Press Release

Hijra Habba

Inclusion – All citizens equal

22nd September 2017

Delhiites show understanding and compassion, as they get included into the talented, multidimensional world of transgenders and Hijras. The 5th annual "Hijra Habba" resonated with its theme of "Inclusion - All citizens equal" bringing together 300 transmen, transwomen, activists and young people from the hijra community in a policy event and a popular cultural event at a prominent shopping mall.

New Delhi: The capital city of Delhi demonstrated compassion and understanding as they encouraged more than 300 transgenders and hijras who came from different states for the 5th annual Hijra Habba organised by the India HIV/AIDS Alliance on 22nd September 2017. At a carnival of "trans-empowerment" planned by design at an upmarket Select CITYWALK, a South Delhi mall on a weekend, it was a test of sorts. A test to see if Delhi's shoppers and moviegoers were ready to embrace members of the third gender in their midst and cheer them as they danced, sang, shared their stories and put up a fashion show to enthral a floating audience who had the choice to stand and watch, or walk away. Most of them stayed and cheered and the numbers just swelled. This event incidentally coincided with Gauri Sawant, an activist transgender from Mumbai and the adoptive mother of a 14-year-old girl's appearance on Kaun Banega Crorepati where she shared the hot seat with Amitabh Bachhan in what was the first time a transgender had taken part in an Indian quiz show.

While there are many firsts to the credit of members of this group, what remains a major cause of concern is their inclusion in mainstream society. High levels of transphobia still exist, forcing many to leave home, not find jobs and go through immense agony and confusion as they navigate government processes and paperwork to first establish their identity, claim their transgender card after going through a screening process and then go through another round to register their gender.

In 2014, India's Census for the first time completed a count of transgenders and found nearly 5 million who were prepared to come out in the open and admit their status while filling out census papers. While the actual numbers are much higher, this in itself was seen as an achievement. Meanwhile, approval of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill 2016, by the Union Cabinet, under Chairmanship of Prime Minister Narendra Modi is seen as a major step in the movement that has been spearheaded by multiple agencies and the transgender community. This year's Hijra Habba's whose theme was "Inclusion – all citizens equal" discussed strategy plans and actions that can be taken up before the Act is passed acknowledging the standing committee report which will be tabled in the winter session of the Parliament.

While many concerns of the community have been accepted in the Bill, for the law to have teeth it must be implemented at the state level ensuring every transgender and hijra gets the right to marriage, adoption, insurance, healthcare, property, and choices. Celebrating the theme of "Inclusion – all citizens equal" saw more than 300 transgenders and hijras participating in discussions. Tripti Tandon, from the Lawyers Collective, reiterated, "TGs want more than just the law. They want their rights. With each state having its own system and legal frameworks, there needs to be greater clarity and a more simplified process so they can first establish their identity and then access their rightful due in society."

Hanita Kuntawala, India PEPFAR Country Coordinator said "the Hijra Habba had filled a big void by creating visibility and providing a platform for dialogue giving the community a voice while retaining respect and dignity, which is at the core of the movement". Savina, Ammassaria, Senior Strategic
Information Advisor, UNAIDS, complimented the way the community is wanting to organise itself to articulate their demands. She lauded the suggestion of including a chapter on transgenders and hijras in schoolbooks to push for greater sensitivity and added, "Seeing how perspectives from the grassroots have been incorporated at the Hijra Habba is heartening. There is a need for a holistic approach to it is not only about support, care, and treatment but also about ensuring access to employment, shelter, healthcare, income generation and social security."

Dr. Sampath Kumar, from the Centers for Disease Control, lauded the Hijra Habba, saying it was a powerful advocacy event that has become a movement with the potential to bring about dramatic change. Meanwhile, concerns put forth by Raveena, transgender rights activist and community leader, "We still do not know which department is for us. Do we go to the Women & Child Department or the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment? It would be good to have a special department that is equipped to answer our queries without delay and confusion."

Ashok Sajwan, Director of Lok Sabha reassured Gauri and others by emphasising that the “TG Bill is indeed historic and that he would be more than happy to work with the community to address their concerns while maintaining a balance between the government and the activists." According to Sonal Mehta, Chief Executive, India HIV/AIDS Alliance, "working together is the key to refining processes so that inclusion and mainstreaming become a seamless part of the system. This will translate into transgenders, hijras, and members of the LGBT community to feel safe as they open their world up knowing that they will not be judged, they will be given equal opportunity and they will be included like any other person on the street". Working closely with donor agencies and the government will be critical and Alliance will continue to create opportunities and platforms through the district and state consultations and interactions making sure that bridges are built and more transgenders are seen in public leadership space.

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About India HIV/AIDS Alliance: Founded in 1999, India HIV/AIDS Alliance is a non-governmental organisation operating in partnership with civil society, government, and communities to support sustained responses to HIV in India that protect rights and improve health. Complementing the Indian national programme, we build capacity, provide technical support and advocate strengthening the delivery of effective, innovative, community-based HIV programmes to vulnerable populations affected by the epidemic.

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