

## Gay Marriage and Its Impact on LGBTQI Rights in the UK and the Western World

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As one of the first same-sex couples to get married on 29th March 2014 in the UK, we were acutely aware of two key factors: We felt privileged to exercise our right, which the law allowed us, after years of struggle to win the fight for equality. Secondly, millions of LGBTQI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer and Intersex) people, who had preceded us over the several centuries, were a part of this long journey that has brought us here. It was a momentous milestone in our lives. Of course, it does not mean that the fight for achieving equality for LGBTQI people has to slow down, as there are a number of hurdles and discriminations that still remain unconquered, in the battle for social and cultural equality in the Western world.

When I talk about the struggle over the several centuries, I also include the great efforts for survival and daily struggles that our predecessors have had to face. Due to lack of proper archiving and research material, several of them continue to remain unknown to us and to the entire world. We have to admit that they must have lived under huge pressures as enormously marginalized sexual and gender minorities in the largely oppressive world. Several must have lived to survive and abided by or conformed to the norms defined by 'Society' of the day, unable to live their lives as they would have liked to.

It must be noted that the UK (England and Wales) was not one of the first countries in the world to lift sanctions on same-sex marriage and allowing the couples to get married in a civil ceremony. The Netherlands was the first to allow couples to get married as long ago as 2001. Progress has been patchy for gay and /or LGBTQI rights across different political boundaries. A number of countries including (and in some cases part of) Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, New Zealand, Portugal, South Africa, Spain, and Uruguay, now allow same sex marriages. A few more countries allow same-sex civil unions or same-sex partnerships, which provides legal sanction to the union, of varying degrees. Wikipedia provides largely correct picture of this, on a regularly basis.

In some ways, this is not just a matter of allowing the right to use the word 'Marriage' for acceptance of a union of two people of the same gender. But in many ways it is a fight over using whole set of vocabulary that's associated with equal right movement for LGBTQI people. Hence, it may not be entirely out of place to mention that legal protections won for LGBTQI people in different countries of the world include a major milestone in winning the same-sex marriage rights. In many ways this is also about greater social acceptance process for the LGBTQI people in the world, particularly in the West.

In today's 'Post-truth' and 'Post-Brexit' world, there is still a lack of easy acceptance of LGBTQI diversity in the West, unless you make a big noise. Up until now, only 4 LGBT leaders have been OUT and proud presidents or prime ministers in the West. Here is a recent (White House in US, May 2017) example of sparking fierce outrage after omitting to mention the name of the husband of Luxembourg's gay Prime Minister Xavier Bettel. It was an official Facebook photo caption of the spouses of G7 nations' leaders gathering. This omission says a lot about challenges of acceptance from the top.



At a grass roots level, I personally highlight a number of cases and stories of discrimination on a daily basis via my social media channels. A number of cases or stories of mostly law abiding LGBTQI citizens, fall in the area of reiterating our legally protected rights in the global North countries. Others often fall in the grey areas since a number of workplaces, cultural, sports, media and educational institutes still haven't offered clear statutory protections to LGBTQI individuals and their loved ones in several countries. This might be also largely true in the global South context, but also, more specifically true in some Eastern European countries, some US states, and countries like South Africa which has accepted gay marriage on its statute books.


Why should the 'patch progress' matter to us here in London? London has been a melting pot of global citizens, either on a visit or living here. The 2011 census shows, 36.7% of London's 8.6 million population was foreign born (including 24.5% born in countries outside Europe). In short, as a 2014 research figure shows now nearly 3,082,000 residents are born abroad. Some people are inclined to bring along their prejudices and discriminatory attitudes towards LGBTQI people along with their much welcomed cultural heritage and rich languages that has made this city a truly global capital of culture from beginning of the 21st century.


Second part of the argument is connected to internalized homophobia, biphobia and transphobia. These phobias will take some time to tackle, since broader and wider legal protection for lesbian and gay people (to some degree the protections extend to bi and trans people - but we are still not there as far as full equality is concerned) are achieved as recently as 2013. These are still recent or new developments for a number of elderly people from establishment backgrounds. Their involvement in promoting LGBTQI rights is a pivotal point for delivering institutional change over a sustained period. Due to legal protection, the discrimination now seems to have gone

underground. It is far more difficult to challenge and tackle covert discrimination. Sometimes, I notice that some people have learnt well to bypass addressing equality and cultural as well as social diversity in its true spirit, once they have dealt with it in a tokenistic way.

It is logical to think, that this is where the battle lines for the next stages of progress will be drawn. What is most pertinent is visibility of diversity of LGBTQI people in all walks of life – from our elected chambers to businesses (small and big), to the educational and cultural institutions, and on our streets. It is imperative to have a real and sustained visibility of older and younger LGBTQI people from different religious backgrounds, including no religion, and most importantly LGBTQI people from Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds. It's equally important to emphasize that LGBTQI people can come from diverse backgrounds: economically rich or poor, urban or rural and educated or illiterate. The stereotypes around their existence and professions or their likes and dislikes are far too many to list here but they can be as false as any stereotyping goes.

There is a growing visibility of same-sex couples' presence on the streets of London every day. The family units with their (surrogate or biological) children making the family portraits complete on the day out. You can see single parents with their children and a few trans-parents with children. All help to reinforce the notion of diverse families and offer greater public visibility. These snap-shots provide answers to the criticism from LGBTQI communities (note the plural, since there is no single cohesive community), that we are likely to follow the hetero-normative patterns of societal conformity. It might be also appropriate to note, that each family unit can be as diverse as each individual's identity/identities. Stereotyping a perception from some media stories might be a different equation, when we look closely in each unit with greater fascination on how they differ in from say a traditional or conventional binary (male and female) family unit bringing up their children.





