

Pride Month 2018: Getting LGBTQ into the mainstream

Mallika Iyer | Updated: Thursday, August 22, 2019, 12:04 PM IST



Pride Month is celebrated in June to commemorate the Stonewall riots of 1969, which served as a turning point in the LGBTQ movement. While Pride Month involves a celebration of sexual diversity, it is also an opportunity to fight discrimination and discuss concerns about Inclusive Workspaces, writes Mallika Iyer

Sonia, a transgender, was forced into prostitution at the age of 10 due to her mother's health. A boy until a few years ago, her boyfriend gang-raped her and threw acid on her, leaving her to die, when he found out she was transitioning. Today, Sonia has overcome the anguish and runs a beauty salon, fulfilling a long-cherished dream. But Sonia's journey has been far from easy.



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Pioneering Measures

"Mediclaime is a basic benefit extended to employees and their families in corporates. But same-sex partners are excluded," says Sushant Divgikar aka Rani Ko-He-Nur, model-singer-performer and Mr Gay World India 2014. *"This kind of discrimination is rampant."*

Amongst a handful of organisations, taking bold inclusive strides is the Lalit Group. *"Every human deserves to be treated equally, irrespective of sexual orientation, caste or colour. Health is a basic necessity, and as leader, I felt it was necessary to insure a healthy future for all employees,"* says Keshav Suri, executive director of the Group, who also helped Sonia realise her dreams.

The Lalit, together with ICICI Lombard, provides insurance policies to LGBTQ employees, adopted children, children born through surrogacy to heterosexuals, same sex partners and single parents. It is a path-breaking measure. *"We at The Lalit take an equality pledge and there is no discrimination. We work with acid attack survivors, have India's first DJ on a wheel chair, transgenders, drag artists and more,"* adds Suri. The Lalit amongst 32 companies worldwide to endorse UN's LGBTQ standards at work.

Godrej Industries, is another organisation that is unafraid to walk the talk. *"Our documents include 'other' as an option to represent gender. The word 'spouse' has been replaced with 'partner'. Our adoption policy has been designed for the primary caregiver irrespective of the gender,"* explains Mahnaz Shaikh, head – diversity & inclusion at Godrej Industries and Associate Companies. These measures go a long way in making workspaces truly inclusive.



Nothing Illegal about Being Gay!

"Phobia often occurs due to lack of knowledge," says Suri, speaking of societal attitudes, that he is working to transform. Harish Iyer, equal-rights activist and a recognised voice in the LGBT movement, agrees. *"Section 377 of the IPC criminalises intercourse against the order of nature – that's non-penile vaginal intercourse. It does not criminalise being gay, lesbian or queer. Often, people do not understand the difference! India has never criminalised homosexuality or transgenders. But people misunderstand and think being gay is illegal."*

The misunderstanding is part of the problem, adding to the stigma. "Most corporate entities invite

me to perform in their office spaces,” says actress Mona Ambegaonkar, whose popular play Ek Madhav Baug, centred around a mother who accidentally finds out that one of her sons is gay, has completed over 100 performances. “But they attach a non-disclosure clause to the invitation preventing me from disclosing about the performance to anyone, including the press. I find that hypocritical,” she adds, pointing at an underlying hesitation and uncertainty, even amongst those who are seemingly open.

Neither Male Nor Female

In 2014, the Supreme Court passed a historical verdict, recognising the rights of the third gender (NALSA v Union of India). Directions were also given in respect of those undergoing sex-change procedures. As a result, some transgenders found dignified employment. Yet, much remains to be done.

“In my earlier job, I was denied a promotion as I was going through sex-change surgery,” says Aditya, trans-man based in Mumbai. Aditya found employment under a diversity-hire drive inviting transgenders, in line with the move of Kochi Metro Rail Ltd which took a pathbreaking step of hiring transgenders. However, many of them in Kochi were forced to subsequently quit. *“Diversity drives for hiring are good. But they must be backed up by sensitisation drives. Else transgenders continue to remain soft targets,”* says Aditya.

Policy on Sexual Harassment

Another area of concern is the sexual harassment policy, which is not gender neutral, leaving gays and trans-men out of its scope. *"Sexual harassment is a major reason many drop out of education and work. Social stigmas drive them to take extreme steps like begging and commercial sex-work,"* explains Hemalatha S, clinical psychologist who counsels several LGBTQ patients.

Few corporates like Godrej Industries have a gender neutral anti-harassment policy. But they are the exception rather than the norm. Sensitisation of staff, skill-upgradation, gender-common washrooms are some of their other concerns.

Fall from Grace and Return to Pride

India has always recognised and celebrated diversity. One may well ask how such deep-rooted stigmas emerged? *"There is no ambiguity that such relationships and same-sex-relations were in vogue back then. With the influence of Victorian prudishness, we began to foster a homophobic view. Soon the prudishness gained ground and it was seen as an abnormality,"* explains Utkarsh Patel, author and professor of mythology at the Mumbai University, whose talks on Same-Sex Love in Mythology run to packed audiences.

This fall from grace has led to an erosion of dignity. To reinstate that, is at the core of Pride Month. *"When you can earn enough to take care of yourself, you gain confidence. When one's gender is not respected and is a barrier for entry into jobs and education, it becomes a cause of marginalisation,"* explains Hemalatha S.

Both the Godrej India Culture Lab, which has hosted over 30 LGBT events including the Kashish Mumbai International LGBT Film Festival and Kitty Su, the nightclub at the Lalit which provides a platform for LGBTQ members to perform with pride and panache, are trying their best to reverse the trend.

"Pride can't exist in a closet!" says Iyer, speaking about those who hesitate to openly express their support. Perhaps we must all – as employers, as colleagues and as co-travellers in the journey of life, open our minds and step out of the closet.

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