

Aspirations and Challenges of LGBTQIA+ Community in India

Dr. Saundarya Rajesh¹, Ms. Anju Rakesh², Ms. Nisha Chandran³, Dr. Divya Kumar⁴

¹ Founder & President, AVTAR Group

² Assistant Vice President - Research & Solutions, Avtar

³ Assistant Vice President – Consulting & Solutions, Avtar

⁴ Associate Manager – Research, Avtar

Abstract: Historically, the social acceptance of the LGBTQIA+ community has been very low across the globe. In India the scenario was no different though the landscape began shifting post the progressive judgement rendered by the Supreme Court of India, in 2018, decriminalizing homosexuality. The introduction of the third gender as a part of recognised gender spectrum in 2014 and the right to change legal gender in 2019 were other progressive measures in this direction. Despite the mandate the societal awareness and acceptance of the LGBTQIA+ community continues to be a challenge in the Indian socio cultural milieu. Against this backdrop, a research study was undertaken to understand the aspirations of, and challenges faced by members of the community in India, today. A qualitative survey questionnaire with questions including when they developed self-awareness of their identity, how their experience of acceptance and inclusion was and how they embarked on their pursuit of aspirations, was used. The research sample consisted of 31 respondents who identified themselves as part of the LGBTQIA+ Community. From a self-awareness standpoint, 70% respondents said they accepted their own identity only after the age of 20. 48% of respondents reported facing mental health challenges because of a lack of acceptance. The paper also includes a discussion on the measures that individuals, organizations and institutions can undertake to be more inclusive of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Keywords: aspirations, acceptance, awareness, LGBTQIA+ community and inclusion

I. INTRODUCTION

India, a country that consists of 29 states, 7 union territories, and over 22 official languages is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world. Though India is fortunate to have a rich diverse society, inclusion of the LGBTQIA+ Community is a concept that requires more constructive conversations. LGBTQIA+ community is an umbrella term that is often used to refer to the community including - Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Asexual. Despite several historical mentions that the community has in India, the knowledge that people have about this community leaves room for much to be done. The lack of understanding that people have about this community has resulted in several challenges for them, such as workplace discrimination, violence, poverty, and exclusion across different spheres of life. This affects several aspects of their physical and mental well-being, preventing them from fulfilling their aspirations and rising to the fullest of their potential.

This research study is aimed at understanding the aspirations and challenges of LGBTQIA+ community in India, through a controlled group qualitative research. It traces the journey of a representative sample of the community along their identity continuum, seeking answers to questions including when they developed self-awareness of their identity, the common reactions they have met with when they expressed their identity, the changes they wish to see in the society for them to develop a greater sense of belonging. The study was administered through a qualitative research study questionnaire. Through the findings of the study, recommendations to build an atmosphere of greater acceptance are presented.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Around the globe, the LGBTQIA community face greater challenges and increased risk compared to their heterosexual counterparts.

According to (Hudson-Sharp & Metcalf, 2016)

“They are subjected directly and indirectly by means of discrimination, harassment, inequality and hostile environments on a day to day basis. This often results in detrimental consequences on their mental health. Discrimination and harassment can lead to fear for LGBTQIA+ people about holding on to the disclosure about their sexual orientation”.

According to Bierema (2002) study “one of the toughest issues what the community faces is "disclosure dilemma" - deciding how and when to disclose one's sexual orientation. It involves a considerable extent of turmoil and a fear of retaliation or rejection”. Alderson (2003) study states “that the discrimination against LGBTQIA+ community is insidious at the workplace. In a working environment, they often face hostility, harassment, and less access to promotional and developmental programs”. Noland (2005), Berggren & Elinder (2012) and Florida (2014) studies state that “the economic development by itself is an outcome that is measured, that is influenced by attitudes or policies related to LGBTQIA individuals”.

Human Rights Watch, 2011 states

“that low rates of openness, in turn, might reduce the likelihood of discrimination but at the cost of authentic workplace relationships and the health of LGBTQIA+ people due to barriers such as fear of retaliation, lack of information about the reporting process, and lack of confidence in the legal mechanisms. This will make the employees from the community distracted, exhausted and stressed at the workplace”.

