

Since early memory, I have felt an unease with my body. Once I even told my parents that I feel like this body is not mine. Everyone laughed at my so-called childish thoughts. But no one knew I was telling them the truth. I was in a dilemma, knowing something is not right, but no one was there to talk and help me understand my experience. The constant struggle with feeling confused on the inside and the bullying in school became part of my life. While I loved playing with girls, I was restricted by the social norms. I started keeping myself locked in my room and played with my toys. But that was also not enough to keep my family's taunts away.

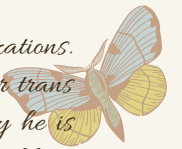
Growing up in a small town in the late '90s and early 2000s, I had no access to the internet. The conservative society around me was nothing but full of homophobia and transphobia. For a long time, I was unaware of myself. Witnessing how the society around me treats Queer people (Yes, I can say the Q word because I am Queer and we have reclaimed it), I had no courage to come out. A sudden fear started engulfing me. What if I tell my family, and they throw me out? The answer to the question was financial independence. I finished my studies and started working in a tier-2 city, hoping it would help me become my true self, but the Queerphobic and hostile workplace never allowed me to come out. I thought moving to a bigger city in a new corporate environment will solve my problem. I moved to Ahmedabad and joined a corporate organization. But to my misfortune, life could not change. This place was also rife with Transphobia.

When I joined this new job, I was unaware of the terms "Inclusive organization", "Diversity, equity and Inclusion." When I realized that there are organizations inclusive of LGBTQIA+ employees, it was a ray of hope for me. But, instead of searching for a job for myself in an inclusive organization with my previous qualifications, I decided to choose a career in diversity and inclusion to ensure that no other soul had to go through the trauma that I had suffered in my workplace environment. The more I studied it, the more I experienced the diversity and inclusion campaign in India, and alas! - the more I grew disappointed. Especially with respect to transgender inclusion, we have walked but a step, when miles are yet to be travelled. It is not the public who are non-inclusive but the allies who have caused us pain. With a transphobic person, you are assured of Transphobia, but when allies do the same in the name of inclusion, that hurts a lot.

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A couple of years ago, I was in a bankers' meet, and we were discussing the inclusion of transgender persons in organizations. I was amazed by the enthusiasm of this banker, who called himself an ally and assured us that he was all in for trans inclusion in his organization. After the discussion, I had a chat with the person to appreciate him and asked why he is interested in trans inclusion at his bank. He replied saying, "Transgender persons can help in the collection of defaulted loan amounts; people are afraid of them, and the bank can use it to the advantage." The stigma and stereotype left me heartbroken and devastated. In the working environment of India, we have so many people like him who still demonize transgender persons and call themselves allies. I am not saying all allies, but there is a transphobic population, and they do not know enough to acknowledge the harm that they cause.



Earlier this year, I came across a job fair exclusively for LGBTQIA+ candidates organized by one of the biggest companies in the world. I applied with my resume hoping to get a job in an organization with a global name because of their inclusive policy. A couple of days later, I received a mail with the details of the online job fair, my credentials and job description. When I opened the mail, it was a shock more than a surprise. When I applied for the job fair, they specifically asked me about my experience, salary and job expectations, which I provided. But for the interview, I was offered a post that required 2-3 years of experience even though I had more than ten years of experience; moreover, the salary they offered me was ten times lesser than what I was earning at that time. This happened even though I provided them with all my details. Maybe I offered them too many details; perhaps they don't think a transgender person deserves to work in top management, drawing a six-figure salary. I have witnessed this on many occasions. Most organizations, calling themselves inclusive, seldom hire LGBTQIA+ candidates, especially transgender candidates, for higher positions. Even when they roll out job vacancies for LGBTQIA+ candidate, most organizations seek them out for entry-level and low-paying jobs only. This is not inclusion; this is discrimination. This type of practice is a glaring example of Pinkwashing and nothing more.

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A trans friend of mine working in corporate once told me, "The bitter truth is organizations do not hire Trans person unless they are utmost sympathetic towards transgender rights." No matter how much it hurt, but this is the reality. In the dome of workplace inclusion in the Indian corporate world, diversity means Cisgender women. Most companies with DE&I policies have no inclusion of LGBTQIA+ employees. If an organization proclaims itself as inclusive while excluding an entire section of the society, is that organization genuinely inclusive? Certainly not.



Moreover, even in most organizations inclusive of the LGBTQIA+ community, they feel reluctant in including Transgender persons in their organization; specifically transgender women in the middle or top management. How many transgender women do we see in these positions, and how many out there remain qualified but unemployed? The stereotyping of transgender persons even in an inclusive environment is the unconscious bias that the community is fighting every day. Just take stock of the event flyers for this year's celebration of women's day and try to figure out how many organizations had transgender women on their discussion panels.

The fight is for equality and telling the world we are no different. The issue is even in inclusion; they make us feel different. The allies, while talking to you, most of them, do something that makes you feel like you are different. The extra care and the sugar-coated behaviour sometimes makes you feel like they are saying, "We love you, but you do not belong with us." While it is important that trans persons speak about their issues themselves, it is not ok to expect us to talk only about the transgender issue or LGBTQIA+ issues; this is a harmful stereotype! And do remember stereotypes are the worst form of phobia. I am talking about India's corporate world and not the government organizations because the situation in government organizations is far worse than one can even imagine.

The battle is never-ending; from home to school to work environment, every day every step is a battle for transgender persons. In every step, they face a rejection, and after every rejection, they start a new dream. They fight every day and emerge victorious every day. Even after that, people use terms like transgender, Kinnar, Hijra as slurs to signify cowardliness. Transgender persons are the most courageous community; they fight discrimination every day and also fight exclusion in the "Inclusion" movement.



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