalisation, the political dynamics of the US exert a significant influence, even reaching Pacific nations like New Zealand. Management in the New Zealand offices of US-headquartered international companies has been affected by the growing backlash against DEI initiatives, which has intensified since President Trump's second term. Despite a widely held perception of inclusive workplace culture, Rainbow employees from these companies have expressed discomfort, citing the withdrawal of DEI programs, prompted by US regulations, as a key source of unease.

The team's pretty inclusive overall, but HR has to stick to U.S. laws and rules. They recently shut down the DEI program, and it's left many people feeling uneasy. (survey comment from an IT company)

In addition to the New Zealand offices of US-headquartered international companies, the public sector is another area significantly impacted by the global backlash. Mirroring Donald Trump's anti-DEI and anti-gender stance (Wendling and Epstein, 2025), politicians in the New Zealand government introduced bills to remove DEI regulations from the public service (Ensor, 2025) and to define in law the biological categories of "woman" and "man" (The Guardian, 2025). Consequently, Rainbow employees within government departments have witnessed a pronounced shift in their organisational culture. DEI practices, including those dedicated to promoting Rainbow visibility, have faced increased scrutiny and censorship (Cooke, 2025). This erosion of support undermines Rainbow employees' sense of belonging and restricts their freedom of identity expression in the workplace.

[A politician]’s anti-LGBTQI+ views seem to be influencing XX’s culture. Funding for human rights and LGBTQI+ initiatives is being heavily scrutinised. The directive to not post or promote Pride events makes me feel more uncomfortable to express or share my identity at work. (focus group from a government department)

Amid an intensifying “anti-woke” political climate, management in government departments finds itself navigating a fraught tension: the demand for political conformity on one side, and the ethical obligation to support Rainbow staff on the other. The following comment illustrates how a department leader’s silence amid political backlash left a Rainbow employee feeling disappointed, who had hoped for visible support.

In a meeting, I asked a leader about [a politician]’s anti-woke speech and how the department supports LGBTQI+ staff. The response was to separate his public persona from his role at the government, without addressing what the department is doing to support its diverse staff. The question was missed entirely. (focus group from a government department)

This political climate has negatively impacted Rainbow employees not only within government departments and US-headquartered international companies, but also across local organisations spanning multiple sectors. As reflected in the comments below from participants in the insurance, recreation and education sectors, the rise of broader political conservatism has emboldened like-minded colleagues to openly dismiss what they refer to as “woke culture”. The political climate, thus, is not something external to the organisation or distant from its employees – it has already permeated workplace culture, directly affecting Rainbow staff. In response, Rainbow employees may feel under attack and expect their organisations to proactively demonstrate care and publicly reaffirm an unwavering commitment to support.

I’ve observed that some older colleagues dismiss “woke culture” as a temporary fad, not recognizing their significance. Some even suggest the organisation is too focused on inclusion which is sad. (survey comment from an insurance company)

Now is an important time to reaffirm that we are a Rainbow-friendly organisation. Our Rainbow whānau feel under attack with [a politician]’s recent attempt at a private members bill about “definition of a woman” [2]. We need to take a stance against such reductionist crap. (survey comment from an education institution)

There is a lot of politic commentary at present which is negative. Whilst it isn’t the company’s responsibility to solve any of this, it would be good if managers were trained/encouraged to reach out to Rainbow employees to check on them. (survey comment from a recreation company)

In response to the political backlash, global scholars have voiced concerns and reaffirmed their commitment to DEI initiatives and research (Aguinis *et al.*, 2025; Jaramillo *et al.*, 2025; Ng *et al.*, 2025; Sands and Ferraro, 2025; Sitzmann *et al.*, 2024). As Follmer *et al.* (2024) highlight, motivations for dismantling DEI policies – such as anti-woke agendas, perceptions of reverse discrimination and the myth of meritocracy – have led to restrictions that reduce access to DEI knowledge, resources and support, with potential consequences for individuals, organisations and society at large. However, empirical research on the consequences and impact of anti-DEI and anti-gender backlash remains scarce, despite its increasing relevance to policy development. By foregrounding Rainbow employees’ concerns about workplace climate shaped by political dynamics, this study provides deeper insight into both contemporary political discourses and New Zealand’s workplace environment – and the interplay between them.