In India, individuals from the LGBTQIA community “face significant challenges and biases related to their sexual orientation from their starting right from their family members, society and workplaces” (Berik, Rodgers, & Seguno, 2009). In the words of Nagel (2003) states that “the creation of sexual identity is based on how a person acts, rather than how they feel or who they are and the context of the social life and family is a crucial indicator of how someone is seen”. This portrait what our Indian society perspective as it took over close to one century to quash the criminalization of homosexuality.

Badgett (2014) reports The World Value Survey (2006),

“result that over 64% Indians believed homosexuality can never justified, only 14% said that it can be sometimes or always justified, and 41% stated that they would not like to have a homosexual neighbour. Interestingly, compared to other countries, India falls in the middle for acceptance of homosexuality. Over the years there is a marginal attitudinal shift towards positivity”.

The 2018 verdict by Supreme Court in reading down the archaic Section 377 was a historic moment for the LGBTQIA+ community in India. The review and amendment of Section 377 (dated 1861) not only was a celebration for the community but a reaffirmation of justice to human rights which they had battled for many years. It was a positive chronological transition from the previous accomplishment on 15 April 2014 in the NALSA vs Union of India judgement - Navtej Singh Johar & Ors. v. Union of India (Firstpost, 2018). This judgment marked a significant milestone where the community gained legal acceptance of gender identity, access to fundamental rights and exclusive benefits to education and employment. It has led to an underlying wave of change that is facilitating open discussions, more visibility to the community and change in attitude towards the community in urban India.

According to Williams Institutes estimates, “individuals from LGBTQIA+ community are likely to form 3.8% of the population in India, i.e., 45.4 million (Kealy, 2018)”. This large untapped section of the population has enormous potential to contribute to the GDP and economic development of the nation. The World Bank and the United Nations Development Program report (UNDP, 2016) mentions that “full inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people in economic, social, and political settings is linked to overall improved well-being at the macroeconomic level”.

Badgett, Nezhad, Waaldijk & Rodgers (2014) study

“draws on one year of data from a transgender rights index and establishes a positive correlation with economic development. It is predominately due to lack of access to understanding among the common people which creates a psychological burden on the members of the community”.

These challenges prevent individuals from the community from coming out and being their true selves, and this limits their ability to contribute to their fullest potential which was reaffirmed in several research studies by Meyer (1995; 2003), Hipple, Lando, Klein, & Winickoff, (2011) and UNDP (2013).

Several research studies Badgett, 2001; Rostosky & Riggle, 2002; Tejada 2006 and Ragins & Cornwell, 2007 suggest “that it is important to focus on inclusive and supportive policies that can create a workplace climate where LGBTQIA employees feel comfortable enough to disclose their sexual orientation”. Banwar, Mistry, Soni, Parikh & Gandhi (2015) study reaffirmed this notion and established that “adequate knowledge about homosexuality was associated with more positive attitudes”. Empirical studies amongst the corporates stated that “collaboration amongst employees was associated with more acceptance of homosexual individuals and found less implicit bias against homosexuals for those in more contact with them” (Sahni, Gupta, Nodiyal, & Pant, 2016 and Kaur & Stephen, 2019).

The review of the literature identifies a series of questions about the LGBTQIA+ community in India and formulates objective of the study:

1. And what is the status quo?
2. What does the community aspire to?
3. What are the changes that they would like to see in society towards becoming more inclusive?
4. Can corporate India play a critical role in the journey of inclusion?

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The research study traced the experiential continuum of identity and aspirations of the LGBTQIA+ Community. The three stages along the continuum is as presented below:



Figure 1: The 3A Continuum of LGBTQIA+ Experience

- The Awareness stage consists of the stage at which members of the LGBTQIA+ community developed self-awareness of their identity and sexual orientation and proceeded to come out to themselves and their networks.

