

Workplaces that include

When a December 2013 verdict of the Supreme Court of India on Section 377, which criminalises same sex relationships, undid years of hard work by Indian LGBTI civil society, many companies stood courageously in solidarity. Firms such as Genpact, Godrej, Intuit, ThoughtWorks, [Microsoft](#) and [Google](#) took a stance against the section of the country's penal code. The jewellery brand Tanishq posted an ad showing a pair of diamond earrings with the tagline "Two of a kind always make a beautiful pair! #sec 377"; Fastrack ran a campaign called "Move On" while Hidesign tweeted in support of a repeal. Various CEOs also spoke out such as Keshav Suri, the executive director of Lalit Hotels, who called it "a very repressive and redundant law".

Four years later, Indian activists continue to draw on private sector support to raise awareness and increase visibility for the LGBTI community - this comes both in the form of direct support for events such as the Indian LGBTI Youth Leadership Summit, a pioneering initiative aimed at identifying and grooming high potential LGBTI individuals, or the Kasish Mumbai international queer festival and in terms of broader messaging about diversity and inclusion, something the private sector has taken the lead on in recent years in India.

However, this stance by prominent companies in a context where attitudes towards LGBTI people remains conservative is sometimes denounced by opponents as frivolous, capricious and at odds with culture and tradition. In addition, for companies that want to take positive steps in this arena but are new at it, the accumulated wisdom and best practices remains thin particularly in the Indian context.

A new initiative by the United Nations Human Rights Office, titled "Standards of Conduct for Business on tackling discrimination against LGBTI people" launched in Mumbai on October 12 with a plethora of business leaders, public figures and activists, is attempting to fill this gap by providing support to companies that wish to stand for the human rights of LGBTI people and civil society that wish to engage with them. The document, developed by Human Rights Officer at the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the London-based think-tank, Institute for Human Rights and Business (IHRB), through global consultations, resolutely places efforts by the private sector and the wider discussion on business' responsibility into UN Norms, such as the UN Global Compact and the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

LGBTI inclusion in the workplace is an acute issue in India, but for many companies it is still an abstract concept. There is growing awareness of issues such as homophobia, harassment and discrimination in the workplace but these are usually seen as problems unrelated to the ways that companies operate internally. A recent report titled "The Indian LGBT workplace climate survey" carried out by Mingle showed that a staggering 2/3 of respondents reported hearing homophobic comments in the workplace. Policies still lag behind too. Of 100 respondents from Indian and foreign multinationals interviewed by Mingle in the report, only a small minority of 4 percent were covered by same-sex partnership benefits. The Standards of Conduct remind companies that they should enable workplaces that eliminate the scope of discrimination and create an inclusive environment across the employee universe.

But as the torch-bearers of change, the Standards urge corporate India not to stop at ensuring a fair workplace environment. Companies should influence their supply chains or business relations. Beyond the marketplace, companies, as part of broader coalitions, should communicate to governments and lawmakers the impact that rights of LGBTI people issues have on their countries' reputations but also when it comes to economic development and investment.

An argument previously spelt out by the World Bank in a 2014 study revealed the massive cost of

discrimination against LGBTI people for India. When it comes to respecting and promoting the human rights of LGBTI people, it is increasingly obvious that companies have everything to win in eliminating all forms of discrimination.

In most part of the world, workers, consumers and investors are increasingly rewarding companies that actively tackle discrimination. Purpose-driven brands that manage to associate themselves with the cause of equality can reap real business benefits, particularly with young affluent market segments. It is our hope that a number of Indian companies will support the UN with the Standards of Conduct and join the global movement to respect and promote the rights of LGBTI people.

Ultimately the Standards are a reminder to corporate India that to achieve much needed social change on LGBTI issues, the private sector must be a catalyst of change and a leader for change putting human rights first. Increasingly, Indian people expect that companies do not only focus on operational drivers, but also on societal ones.

Given India's status as a global economic power house, and its long tradition democracy and a constitution that upholds the values of dignity and fundamental rights including the right of privacy and equality, leadership by its private sector can have a tremendous impact not only on the country but on the sub-region where corporate leadership and advocacy on LGBTI issues is only nascent.

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