



Prabal Empowerment programme

For Parents of LGBTQ+

27th March – 6th June 2022

Zoom Meetings

NARRATIVE REPORT

Led by



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Introduction: The Humsafar Trust (HST) is a community-based organization (CBO) in Mumbai, India working on the health and human rights of LGBTQ+ communities since 1994. The organization has four verticals that include Health, Advocacy, Research and Capacity building of the communities. HST currently implements HIV prevention and treatment programs with an outreach to 3,000 Gay identified, Men Having Sex with Men (MSM) and TG/Hijra communities in Mumbai every year through outreach work on physical sites, and 100,000 + users through social media, dating apps, and online programs.

Background: While The Humsafar Trust continues to work with communities by various activities, a need for enlightenment and empowerment of parents of LGBTQ+ communities was identified, and thus, Prabal was formed in association with Sweekar: The Rainbow Parents, an initiative of parents of LGBTQ+.

Prabal is an empowerment programme for the parents of LGBTQ+ individuals which after the emergence of COVID-19 Pandemic, Prabal 2022 edition is the second version of this workshop. This workshop intends to act as a fresher of the previous workshop inclusive of updated information for the older batch of Rainbow parents and cover sensitisation for the newer participants. This workshop will be designed to take the Pandemic and its effect on LGBTQ+ community and their parents into consideration.



A Platform to Support & Guide Parents of LGBTQ+ community

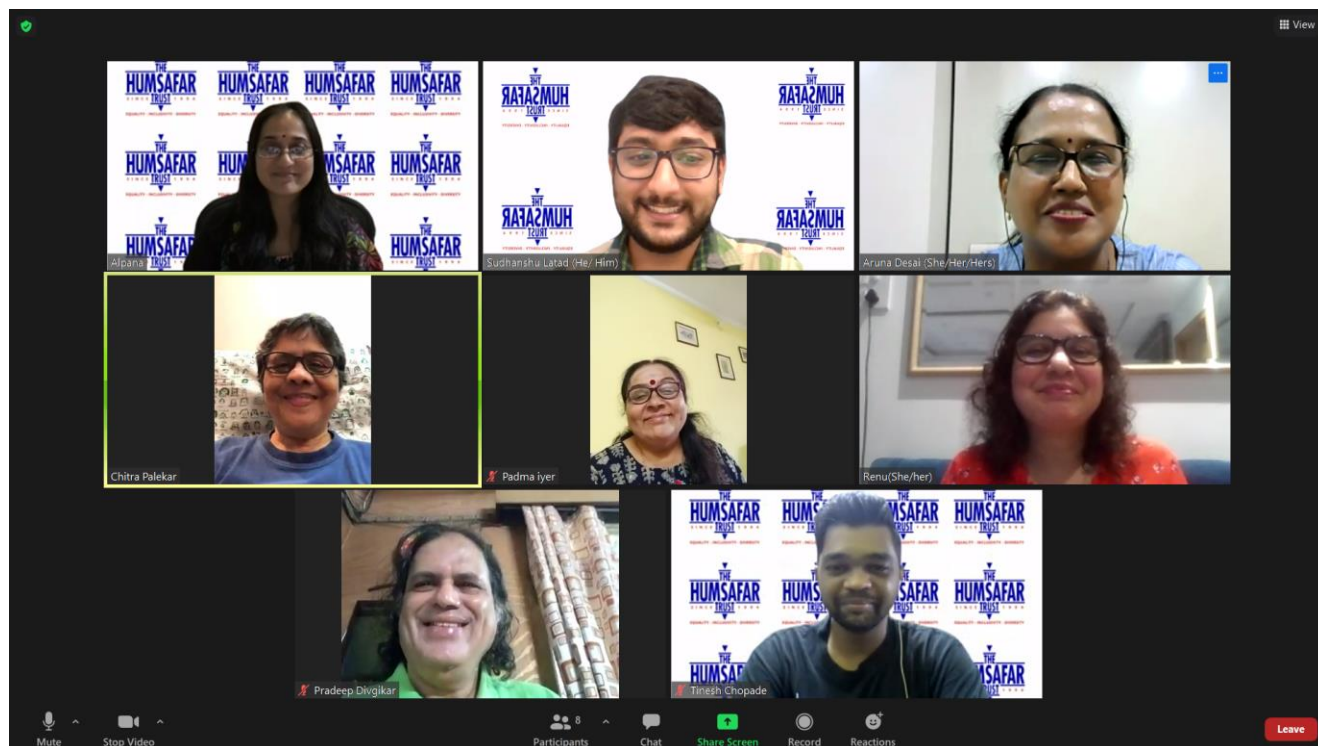
March 27	Sex, Gender Sexuality - Catch up with new terminologies
April 10	Mental Health Self Care for Rainbow parents
April 24	Sexual Health of LGBTQ+
May 08	How to deal with Ignorance & Homophobia at workplace
May 22	Understanding LGBTQ+ rights & your rights
June 05	Acceptance of a Rainbow Offspring & embracing the Families of Choice

Venue for Workshop: Zoom meet

Read caption for details.