- The Acceptance stage consists of the experience of inclusion and acceptance that LGBTQIA+ Community members experienced after the process of coming out
- The Aspirations stage consists of how to post the awareness and acceptance stages, they were able to pursue their aspirations, specifically at the professional front.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative research study conducted on 31 people from the LGBTQIA+ community. The research dissemination was done via a) administration of a structured survey questionnaire that featured multi-value questions b) Structured Focus Group Discussions. Respondents could choose to be anonymous for the survey. The questionnaire was designed keeping in mind the nature of the target sample, the sensitivity of the questions, and some of the underlying unconscious biases. People who participated in this study willingly came forth to partake, in support of the objective and vision of the study. The study was conducted via an online survey platform between May 1, 2020 – May 31, 2020 and through a virtual FGD conducted in May 2020. The study was conducted in partnership with an LGBTQIA+ Community Network, reaching out to all members of the network. A non-probability sampling method was used, as any member of the network was free to respond.

Key Findings From The Research

The observations from the exploratory research across the stages of the LGBTQIA+ identity continuum is presented here – the journey that begins with them becoming aware of their sexual orientation, which progresses to one in which they proudly affirm their identity. The demographic composition of the sample is as shown in Fig.1

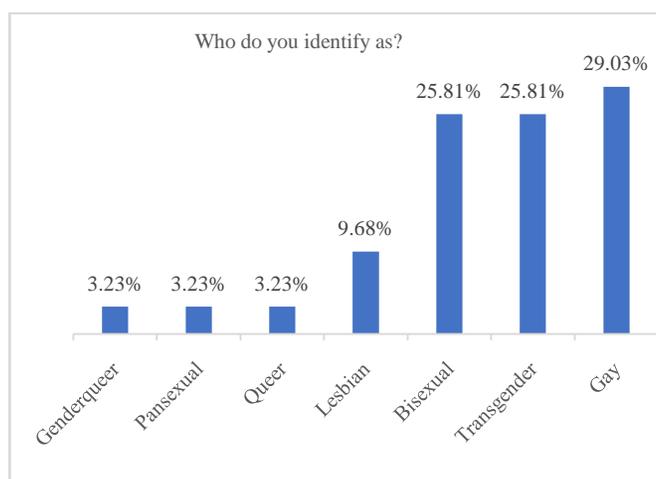


Figure 1: Demographic composition of the sample

Stage 1 – Awareness: On the Experience of Developing Self-Awareness & Coming Out

With a general lack of understanding and acceptance of alternate sexual preferences and sexual orientation, a vast

majority of respondents said that they became accepting of their self only after the age of 15. While 29% got around to accepting themselves only after the age of 20, 36% reported developing this awareness when they were aged between 15 and 20. This is as shown in Fig. 2.

