

# Veganism and Equality Research

**An investigation into the experiences of UK vegans in the context of human rights and equality provisions**

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## **Summary**

This small scale research project invited vegans to describe unfair experiences in personal, social and employment contexts. On the basis of the results, it is clear that members of the vegan community are at risk of unfair and discriminatory treatment in all major sectors of social life. This study reveals that the public sector is failing in its duty to accommodate veganism, particularly in health care. Protection for vegans in employment is urgently required in both the public and private sector. This study makes a number of recommendations related to the requirements of international and domestic law and urges the United Kingdom Equality and Human Rights Commission to pay particular regard to the vegan community.

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## 1. The context for the research

Anecdotal accounts of unfairness and discrimination emanating from within the vegan community necessitates research regarding the lived experience of vegans in employment, social and personal contexts.

Respecting the right of all people to live according to their own ethical convictions and to live meaningful lives, international law requires that states protect the right to freedom of religion and belief. The United Kingdom is subject to this requirement and has incorporated the right to this freedom into its domestic legislation by making available the rights contained in the European Convention of Human Rights. This is achieved through the Human Rights Act 1998 and through the provisions of current equality law: the 2010 Equality Act. In international law there is no hierarchy of legal protection for religions and (qualifying) beliefs.

The European Court of Human Rights and the UK Government agreed in 1994 that veganism was a qualifying belief\* in law.<sup>1</sup>

The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) of the United Kingdom is the organisation under a statutory duty to monitor the implementation of human rights and equality provisions. The EHRC has repeatedly informed employers and society more generally, that veganism is a protected lifestyle under the Human Rights Act 1998 and the Equality Act 2010. In addition, the current equality provisions of the UK were specifically designed to promote diversity and inclusion.

The research was limited to vegans living in the UK.

### **\*Why is veganism a protected “belief” in law?**

Six vegan participants commented on the status of veganism in law as problematic due to it being designated a “belief”, when in fact, veganism reflects deeply held ethical convictions. United Kingdom law, reflecting international law, legislates from the perspective that all other species are resources for human consumption of one kind or another. It has however, in line with international requirements, accommodated the opposing perspective, by acknowledging veganism as a valid alternative ethical position and lifestyle. Protection for the vegan community can only be forthcoming under already existing categories and terms contained in the Articles of various Treaties and Declarations. The relevant category for protection of a person’s lifestyle is protection for one’s “Religion or Belief” and not being a religion, veganism is protected under the alternative category “belief”. This does not mean that international law or UK law implies that veganism is simply, or merely, an insignificant belief. In fact, in law, a qualifying “belief” must be cogent, coherent, meaningful, reflect one’s deep convictions, be a weighty and substantial aspect of one’s life and be worthy of respect. The UK has recognised veganism to comply with all of these attributes and has therefore complied with its duty and obligations to protect veganism as a qualifying ethical lifestyle of choice. As such, veganism attracts the same protection as that of any religion and is in no way relegated in status nor is it dismissed as an insignificant world view.

## 2. The research aims

The aim of the research was to ascertain the views and experiences of vegans in employment, social and personal contexts regarding how they felt treated in relation to current equality and rights provisions. Participating vegans were asked to provide their views regarding commonly used terms in equality law such as “dignity” and “harassment”, and provide an unprompted account of circumstances in which they felt unfairly treated or discriminated against according to these terms. Participants were also invited to report positive experiences.

## 3. The researcher

The research was conducted by Jeanette Rowley as part of a PhD research project into the relationship of human rights law to veganism. The impetus for the research stems from Jeanette’s many decades as a vegan and her passion to promote veganism as a way of life that contributes to the dismantling of the dominant

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<sup>1</sup> W v United Kingdom 1993. The details of this case can be accessed here: <http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/sites/eng/pages/search.aspx?i=001-1503>

practices that protect and sustain the abuse of other species. A further impetus stems from the removal of “vegan examples” which were written into the Draft Code of Practice to the Equality Act 2010. The Draft Code of Practice, published by the UK Equality and Human Rights Commission was ground breaking because it explained to employers and society generally that veganism was a lifestyle protected by law at both the European and UK level. However, in the final version of the Code of Practice, the examples and references to veganism were removed. This was felt to be a backward step for veganism and thus required investigation and action. Under Freedom of Information rules, a request was made to the Equality and Human Rights Commission, to provide specific information about the removal of the text relating to the legal status of veganism. Information was forthcoming, is currently being used in other areas of the research and will be pursued further.

#### **4. Funding:**

The research was privately funded and benefited from a discounted advertising rate offered by the Vegan Society of the United Kingdom.