Prabal is led by Ms. Alpana Dange with the support of CONNECT team. To ensure relevance to the audience, a pre-planning meet was held with the Sweekar group. The aim of this meeting was to identify the current needs of the parents and to ensure the right set of facilitators are onboarded whose expertise resonate with these needs. The needs identified during this process were a sensitisation session for the parents to understand newer emerging terminologies, understanding the rights of their LGBTQ+ children as well as their own rights as Rainbow parents, understanding sexual health of LGBTQ+ and that of PLHIV individuals to ensure strengthening support systems, understanding the advances of workplaces in the industry out there from an inclusion perspective, focused discussion on mental health of Rainbow parents and building stronger relationships within the parent's support group. Alternately the availability of Rainbow parents was also discussed during this meeting. Sweekar parents offered their insights to ensure maximum participation is seen in the sessions. This led to the structure of alternate Sundays for the Prabal programme starting March 27th to June 5th. To ensure a thematic view, the identified needs were distributed in 2 sections of Enlightenment and Empowerment. The first three sessions contributed to the Enlightenment section where the aim was dissemination of information to make the parents aware. The second section contributed of the last 3 sessions where the aim was to empower parents in their personal and professional lives.



The introduction to the Prabal programme was initiated, with an aim to enlighten the parents in the areas of sex, gender, and sexuality and catching up with new terminologies on the LGBTQ+ spectrum. A pre-understanding of the parents was gathered on terminologies like gay, lesbian, transgender, queer, bisexual, and kinnar; the difference between sex, gender, and sexuality; their views on whether LGBTQ+ is a western concept; their understanding of whether being LGBTQ+ was a mental or physical illness and lastly, what compelled them to attend this session. The introduction also gave an insight into what 'The Humsafar Trust' has been working on with the LGBTQ+ community, mainly in the areas of health, advocacy, capacity building, research, and relevant projects. This also set the parents' expectations of Prabal programme to ensure their interest and consistent attendance.

The first session was facilitated by Ms. Shruta Rawat. Shruta initiated the conversation by discussing key concepts and terms such as biological - sex assigned at birth. This conversation briefly touched base upon Intersex identity - person born with reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't fit the typical definitions of male and female. The discussion then moved to gender - socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that society considers appropriate for men and women such as certain names, colours, sports, crying habits, hair, roles in family like that of mother (quite, patient, bearing, children come first) and father (protect, provide for family). With gender, gender identity was discussed. This conversation included the personal sense of being man, woman, gender, queer, nonbinary (internal perception of an individual's gender).

Shruta emphasised the importance of separating gender identity and gender expression. She elaborated gender expression as behaviours, roles one plays. The discussion then moved to Transgender people and highlighted that a person's biological sex and gender identity are not the same. After clearing the concept of Transgender, sexual orientations, heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality, asexuality (which genders one is attracted to) were discussed. With the concept of sexuality - how people experience and express themselves as sexual beings through sexual feelings and behaviour. Bisexuality - being attracted to people of two different genders; Pansexuality - being attracted to all genders or "attraction regardless of gender"; were emphasized on duty to the invisibilisation of these identities. The umbrella term - Queer was explained as someone who doesn't identify with cisgendered-heteronormative societal norms or someone who doesn't factor into categories of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or heterosexual (sort of political identity). There were also discussions about the Hijra and Kinnar communities and who they really were, where they come from, how or why the myths surrounding them such as that of kidnapping boys and castrating them, forcing them to join the community. The conversation also included myths of how Trans persons are born. The conversation then moved to the social marginalisation that the Transgender community faces due to the professions most trans-people engage in like dancing, begging, sex work which aren't seen as respectable professions. The realities of these communities were also shared with real life incidences and how Hijra/ Kinnar communities acted as support systems during such times. There was a discussion at greater depth about the idea of 'gender non-binary' and 'gender fluid' and about what they mean (nonbinary-person does not ascribe to man or woman; gender fluid- alternate between masculine and feminine presentations). Global examples of perspectives on LGBTQ+ community was leading to a realization that native cultures seem to have already had an understanding of people being neither man nor woman such as the hijra and kinnar communities and western cultures seem to have to catch up. Towards the end of the session, the discussion moved toward busting myths about the LGBTQ+. Tips were also shared as to how parents could offer support to their LGBTQ+ offspring while ensuring respect, confidentiality and patience.