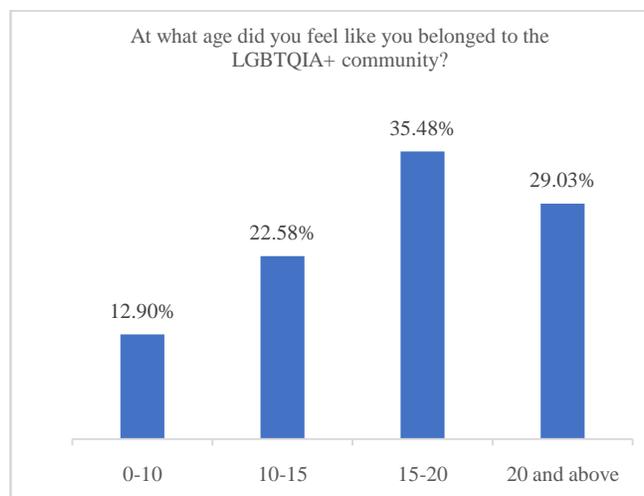


Figure 2: Age at which self-awareness on LGBTQIA+ Identity happened

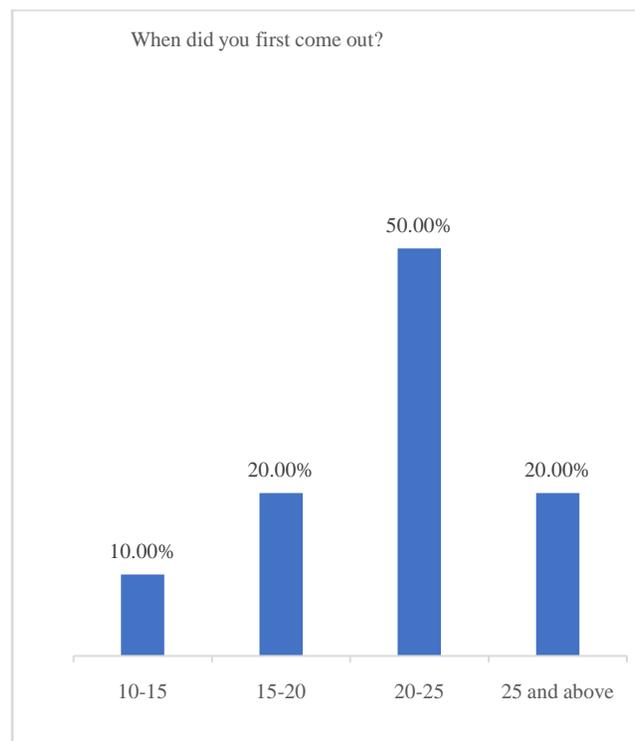


Figure 3: Age at which they came out

As shown in Fig.3, over 70% could confidently come out only after the age of 20. This would have been after navigating through traumatic and confusing teen years when self-acceptance was very low. For trans-persons, the act of coming out, of proudly wearing their identity, happened a little earlier when they were between 10-15 years of age.

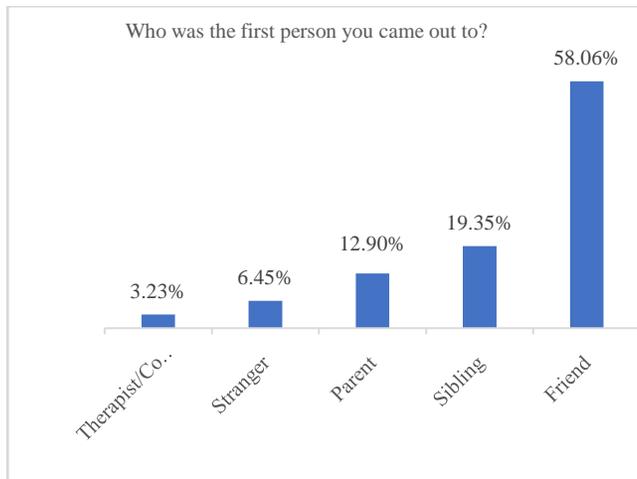


Figure 4: Disclosure of coming out

As shown in Fig.4, more than half of them – 58% said they came out to friends fearing exclusion and stigma in the family. This calls for greater awareness within our familial units to be inclusive of the community and understand diverse sexual preferences and sexual orientation in a more accepting manner.

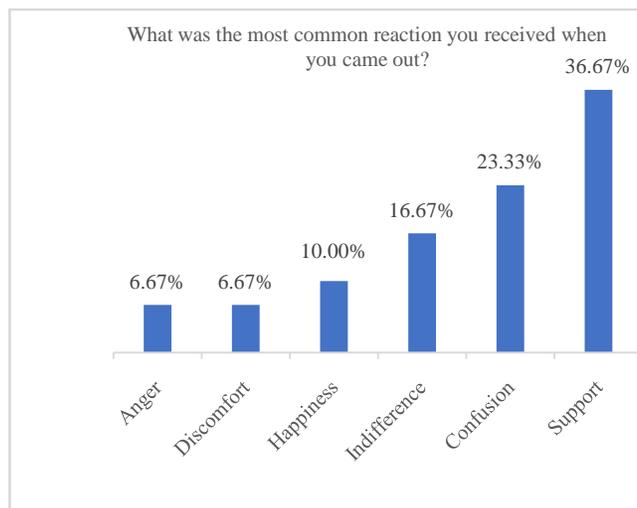


Figure 5: Reactions received on the act of coming out

As shown in Fig.5, 37% of respondents said they received support as they came out, 10% said they were met with cheer and happiness and when they came out. This is a silent reaffirmation of support rising in our society for members of the LGBTQIA+ community.