#### **5. Method**

The research was subject to the rules and regulations of Lancaster University Ethics Committee and all procedures and regulations concerning the personal data of participants were complied with.

An advertisement was placed in four issues of The Vegan magazine over the course of one year. The decision to use the magazine of the Vegan Society to advertise for participants was to aim the research at committed ethical vegans rather those who merely follow a vegan diet for other reasons. Whilst not wishing to dismiss the views of non-subscribers to the magazine and non-members of the Vegan Society, it was acknowledged that promoting the research to a wider audience, emanating from an internet advertisement for example, may result in too many participants from outside of the United Kingdom. The research was also promoted at various “Vegan Fairs” in the UK. It was hoped that this type of advertising would produce the most reliable responses. The views of seventy four UK vegan participants were recorded and form the basis of this report.

Research participants were asked to read the documentation supplied which provided information about the aims of the research and frequently asked questions. A consent form was supplied, to be signed by the participant and returned to the researcher at Lancaster University or through a designated research email address. The research aimed to be open for a 12 month period from Spring 2013 to Spring 2014 but at the time of writing this report (March 2014) offers to participate are still forthcoming. Though some accounts from vegans may therefore be excluded from this report, all late participant views will contribute to a final generalised analysis and summary which will be used to inform the final thesis.

Participants were asked to write an unprompted brief account of experiences which they felt to be unfair or discriminatory. There was no expectation that participants would be familiar with rights or equality law and the account was to be as candid as possible. Participants were informed that positive experiences of being vegan in a non-vegan world were valuable to the research and were thus invited to provide this information simultaneously.

The descriptions of experiences of individual vegans was categorised and filed. Paper or emails containing contact data were then deleted or shredded. Participants had the option to be kept informed of the progress of the research and a small number explicitly requested that their contact data remained on file. Where this was requested, the contact details were filed separately. This ensures that the personal contact data of participants cannot be matched with specific experiences submitted for inclusion in the research.

Views of 74 participants were examined and categorised according to the circumstances of the experience. Some participants reported unfair treatment in more than one category. Categorisation to date (March 2014) indicates 16 areas of daily life in which vegans report experiencing varying degrees of exclusion, discrimination or unfairness and feeling a range of emotions related to those experiences.

## 6. Results

Seventy four vegans described a total of 221 experiences and feelings. A total of 15 positive experiences were recorded as can be seen in Figure 1. These were detracted from the total number of experiences in order to analyse the overwhelming prevalence of negative experiences. This report therefore analyses a total of 206 negative experiences. Figures 2 and 3 represent this data visually illustrating 3 main areas: availability and choice of food, attitudes and provision of essential items.



Figure 1 Number of experiences described

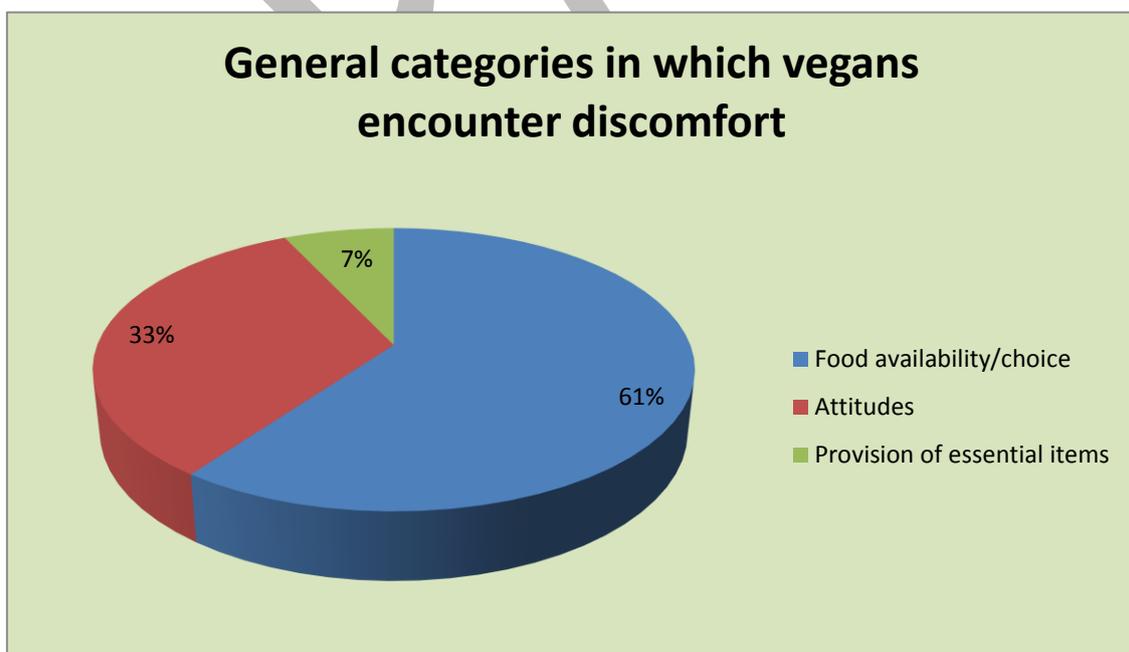


Figure 2 General categories in which vegans encounter discomfort.