I am happy to say that, there is now a growing awareness in the UK media world of no-binary (not identifying as traditional 'male' or 'female') identities recognition. A recognition that covers a widest possible spectrum of identities in each person - not necessarily conforming to gender specific or sexual orientation specific roles and behaviors. There is still a long way to go before we get wider acceptance to gender-fluid or genderless or A-gender persons across the world, but the process is on its way.

I believe there is also a little more awareness, than before, amongst global academic circles, of the traditional and historic trans, gender fluid or third gender/sex e.g. South Asian socio-religious and economic identities, or constructs such as Hijras / Hijada / Kothis / Giryas (not very well-known) Khusaraa/Ali (again, not as much well-known) and Far East Asian identities such as Bakla, etc. I also accede that the levels of awareness that is needed, is still not enough, however at least there seems to be an interest in academic and research circuits to know more. Some have heard or know the terms and, more importantly, are now aware, to some further degree, of the terms from the diversity vocabulary.

However, we still lack allies support networks and particularly greater support from, visibly loud and proud BAME community leaders and allies. BAME business community leaders are conspicuous by their absence in openly and solidly supporting the LGBTQI people from BAME communities. Their substantial financial and corporate powers count in the global cities like London.


It is not to say, that mainstream (white) LGBTQI communities are not aware of and concerned of the plight of LGBTQI people in the global South. Majority of them are greatly aware of the countries that criminalize homosexuality. Where trans and diverse sexual or gender minorities can face a huge stigma in the societies. A number of commonwealth countries inherited

these suffocating and inhuman laws as part of legacy from the erstwhile British empire. Most haven't even tried to repeal them. In some cases, this persecution is carried on with increasingly resurgent effect to ensure homosexuality remains a criminal offence. In many ways, we cannot hold on to a blame culture. Instead we need to work together on finding solutions that can offer legal protections for people. It is a fundamental human right of everyone to live openly and safely as who they are. Contrastingly, there are a number of opinion columns and news stories cover the topics such as, 'racism still being rife in the LGBTQI communities in the West'. This also means people believing in a process that accepts our own shortcomings and working on removing them.

Informed people in the West are now more concerned about equality rights struggles in the other parts of the world. They are keen to support those as members of our fellow communities. Again, Wikipedia and Pew research institute provide us with mostly reliable research and up-to-date figures of these struggles in various places wherever homophobia, biphobia and transphobia exists today. We know and have learned that these struggles matter to an individual's life, which can be a life-or-death fight or a basic survival on a daily basis. A current case of Chechen police (or the state) attempting to purge gay and bisexual men from society, met with a rapid response from the large parts of the world - condemning the acts and offering support to those men who suffered.

I return back to our own story again, I have borrowed sections from an article, Subodh, my husband and I wrote for the Pinknews (Europe's largest LGBTQI news portal) on the eve of our official wedding in March 2014 - since some points still make sense. Having supported the Same-Sex marriage bill in the UK, it was only natural that we wanted to opt for marrying on the first day. 22 years ago we exchanged our 'marital vows' on a beautiful, quiet beach of Nargol, on border of Indian states of Gujarat and





Maharashtra – where our parents originally came from. Both of us are of Indian origin and wanted to celebrate our union in presence of senior family members, work colleagues, friends, straight and gay couples, and people who have been part of our lives for over the last 22 years and more.

We don't suppose, we can ever fully answer the question - 'why was it important for us to get married?' As both of us were on the verge of facing our 50s, marriage may not seem like a priority in our lives. In the last 22 years, we made conscious efforts to highlight our relationship and sometimes received recognition, surprisingly from the most unexpected sources. That does not mean we did not have our fair share of challenges. But we hope that the toughest ones seem to be behind us as we would like to believe that the community, society, friends, majority of family members have accepted us for who we are, however long and difficult the process might have been for some of them.

To many, it may look like an entirely naïve belief that as a couple, we can talk about positive developments from a safe distance. However, having worked on culturally sensitive sexuality related issues and projects across South Asia, East European countries and for a few international development agencies in the past, we recognize change can happen when you get

the strategies right. Change is possible when we work effectively on the strategies that deliver it. The strategies should not solely depend upon quiet diplomacy. LGBTQI people across the world still continue to fall victims to horrible hate crimes on a daily basis. Each of us needs to raise our voice against a culture of social injustice.

When we first met in Mumbai (Bombay) over 20 years ago, at the first South Asian Gay conference, we could not have envisaged the progress achieved by LGBTQI people on several fronts. Then in our late twenties, we could have only dreamt of it. We didn't really know then that it takes a lot to learn, listen, build upon strengths and reduce weaknesses. There is still a need to work together with diverse people at the grassroots and develop new skills to be really efficient change makers.

It is my aspiration to see that LGBTQI equality is achieved in all or most of the countries in our lifetime. It is feasible that this 'dream' can be a reality - if we build upon the political, social and capacity building strategies and drive, along with a smart prioritization process. We also need to focus more on 'right kind' of diverse, collective LGBTQI leadership who will this outcome.

NOW is the time to shift to the full cultural and full legal acceptance in the diverse world that we live, and to ensure 'Equality in All Walks of Life'.