As part of the Focus Group Discussion, when asked about the experience of coming out, respondents expressed feelings of liberation, confusion, nervousness, anxiety, freedom, happiness, peace, power, confidence, fear, relief and unburdening. While most of these feelings are that of greater freedom and liberation, the apprehensions that they feel express as anxiety and nervousness. In the absence of widespread societal acceptance and understanding, these feelings (when not addressed) can lead to severe mental trauma.

Stage 2 – Acceptance: On Their Current Experience Of Inclusion And Well-Being

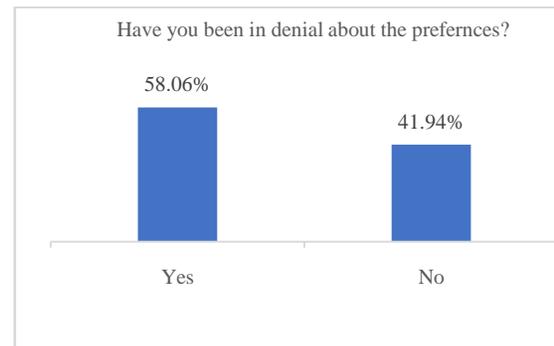


Figure 6: Denial about preference

As per Fig.6, over 58% of respondents said they did not feel included enough, to the extent that they continue to be in denial of their preferences. This is unfortunate as it prevents them from pursuing their dreams and aspirations, wholeheartedly as they continue to trudge a path of confusion and self-denial.

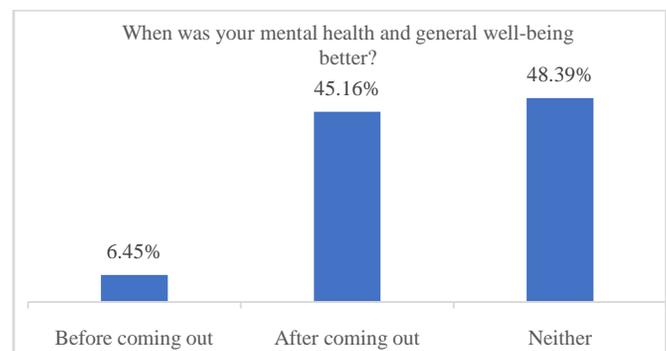


Figure 7: Status of mental well-being

Fig.7 shows that, while a majority of the respondents said that they are not happy with their current mental state, 48% report having mental well-being challenges which have not gotten better after coming out.

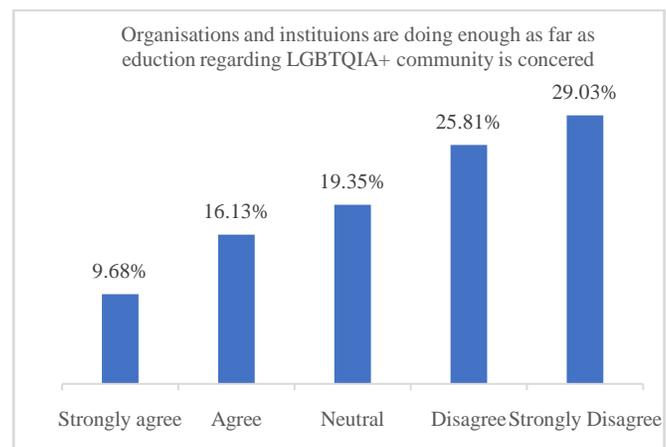


Figure 8: Role of organizations and institutions in building acceptance of LGBTQIA+ Community

As shown in Fig.8, 55% of respondents said that organizations and institutions need to do much more in raising awareness and educating people about LGBTQIA+ community. The feeling was more pronounced amongst the transgender community- 63% felt so.