The second session of the 2022 Prabal was facilitated by Ms. Laxmi Lobo, a Queer-affirmative clinical psychologist on April 10th, 2022. The conversation focused on the mental health of the participants. Laxmi tried to understand the stress patterns of the Rainbow parents participating in the session as she believed a lot of time parents lose their individualities and focus too much on their offsprings and how it grains away the mental health of a parent. While this is extremely common in parents of cisgendered and heterosexual children, the problem magnifies for a Rainbow parent due to the social stigma the child as well as the parent faces or has the risk to face. Ms. Lobo encouraged healthy self-care activities such as taking healthy time outs from the stressful routines by indulging in passions and arts. She also focused on the importance of affirmation, a researched strategy to boost resistance power towards a stressful situation and shape the ability to withstand external hardships in a composed manner. Laxmi emphasised on the importance of taking cognizance of one's feelings and having healthy outflows of emotions to avoid untimely outbursts that may complicate existing strained circumstances and strain relationships. The parents vocally expressed the need for these practices to be inculcated in their daily routine and were encouraged to promise to themselves the attitude of self-care.

The third session on April 24th, facilitated by Dr. Abhishek Royal aimed at enlightening the parents in the areas of the sexual health of the LGBTQ+ community. The session started with the parents talking about the homework they got from the previous session relating to what they did for self-care. Many parents talked about picking up old hobbies such as gardening, working out, writing stories, indulging in manicures - pedicures, etc. The homework given for this session was to draw what the parents thought of their family, whether it be elaborate images or stick figures. The impact of stigmas surrounding STIs (sexually transmitted infections) was discussed along with the need for care and support from parents and partners in such cases. It was identified that the disconnect between parents and kids especially in terms of sex and related topics leads to both parties not being educated about it. Tricks to handle situations dealing with STIs because it is a taboo were also shared. How the handling of cases of STIs by medical professionals in an insensitive manner, where they didn't listen to the patient, didn't intervene as was needed and shamed the patient by asking them why they engaged in sexual activities, led to the patient not approaching other people for help, was discussed. The tips for parents to handle this included not being judgemental and researching and understanding the situation completely to effectively be able to sympathize and help their child. Parents were also given some background into how most of the community's initial sexual encounters were with an older person and were blackmailed into it. The conversation then went more toward the technical side of STIs such as the fact that they could be contained to only the reproductive organs or could spread to other parts of the body. Modes of transmission other than sexual acts included blood transfusions or infections from parent to child. STIs also increase the probability of HIV transmission and acquisition. Most STIs can be managed by treatment, and some can be completely cured, however, some STIs may have permanent long-term damage and could result in death. The overall feedback received from the parents by the Sweekar core team was shared with us and it was an eye opener that how much of sexual health information the parents did not have.

The fourth session was facilitated by Ms. Shwetambra and Ms Anjali Siroya on May 8th, 2022. This session aimed at empowering rainbow parents on how to deal with ignorance/ homophobia at the workplace. The session began with the previous session's homework where parents were supposed to draw what they thought of their family and what it looked like; in general, the parents seem to have found the activity relaxing and fulfilling. When asked what parents expected from the workshop, many asked about how to deal with negative situations that may arise when parents come out to their colleagues as a rainbow parent, how one could deal with homophobia at a domestic level in a building society rather than at work, and in general how as a parent they could help their kids and understand the Dos and Don'ts in approaching such situations. The session then began with understanding if the participating parents knew of any homophobic statements in their workplace, if they knew any other LGBTQ+ persons in their vicinity (other than their child), and if any LGBTQ+ person ever came out to them for advice or support (other than their child). A few first steps that were suggested to the parents as a way to be proactive and supportive were talking pre-emptively about their child and LGBTQ+ (making their presence known), getting involved in ERGs (employee resource groups), ally groups in workplaces, and maybe even start one. The conversation also asked the parents to find out if the policies at their workplace have the relevant terms that specifically refer to the LGBTQ+ community, and if they did, were the wordings correct and whether these policies were actually being enforced. It was suggested that starting the process of sensitization with support from the community by creating more dialogue around LGBTQ+ and the issues they face would lead to more understanding in the workplaces. In addition to this, they also suggested advocating for the inclusion of LGBTQ+ in their own workplaces, taking into account how many people in their workplace have come out, pushing for inclusion with HR, using language that promotes inclusion (ensuring that people from the community aren't just hired but are also retained as employees) and perhaps make a business case for inclusion such as what they are bringing to the table such as a different perspective, etc. There was a question as to how to initiate the dialogue if it is not already being done and the responses to that included trying to slip in a little detail about their child's coming out and being an out and