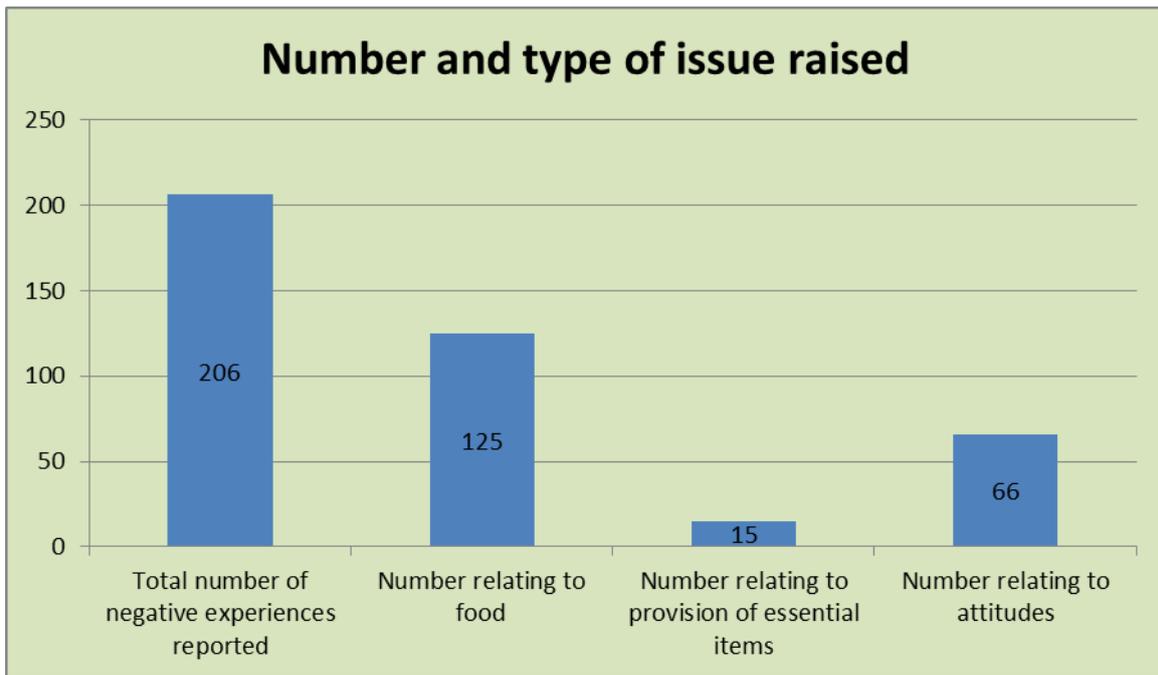


Figure 2 Number and type of issue raised.

These 3 general categories are further divided into 16 sub categories of daily life. Figure 3 indicates the categories and the percentage of negative experiences reported in each sub category.