As part of the Focus Group Discussions, when asked about the major changes they wanted to see in the society to become more inclusive, the respondents mentioned inclusivity, acceptance, knowledge of the community, support, greater expression of support from celebrities and people of power and influence, normalization of varied sexual preferences and greater inclusivity in hiring, as directional ones they are looking forward to.

Stage 3 – Aspirations: on Career Aspirations and Plans

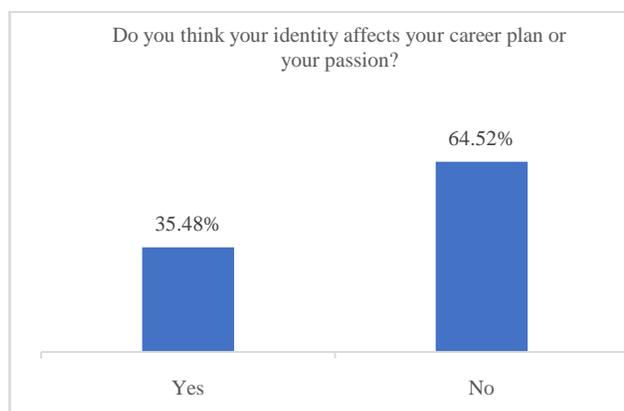


Figure 9: Impact of identity on career aspirations

As per Fig.9, 64% said their career aspirations were not determined by their identity, a clear indication of greater acceptance and horizons getting wider. The majority is extremely proud of their identity – 84% said they felt proud. This goes on to show that if society at large is more welcoming of this strand of diversity and are equipped to be more accepting, we would see many from the community thrive, as leaders, artists, as sports persons et.al.

As part of the FGD, when asked about the skills they would like to acquire their responses ranged from technical skills like programming and analytics, consulting, training, diversity, sensitivity and inclusion to creative writing and dancing and painting. It is heartening to see the wide range of interests this representative sample demonstrated – the onus of facilitating the path to their dreams now rests with organizations, communities, and individuals (in our capacity as inclusive beings)

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

Familial support

From an individual perspective, developing self-acceptance and a healthy, positive sense of identity can be difficult from a younger age. Reaching out to family members who are close and understanding, seeking the support of a broadminded medical professional, tackling loneliness and prejudice by

developing healthy relationships with friends and seeking support from the LGBTQIA+ community can help gain a deeper understanding sexual orientation. It may be noted that only 3% respondents reported coming out to therapists, less than 13% reported coming out to part, necessitating greater need to build societal awareness. Looking for role models and seeking counselling will help LGBTQIA+ individuals invalidating their thoughts and feelings and will also provide emotional support. With over 58% individuals still living in denial of their preferences and identity, the need for enabling mental health support is strong.

Institutional support

Close to 56% respondents said that institutions in India have a long way to go in terms of becoming inclusive of LGBTQIA+ Community. This points towards institutional changes that can make the world a better place for members of the community. Sensitising the teaching community, who potentially can become early life mentors to children who identify with the LGBTQIA+ community, can go a long way. Such sensitization/awareness programmes can help teachers overcome their unconscious biases and bust popular misconceptions about them in society, helping them become allies in the process.

Organizational support

It is also important to cater to skill development aspirations of the community. Very often, as they transition through traumatic teens and troubled early adulthood years (because of the systemic exclusion they encounter), academic focus and skilling take a backseat. While it is important to make educational systems inclusive of the LGBTQIA+ community, the need of the hour is also to curate holistic skilling programs for them that will help them pursue their career aspirations, intentionally. The corporate sector in India can play a critical role in bringing about greater acceptance of India's LGBTQIA+ community. From an organizational perspective, building a positive and safe work environment for the LGBTQIA+ community makes immense business sense. Supportive policies should include an equal opportunity policy that covers sexual orientation, an effective grievance handling mechanism and a whistle-blower policy with a robust confidentiality clause. Effective communication of such policies is important and these can be part of employee orientation and onboarding programmes. Employees across all levels including managers and senior managers need to be sensitized regularly on issues related to diversity and inclusion. This can go a long way in changing mind-sets and attitudes. Basic infrastructure including gender-neutral washrooms, comprehensive health insurance that covers gender affirmation surgery, medical benefits to same-sex partners irrespective of marital status and adoption/surrogacy leave irrespective of the partner's gender, all these provide a greater fillip to the inclusion of individuals from the LGBTQIA+ community. In addition to enabling policies and practices, role models and mentors from the LGBTQIA+

