

Diversity Talks | PRIDE | Joana Silva:

We should strive to be and do better, until every single person feels accepted and respected



In celebration of the PRIDE week, the Inclusion & Diversity Committee did several interviews with colleagues within the institute. Joana Silva, Postdoc, Group of William Faller, NKI

My name is Joana Silva. I'm a cisgender straight ally and my pronouns are she/her. After completing my BSc and MSc in Portugal, I moved to Barcelona to do my PhD in metabolism and stem cell biology. At the end of 2017, I moved to Amsterdam and joined Liam Faller's group, where I've been working as a postdoc trying to understand how RNA translation affects stem cell function. I'm also a member of the Diversity and Inclusion Committee here at the NKI.

I think representation is essential in all fields, and that includes STEM. I often encounter people who claim that any movement that strives for scientific diversity, including gender balance, LGBTQIA+ or BAME, doesn't fit with the ideals of meritocracy, meaning that people should be hired solely on their "professional abilities", rather than how they look or how they identify themselves. However, I believe there are many problems with this system. For starters, these "professional abilities" are usually defined by the people who are in powerful positions, which in most fields are privileged groups who will favor their own traits, therefore excluding individuals who could bring innovative thinking to the table. Secondly, I believe everyone should be able to see themselves in power positions in order to unlock their full potential and that can only be achieved by increasing diversity. Last but not least, scientific innovations aim to improve the quality of life of all individuals and communities, and these discoveries don't just happen out of nowhere, they are led by scientists who work incredibly hard to solve problems that usually affect them. Unfortunately, we can all see how such

innovations still favor white straight males and exclude other minorities when it comes to both diagnosis and treatment of several diseases. I strongly believe this problem can be solved by increasing representation in STEM.

Unfortunately, I have witnessed a lot of discrimination against LGBTQIA+ people in STEM. Back in Portugal, I've seen people writing hate messages on the bench of a gay colleague. Another gay colleague of mine was asked by his supervisor to not be so "feminine" when presenting his work at conferences. And just last week, here at the NKI, someone wrote a very hateful message in one of the PRIDE posters the DI committee distributed. It's shocking to me how this behavior still happens, even in cities that claim to be so inclusive and tolerant.

I think we cannot assume it's easier nowadays for LGBTQIA+ people to come out. I can only imagine that this experience must be so different for each person and it must be quite difficult to define a single moment of coming out, because you have to deal with your family, friends, colleagues, etc. Having said that, I think seeing the increase in representation in media and public figures might be helpful. At the same time, we can also see the setbacks in some countries like Poland or Hungary, when it comes to accepting the LGBTQIA+ community. Or even here in The Netherlands where just recently Frédérique Brink, a gender-neutral teenager, got beaten up. That's why I believe increasing visibility and supporting the LGBTQIA+ community is extremely important nowadays.

If I compare Portugal to Amsterdam, I feel that here there are definitely more initiatives to celebrate LGBTQIA+ people, such as gay bars, queer festivals, and PRIDE, although I think Portugal is very tolerant and supportive of the community. We all know how the Netherlands became the first country to legalize gay marriage and its pioneer political advances cannot be ignored. However, I sometimes feel that we risk being trapped in the past and forget that there are still many issues that need to be solved. For instance, only next September gay men who are in monogamous relationships will be able to donate blood. Or the abolishment of conversion therapy centers for gay and transgender people is still not completed. These are just some of the issues which must be solved ASAP.

I think many LGBTQIA+ people are comfortable discussing their status here at the NKI, at least with me, which is so great, but I think we can still improve some things to create a safer and more inclusive environment for everyone to feel comfortable. Even if one single person does not feel safe and accepted, that's one too many.

When it comes to role models, there are many famous LGBTQIA+ names that come to mind, such as Alan Turing and Sara Josephine Baker. Particularly in my area, I had the pleasure of meeting Karissa Sanbonmatsu, a transgender structural biologist who is making an amazing contribution to the RNA/translation field. She was the first to perform an atomistic simulation of the [ribosome](#), determine the secondary structure of an intact [lncRNA](#), and publish a [one billion atom simulation](#) of a biomolecular complex. In addition to that, she is a public speaker and a strong advocate for LGBTQIA+ people all around the world.

I think the motto "Be inclusive by including" is key to promote change and improve our work culture. Being an active ally, using the right pronouns, having gender-neutral bathrooms, creating support groups with professionals on mental health that the community can use and

increasing representation in all different job positions are just some examples of things we can do.

Unfortunately, there are still many issues that LGBTQIA+ people face every day in STEM. Some that come to mind are lack of representation and how this increases exponentially the imposter syndrome which many scientists already suffer from, and that many times prevents them from evolving and unlocking their full potential. Overall mental health issues are a big problem, considering the constant pressure and stress LGBTQIA+ people suffer every day, even when it comes to simplest things like mentioning their same-sex partner when asked how was the weekend, or having people referring to them using the wrong pronoun. And, of course, general discrimination and violence, which sadly still occurs even in the most tolerant cities/institutes.

There are so many things that can be done for the LGBTQIA+ community: create legislation that protects and supports them, invest in education and initiatives to promote a more inclusive society, increase visibility and inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people in all areas, acknowledge the problems and issues we still face as a society. In sum, we should just strive to be and do better, until every single person feels accepted and respected.

My message to the LGBTQIA+ community is: be proud and believe in yourself. The scientific community is better with you in it. Demand change and respect, any other reality is not acceptable. As an ally, I try to focus on listening and learning. Personally, I can get quite frustrated and angry whenever I witness any discriminatory behavior, and to be honest, I don't always have the strength and patience to deal with such situations. But I've been trying to improve this as I strongly believe that everything can be achieved through education. I also think it is very important to be vocal and active when it comes to showing your support for LGBTQIA+ people. Make sure everyone knows it's safe to talk to you.

Being a member of the DI Committee has been an amazing experience and it has opened my eyes to so many issues that I completely missed in the past. I've always been quite vocal when it comes to my support of every minority group and the importance of representation in general, but only recently I've taken on a more active role regarding these issues. I strongly advise everyone to do the same. Discrimination and lack of representativity should not be solved exclusively by LGBTQIA+ people. It's not their problem, it's ours, and therefore we should do our best and be responsible for change.