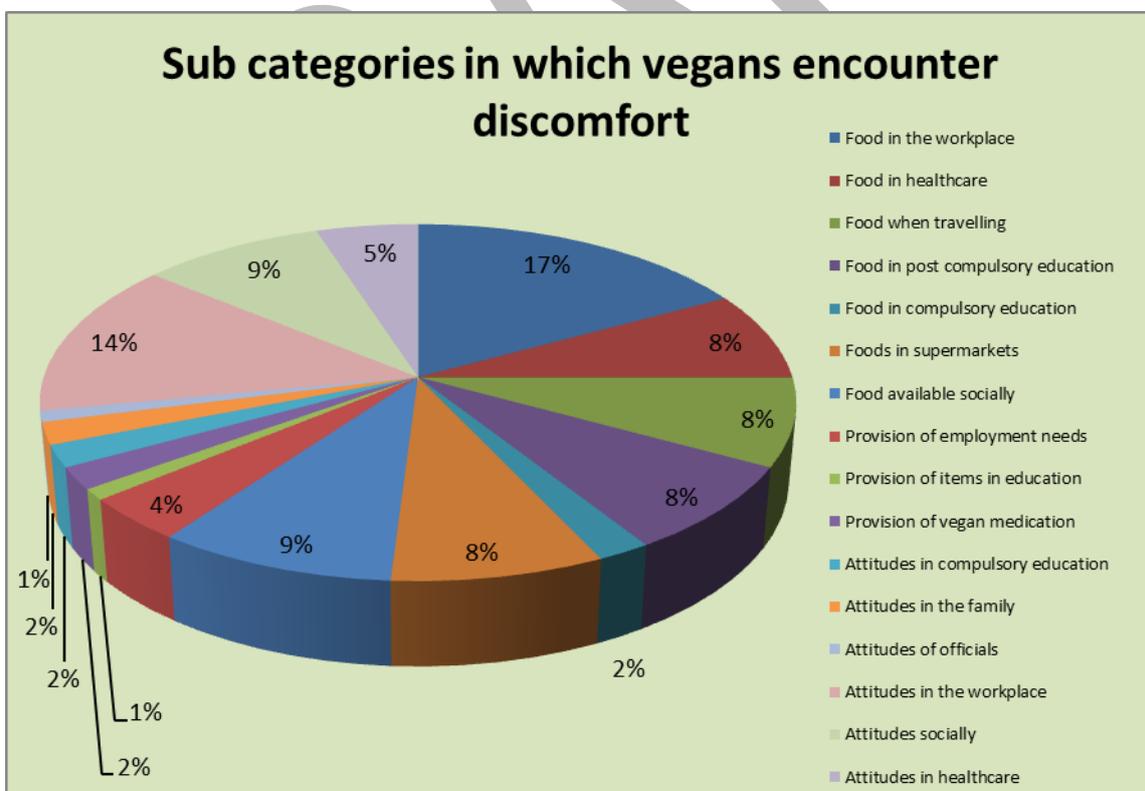


Figure 3 Sub categories in which vegans encounter discomfort.

A very small number reported single positive experiences in a limited number of these categories. Figure 4 indicates the type and number of positive experiences reported.

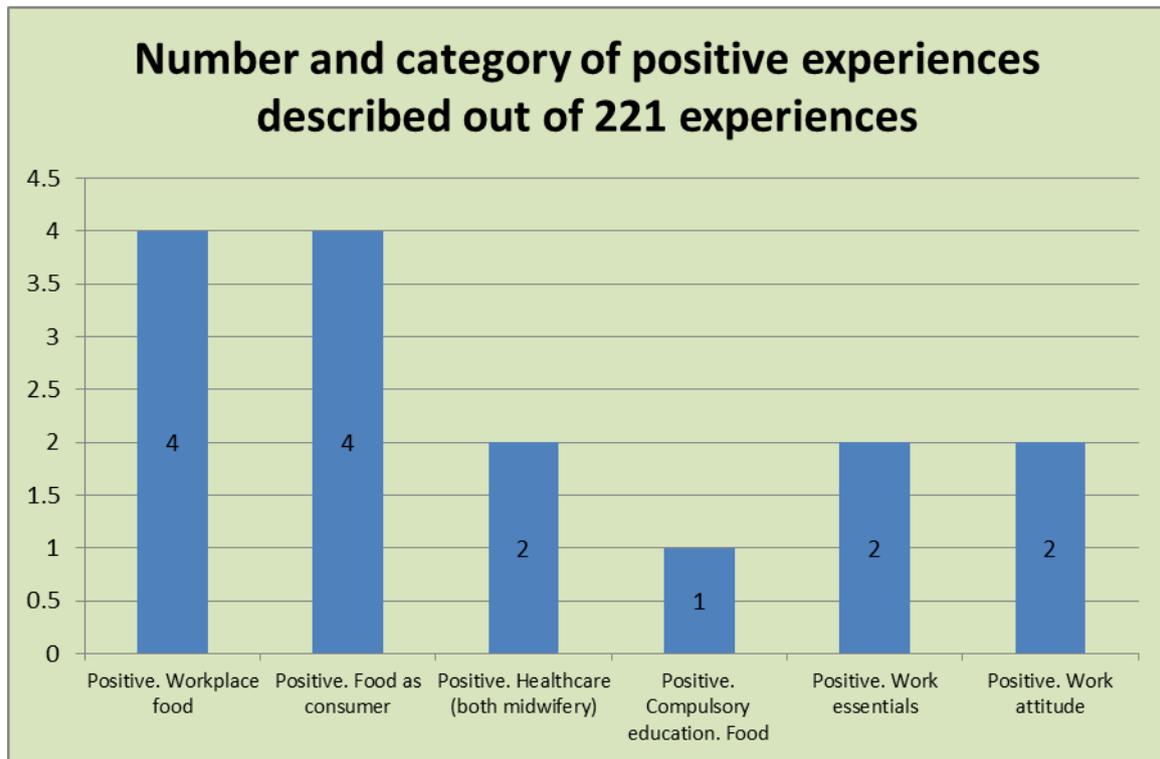


Figure 4 Number and category of positive experiences described.