Specifically, this study reveals that the shifting political climate in the US is not a remote phenomenon for the Pacific region, but one with far-reaching ripple effects. These influences are propelled by the interconnected nature of today’s globalised business landscape and the transnational spread of anti-gender ideologies and movements, often driven by political actors and authoritarian forces (Butler, 2025). Indeed, the findings of this study reveal how

New Zealand organisations are shaped by international political forces – whether through their role as local branches of US-headquartered multinational companies, or through the actions of local politicians whose political strategies are influenced by global conservative trends and, in some cases, appear to “mimic Donald Trump” (RNZ, 2025). Influential queer scholar Judith Butler characterises this intensifying anti-gender movement as a phantasmatic scene – a psychosocial phenomenon that serves as “a site where intimate fears and anxieties become socially organized to incite political passion” (Butler, 2025, p. 9). As Butler (2025, p. 7) asserts, “the weaponization of this fearsome phantasm of ‘gender’ is authoritarian at its core”. Findings from this study reveal the authoritarian dynamics at play in the workplace, operating on one hand through deliberate silence and withdrawal from organisational obligations, and on the other through institutional scrutiny and the censorship of queer visibility to maintain political conformity. Rainbow employees’ concerns about political backlash and declining support illustrate how authoritarian forces, even within democratic contexts, can reinforce organisational cis-heteronormativity – particularly when top-down efforts to dismantle EDI go unchallenged and the growing vulnerability of Rainbow employees remains unaddressed.

4. Concluding thoughts

Drawing on qualitative data from Rainbow employees in New Zealand organisations across diverse sectors, this article has explored their concerns regarding the workplace climate. It has unpacked three layers of challenges: organisational, interpersonal and political. The findings reveal manifestations of Rainbow tokenism in organisational practices that present a superficial appearance of inclusion through minimal efforts and tick-box exercises. These practices fail to make genuine commitments or address the specific needs of Rainbow employees, thereby eroding their sense of belonging and perceived organisational support. At the interpersonal level, cis-heteronormative assumptions and microaggressions continue to frame Rainbow identities as abnormal, thereby marginalising Rainbow employees. Transgender and gender-diverse individuals, in particular, often face disproportionate unfair treatment, including misgendering and difficulties accessing appropriate toilet facilities. The workplace climate for Rainbow employees has grown increasingly complex and restrictive amid global and national backlash against DEI initiatives and Rainbow inclusion. This troubling trend has spread across sectors and is particularly evident in government departments and US-headquartered international corporations, where political directives have produced tangible impacts and, in some cases, censorship.

By situating Rainbow employees’ perspectives within both New Zealand and global political dynamics, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of the workplace climate in an underexplored national context and its entanglement with broader political currents. The study provides important empirical evidence of how anti-DEI and anti-gender backlash affects workplace experiences, carrying timely and significant social implications for advancing Rainbow inclusion. Amid the intensifying spread of conservative and authoritarian forces, organisations must affirm their commitment to Rainbow employees by interrogating institutional cis-heteronormativity, educating staff to foster awareness and embedding Rainbow inclusion into organisational practices and culture – rather than resorting to tokenism. Such organisational resistance to the “anti-woke” backlash is not merely institutional or interpersonal – it is deeply political, generating possibilities both within and beyond the organisation. Here, Butler’s recent insights offer valuable illumination of current challenges and may help inform future organisational responses.

In their latest book, *Who’s Afraid of Gender* (2025), Butler seeks to interrogate the precise nature of contemporary anxieties surrounding gender and to elucidate the political ramifications of such fears. Central to Butler’s analysis is the concept of the “phantasmatic scene,” a theoretical construct employed to interpret the current anti-gender ideology and movement, which is driven by fears of societal destruction attributed to gender, alongside a desire to restore a patriarchal and cis-heteronormative order. As Butler reminds us: “In the grip

of a phantasm, it is hard to think. And yet thinking and imagining have never been more important” (p. 36). Responding to this contemporary political discourse, Butler writes:

It is up to us to produce a compelling counter-vision, one that would affirm the rights and freedoms of embodied life that we can, and should, protect. For in the end, defeating this phantasm is a matter of affirming how one loves, how one lives in one’s body, the right to exist in the world without fear of violence or discrimination, to breathe, to move, to live. Why wouldn’t we want all people to have those fundamental freedoms? (p. 10)

Following Butler’s words, an organisation’s efforts to affirm Rainbow inclusion and to produce a counter-vision against political backlash constitutes not only a recognition of diverse ways of managing and organising, but also a validation of different ways of living and being that resist normative constraints and authoritarian control. Just as the workplace climate is shaped by broader political forces beyond the organisation, internal practices and forms of resistance within the organisation hold the power to reshape sociopolitical dynamics that extend beyond organisational boundaries. In this sense, organisations function as active arenas of political contestation, capable of driving societal change that reaches well beyond the confines of individual professional lives.

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Notes

1. *Wear It Purple Day* is an annual event held in Australia, dedicated to celebrating and supporting Rainbow young people.
2. For details of the incident mentioned by the survey respondent, see *The Guardian* (2025, April 22).

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