community within the organization can provide a great support system, especially for employees who announce their coming out and is going through the transition process. Access to affirmative counselling support is a vital enabler for LGBT employees. A robust employee resource group (ERG) can fulfil the needs of the community to network, connect and engage in meaningful dialogues. Tracking metrics related to the hiring and career progression of LGBTQIA+ employees will also provide greater impetus to their workplace inclusion.

Some best practices from the Working Mother & Avtar Most Inclusive Companies Index (MICI) are presented here. This study covered critical parameters such as D&I Awareness & Training and Practices & Policies for Inclusion & Parity. Some of the key initiatives that organizations that featured on the Index had towards the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ Community are: 56% of companies on MICI have affinity groups/networks for their LGBTQIA+ employees. 36% of companies on MICI engage social media to reach out to LGBTQ talent pool. 44% of companies on MICI have gender-neutral bathrooms for the inclusion of LGBTQ Community.

VI. CONCLUSION

The study establishes the need for creating an enabling ecosystem consisting of families, institutions, and organizations to help members of the LGBTQIA+ Community grow and thrive. Significant attitudinal shifts are required to create more cascade effects – 58% of the respondents to the survey experienced mental trauma because of the lack of acceptance towards their sexual orientation. This points to the need for mass and streamlined drives on awareness. Towards building acceptance, what is required are institutional environments and processes becoming more inclusive of the community. Close to 55% respondents felt that they have not experienced inclusion at institutions they were part of. And if organizations can help build robust career paths inclusive of mentoring and allyship to help employees from the LGBTQIA+ Community grow, the canvas of inclusion could spread further.

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out" to oneself)/the process by which one shares one's sexuality with others

CONTRIBUTORS

- ¹ Ms. Shivangi Rajesh - *Research Intern, Avtar*
- ² Ms. Sridevi Bhardwaj - *Head - Sales and Operations, Bruhat Insights Global*

DEFINITIONS, ACRONYMS, ABBREVIATIONS

- *Lesbian* - Term used to describe female-identified people attracted romantically, erotically, and/or emotionally to other female-identified people
- *Gay* - Term used to describe male-identified people attracted romantically, erotically, and/or emotionally to other male-identified people
- *Bisexual* - A person emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to males/men and females/women
- *Transgender* - Term used to represent a person whose sense of personal identity and gender does not correspond with their birth sex
- *Queer* - A multi-faceted word that is used in different ways. Attraction to people of many genders. Don't conform to cultural norms around gender and/or sexuality. A general term referring to all non-heterosexual people. Queer is an umbrella term that can be used by anyone under the LGBTQ spectrum.
- *Asexual* - A person who experiences little or no sexual attraction to others and/or a lack of interest in sexual relationships/behaviour
- *Intersex* - A term that describes people born with any of 30 different variations in sex characteristics including chromosomes, gonads, sex hormones, or genitals
- *Genderqueer* - Those who identify as genderqueer may identify as neither men nor women, may see themselves as outside of or in between the gender binary, or may simply feel restricted by gender labels
- *Agender* - A person with no (or very little) connection to gender, no personal alignment with the concepts of either man or woman, and/or someone who sees themselves as existing without gender
- *Ally* - A person who supports and respects members of the LGBTQ community. We consider people to be active allies who take action in support and respect
- *Cisgender* - A gender description for when someone's sex assigned at birth and sexual orientation correspond in an expected way (e.g., someone who was assigned male at birth and identifies as a man)
- *Coming out* - The process by which one accepts and/or comes to identify one's sexuality (to "come