The 16 categories, identified by 74 vegan participants as areas of life in which they encountered discomfort, span the breadth of daily life. The 206 incidents of negative experiences could indicate that most vegans are quite likely to come up against a lack of provision for their needs at some stage as they go about their normal day to day life. These experiences often generate feelings associated with exclusion, powerlessness and dismissal. In particular, vegans in the workplace stand out as significantly likely to experience the harmful effects of exclusion and dismissal, when the numbers of issues related to “food in the workplace” are combined with those related to “attitudes in the workplace”. The survey indicates that almost a third of negative experiences raised by vegans relate to the workplace. Figure 5 highlights the workplace as particularly problematic for the vegan community.

## Percentage of negative experiences in main social sectors, expressed as percentage of total number of experiences recorded

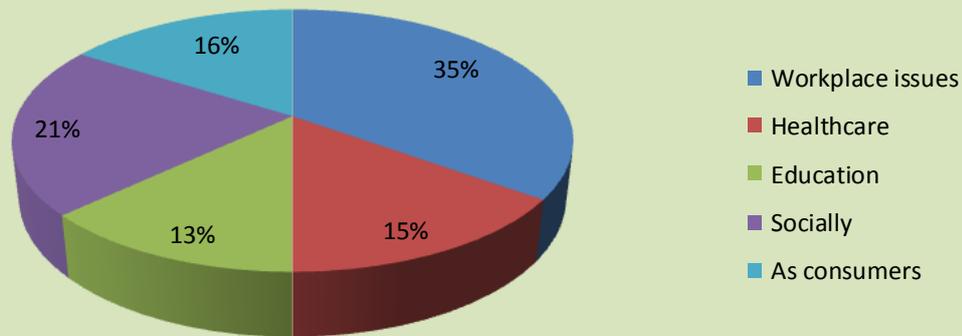


Figure 5 Percentage of negative experiences in main social sectors expressed as a percentage of total number of experiences recorded.

### Food availability and choice

An overwhelming area of dissatisfaction related to food availability and choice, with many participants feeling that they were unfairly discriminated against at work, in health care, in compulsory and post compulsory education, as consumers in supermarkets, in education, when out socially and when using transport. One participant indicated that direct discrimination had occurred because they had been told that they were “in the wrong place” to eat and that they should leave and go somewhere else. Other circumstances indicated that indirect discrimination had occurred because a policy of providing a “working lunch” for example did not take into account the dietary needs of those attending. Food availability on transport was reported as “extremely disappointing”, participants reporting not just food unavailability but dismissive and objectionable comments from staff on trains and flights.

Participants reporting their views regarding food availability in education, supermarkets, restaurants, cafes and when using public transport felt that they were unfairly treated and that the vegetarian options – more predominantly available – ought to be vegan, describing this as “common sense” and “practical”. Vegans reported a range of feelings in these social circumstances including “feeling ignored”, “dismissed”, being made to feel as if they were “making a fuss”, feeling that there was a “lack of consideration” for vegans as consumers. Some participants related their circumstances to equality provisions and felt their dignity as consumers was compromised, that their ethical convictions and lifestyle were trivialised and some being made to feel like “third class citizens”. Participants reported catering employees encouraging the sale of produce on the basis that it is “probably” vegan. Participants felt that food supplied as vegan by non-specialist providers (vegan establishments and “health food” shops for example) was unsafe and a number of participants reported finding non-vegan items in sandwiches and on their plates in restaurants. Food labelling was also a source of frustration and confusion. However, positive social experiences were described, 2 of which indicated that food outlets had “gone out of their way” to ensure the vegan customer was properly provided for despite the fact that the vegan would be an infrequent visitor to the premises. Two participants raised the issue of food in compulsory education. This could become a more significant issue for vegan parents due to the intentions of government to supply a free school meal to all pupils. One participant reported that the school attended by her 5 year old child had accommodated their needs with no fuss at all and was delighted to be received so well after feeling very anxious about approaching the school. This is encouraging, but it must be made clear to all education state establishments that all states have a duty to provide culturally acceptable food under international law aside from being obliged to provide for one’s religion or belief.

Instances of exclusion appear to manifest a range of negative emotions and feelings which seem to be more intense in two particular contexts: 1 the workplace and 2 in healthcare. In both of these contexts, the descriptions of participant experiences reveal that the manifestations of being excluded, marginalised and misunderstood result in varying degrees of psychological discomfort.

### **Food in the workplace**

A large proportion of experiences described that a request for vegan food often resulted in “further discussions”, “undesirable comments” and a type of “interrogation” which sought to “challenge” the participant’s ethical principles, such as being asked questions about shoes, belts, and bags worn by the participant. Participants explaining experiences in this category were by far the most expressive, describing the impact in terms of feeling “confronted”, “excluded”, “distressed”, “dismissed”, “powerless”, “lonely”, “anxious” (to request food or attend conferences), feeling that colleagues were “unfair”, feeling “harassment”, “unsettled”, “shocked”, a sense of “disrespect”, “embarrassed”, feelings of “being singled out”, “publicly humiliated”, feeling that there was “intentional harassment, hostility and dismissal”, feeling that they have to put up with colleagues “ranting” about veganism and feeling “unsupported by senior management”.

Where food was requested, participants report that it was often forgotten, or the prominent label “VEGAN” made the participant feel “embarrassed”, “in the spotlight and singled out”. Where vegan food was ordered but “forgotten”, the participant had no option but to go out to buy their own food while their colleagues were catered for. Being aware of the status of vegans as “constantly complaining” resulted in participants tolerating the working conditions rather than raising the problem as an issue. A number of experiences described avoidance of social eating at work, vegans preferring to go out alone or eat while working due to “constant questioning” or “harassment”. Participants described feelings of anger and frustration regarding the comparative choice in food for vegans and non-vegans; some observing that religions and those with medical conditions are taken more seriously” in the workplace.

Where participants took their own food to work, dissatisfaction was expressed regarding the lack of provision of fridge, microwave and other suitable kitchen utensils. Experiences described “filthy” microwaves and fridges and participants keeping their own crockery and utensils in their desk drawer for their own use. One experience described a situation where the vegan was asked not to take onion and garlic to the office but was required to tolerate the “foul stink” emanating from the desks of non-vegan colleagues.

A significant number of experiences related to the behaviour of some colleagues. Going beyond what can be regarded as “reasonable banter” the workplace was described as a place which could generate feelings of “severe anxiety”. One participant felt the need to explore external professional advice rather than speak to management about unfair and unreasonable comments regarding their needs at work.

Overall, when the impact of a lack of provision of vegan food at work is combined with the percentage of issues reported about attitudes towards vegans in the workplace, the way a vegan feels and experiences life in the workplace is of significant interest in the context of equality, diversity and inclusion obligations and requirements.

### **Attitudes in the workplace**

Participants describing feelings of “powerlessness” and “having to put up with...”. Being asked to perform tasks that caused subsequent discomfort, such as “buying milk”, “carrying milk”, ordering or being required to go and buy “non-vegan products” and handling “meat”, appear to cause significant “distress” and feelings of “hate”. Participants also reported feeling “left out” of celebrations, parties and other occasions, one experience describing an occasion where vegan food had been flatly refused by the organisers of a Christmas event. The most significant issue in this category was that what was acceptable “banter” for non-vegans was unacceptable for vegans. Participants report being taunted with “food” derived from animals, being subjected to “upsetting” situations, whereby a colleague would articulate graphic accounts of animal slaughter, and having to “tolerate” exaggerated displays of eating animal products, and lengthy accounts of how good the non-vegan colleague’s food tasted. Participants reported feelings of “intentional hostility”. One experience described a “typical” day in which colleagues shared cakes for a birthday celebration but the vegan was given a ball of bird seed – the type designed to hang in the garden. Experiences described feelings of “loneliness” for

vegans in the workplace. One participant described frequently occurring situations in which she would be subjected to unfair and unreasonable judgemental opinions about raising vegan children. Some participants felt offended by invitations to events such as horse racing from colleagues who were “aware” of the participant’s principles. Participants reported “finding ways to cope” and attempting to avoid the “daily nonsense”.

An area of interest for the survey was that a few experiences from male vegans described “intentional hostility” related to veganism and “maleness”. The implication was that the vegan male is in some way less of a man than “real” men. One participant reported that things had become “almost unbearable at work these days”.

### Provision of workplace accessories

Participants in this category reported a range of responses from employers regarding requests for suitable accessories. Most participants describing experiences in this category were employed in the public sector and required footwear and other uniform accessories, one had specifically requested soap for the toilets which was not forthcoming. All but 2 experiences in this category described refusal or resistance to requests for necessary items despite the vegan participants being protected by legislation. Where there are suitable alternatives to standard issue equipment, requests ought to be fairly and reasonably accommodated. In one case a participant had to buy uniform items which cost 4 times the price of the discounted one supplied by the employer. In another, repeated requests for vegan equipment were made, for items which were well known to be available, but have, so far, been refused. Meanwhile the same (public sector) organisation released funds to the value of £2000 to accommodate a non-vegan’s employment request which the participant felt was “grossly unfair” but “typical”. Some participants explained that they had to summon great courage to make a formal complaint whilst others indicated that they were too concerned to “make a fuss”. One participant used knowledge of equality provisions to obtain boots in a situation where the issuing stores manager - who, incidentally, was also the equality and diversity officer - had refused to order suitable footwear. The same participant also demanded a replacement cover for technology equipment and was accommodated. One participant described how a replacement company car had been requested following receipt of one which was “full of skin”. The request was accommodated the same day. One participant wrote that “there was no point” requesting suitable vegan products in the workplace. This may indicate the extent of perceived dismissal of veganism, and reflect the need to avoid stress and anxiety in the workplace resulting from the “fuss” status of requests.

Expressions vegans use to describe common negative experiences	
lack of consideration	have “raw” feelings
making a fuss	feeling ignored
third class citizens	find ways of coping
interrogated	intentionally harassed and dismissed
challenged	unsupported at work
excluded	in the spotlight
distressed	singled out
dismissed	constant questioning
powerless	sever anxiety
lonely	have to put up with a lot
anxious	left out
coping with unfairness	upset
harassed	have to tolerate a lot
unsettled	daily nonsense
shocked	grossly unfair
disrespected	thought of as being awkward
embarrassed	not properly cared for
driven out	burdened
publicly humiliated	stressed
confronted	vilified
attacked	distrust

## **Food and attitudes in healthcare**

In healthcare, apart from 2 participants who reported wonderful experiences with NHS midwives during their vegan pregnancies, participants reported that though there appeared to be provision for a vegan diet and pre-ordering was available, the provisions of vegan food, and staff understanding about the needs of vegans was extremely problematic. Some participants were day clients or hospitalised for post-operative care and in very serious and sensitive health circumstances. Participants in this category felt “dismissed”, “stressed”, “burdened”, treated as if “being awkward”, “singled out” vociferously on the ward, reported feeling “not properly cared for” or “not given proper nutrition” and coping with attitudes that “violated” their moral principles. Participants reported staff having “little sympathy”, a “lack of understanding”, and “making them feel as though they were fussy eaters”. Where food was provided there were instances of “offensive” substances (derived from animals) remaining on the plate, and instances of staff unable to verify ingredients. Participants were told to “choose something else” and made to feel as though they were adding to staff workload. Participants reported replying on family for food but also being told that food brought on to the Ward is an infection risk. Experiences also described “going home hungry” following a stay in hospital. One participant reported that a member of Ward staff was encouraged by a colleague to lie about the content of a sandwich to an elderly vegetarian lady on the same ward saying that “she won’t know it’s beef”. Where one participant had knowledge of provisions made for vegan prisoners and human rights provisions, it was stated that “prisoners are much better treated than patients”. Both prison authorities and the National Health Service are required to protect vegans under the Human Rights Act 1998 as a result of veganism being protected by the European Convention on Human Rights in respect of it being a qualifying “belief” in law.

## **Attitudes socially**

Participants who described experiences in this category reflected sentiments similar to those describing workplace feelings. Feelings of being “ignored” “stunned and upset”, feelings of “disrespect” in conversations, feelings of “intentional hostility” and “disappointment” and feeling that other people had “no interest” were common among participants. Participants expressed a power imbalance between vegans and non-vegans and suggested that there existed an atmosphere of priority for non-vegans. A number of participants reported that the “most difficult thing about being vegan” is coping with social attitudes. Participants reported situations that generated “raw” feelings, that they felt “driven out”, and that non-vegans fail to understand the offence being caused by “repetitive questioning” and “insinuation”. Experiences of vegans being made to feel “crazy”, “weird” or “extreme” were also reported. Some participants felt that their feelings about being vegan were “hard to articulate”. Participants felt that vegan issues were often overridden by other issues to do with allergies and environmental concerns. Similarly, where vegans were involved with “green initiatives” or diversity and equality initiatives they felt that their peers prioritised other areas of concern over possible vegan initiatives.

## **7. Other comments**

Participants described feelings of exclusion, harassment and humiliation in other contexts. For example two young school children who were required to give presentations at school, spoke about veganism and both reported being laughed at, ridiculed and felt inadequately supported by their teachers. Another participant provided information about the use of non-vegan equipment at school and described a situation in which a young pupil had ended up in a conflict with the teacher because the football was made of animal skin. In post compulsory education a participant reported being publicly humiliated and embarrassed by the 2 separate course tutors who were otherwise exemplary in their teaching roles. On both occasions the resulting anxiety about what might happen next caused the participant to leave the course. One participant felt that a General Practitioner had dismissed their needs as a vegan and showed an uncaring and hostile attitude to the request for vegan medication. A small number of vegans reported feeling dismissed within their own families and felt that their ethical values were belittled. One participant who had struggled to obtain a refund, following a decision by a rail company to replace all the seats with ones made from animal skin; felt that he was expected to compromise his ethical beliefs and dignity. Other participants raised the issue of having to use unlabelled standard issue soap and cleaning products in the public sector which is under a specific duty to accommodate the needs of different cultures. A number of vegans reported “avoiding” socialising with non-vegans due to anticipated “harassment”.

Three participants described experiences in which they felt “challenged” by institutional power. One reported being judged and advised by a local authority housing inspector to “eat meat”, another felt “victimized” by the editor of a local newspaper who used his position and power to publicly insult and humiliate the vegan writer of a letter to the editor. A third reported being “warned” not to mention veganism in an interview which was to celebrate achievement and personal success specifically as a vegan.

## 8. Conclusion

The 16 categories within the major social sectors represent ordinary aspects of everyday life. In these categories it can be seen that vegans endure a range of unpleasant, unfair and discriminatory experiences. This small scale study illustrates that the vegan community consists of strong minded, resilient individuals but who are clearly at significant risk of direct and indirect discrimination under human rights and equality provisions, in both the public and private sector. It also reveals the more covert manifestations of exclusion and unfairness which revolve around anxiety and feelings of powerlessness and dismissal: feelings which equality, diversity and inclusion principles are designed to prevent.

International law requires that the policies and practices of a dominant culture must not be so coercive to the point that minority cultures suffer pressure, or be required to assimilate. It is clear from this study that members of the vegan community do feel that policies and practices of the dominant culture are coercive and enforce assimilation into a dominant opposing culture. For example, the participant forced to play football at school with a ball made of skin is coerced into a dominant culture not of her choosing and is required to assimilate. Similarly, where uniform items are available for vegan employees in the public sector but not provided, employees of the state are again coerced and forced to assimilate into a dominant culture not of their choosing. This enforced coercion and assimilation into a culture not of ones choosing is contrary to the principles and spirit of international and domestic law, and the following recommendations are thus made on the basis of the results of this study.

## 9. Recommendations

- The Equality and Human Rights Commission in their statutory duty to monitor and oversee equality and human rights in the UK should pay particular attention to the vegan community.
- The catering industry should be aware that vegan food is suitable for a bigger range of consumers than vegetarian food.
- The National Health Service catering staff should pay particular regard to the needs of vegans especially because food is a vital component of health and well-being and no service user should be without food or in circumstances which add to their stress and trauma in times of ill-health. In addition the NHS should promote training opportunities for all staff to understand more about equality law and the duty on the public sector to comply with legal obligations.
- Public authorities and the private sector should be encouraged to source vegan friendly soap and other essential items. This would accommodate the vegan community without alienating non-vegans, as non-vegans are able to use any soap whereas the vegan community apply ethical criteria.
- Schools, employers and all sectors of society should be encouraged to replace items made from the skin of other animals with appropriate synthetic ones to accommodate the vegan community. This does not alienate non-vegans nor assimilate non-vegans into a culture not of their choosing, but it does promote principles of inclusion.
- Veganism should be explicitly represented on the National Curriculum.
- Equality Impact Assessment Audits should make specific reference to veganism.
- Legal Departments in employment contexts should make explicit reference to veganism in dissemination of the provisions of rights and equality legislation. The current culture of dismissing and

withholding information about the legal status of veganism, from senior management, hinders acceptance of veganism and support for the needs of vegans in the workplace.

- The legal status of veganism should be promoted and strategically targeted.
- For all of the above, relevant members of Government should be requested to oversee action points.
- Further research should be conducted for the benefit of the vegan community. Particularly in healthcare, in the workplace and in education. There is also a need for research into the relationship of gender to workplace harassment as some participants felt that male vegans are subject to more serious hostility.

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