proud rainbow parent, displaying some sort of symbolism that showed they are a rainbow parent, such as wearing a rainbow mask or having a rainbow flag on their work desk which not only instigates conversation but also encourages people in the workplace in their journey to come out to their colleagues. An observation was that people have a tendency to accept one's kid if their own parents accepted them first. The parents were made aware of the fact that they have more power than they think they do because people could relate to them in more ways than one (as a parent discovering who their child is as a person), and their colleagues would be much more open sharing their shortcomings, ignorance with them (them also coming from a space of not knowing all the answers), LGBTQ+ colleagues in their workspaces would be likely to come out to them and seek support. It was made clear that despite having an intellectual understanding of the community and their hardships, it does take time for emotional understanding to catch up. A few tips for constant introspection that were shared were, that not everyone is at the same juncture as they are in their journey of understanding. Other key elements discussed were, respecting confidentiality at paramount, staying informed, re-examining one's own biases, identifying one's own role and maintaining a balanced perspective, and to never stop challenging ignorance and homophobia even if it seems like a losing battle at times. The presentation ended with a quote by Andrew Solomon "All parenting turns on a crucial question: to what extent parents should accept their children for who they are, and to what extent they should help them become their best selves."

Upon reflecting on their interactions with other parents and their own feeling about their children's lives, a few parents said that they fully accept their children's gender/ sexuality however they would have preferred they were cisgendered/ heterosexual as they would experience immense pain and discrimination against them in this prejudiced world. Parents also discussed outlooks on gender and sexuality where one could see them as just one part of their life while someone else might see it as a core value/ part of their identity as that part which is marginalised by the heteronormative society is the one thing that sets them apart from the others and has the most potential to empower them. Lastly, questions also arose as to why a child needs to be accepted when they have a right to be who they are and live life as they wish. The session ended with the parents being given two tasks to do before the next session: talk to a person in their workplace about LGBTQ+ rights and write about how they aspire to create an LGBTQ+ inclusive workspace.

The second session of the Empowerment structure, and the fifth session of the Prabal programme, aimed at offering law and legal awareness as a tool to the rainbow parents for situations that may need a legal understanding of their rights as a Rainbow parent. This session was facilitated by Senior Advocate in the Supreme Court of India, Ms. Amritananda C. Amrita acquainted the Rainbow parents with laws that play a role in the health and human rights of their LGBTQ+ children. With a former understanding of potential sexual and mental health issues as well as social stigma, this conversation became a tool to practice and implement the knowledge in an appropriate manner. Amritananda also shared the history of the legal journey of LGBTQ+ rights in India and in other parts of the world. The understanding of the legal status, and scenarios, comforted a lot of concerned parents about their child's safety. Some parents realised the spaces they wish to contribute in legally to make LGBTQ+ lives smoother such as same-sex marriage rights, civil unions and adoption rights for LGBTQ+ individuals.

The last session, part of the empowerment section and also the last session of the Prabal program 2022, focused on the topic of acceptance of rainbow offspring and embracing the families of choice. The session was facilitated by Mr. Vivek Anand and Ms. Alpana D. They started off by discussing the homework given to the parents in the previous session: reading up about Section 377 and the NALSA judgment, what they were and what they meant. After that an understanding of whether the parents' rainbow child had a support system outside their family, the meaning of family of choice from the parents' perspective, and acceptance of an LGBTQ+ partner and other relationships outside blood relationships as family was gathered by the facilitators.

These questions were asked before and after the session to the parents as a way of gauging how the session influenced the parents' way of thinking. First, Mr. Vivek shared his journey within his biological family, how he found an ever-expanding chosen family in HST, and how over a period of time despite having no biological children, he has fathered 2 children that he has mentored. He added that a biological family and chosen family could eventually start to merge to become one if both families embraced each other. Then, the father-daughter duo, Mr. Charles Arthur Williams and Ms. Anjali Siroya, spoke about their unique relationship where Anjali, a transwoman, considers Charles, a gay man, to be her father. Surprisingly they met on Grindr which is an adult dating site. Charles said that his relationship with her allowed him to express his parenthood and made him a better person. He has also opened his home to young LGBTQ+ individuals who may require emotional support, or may have housing issues because their biological parents threw them out of the house. Next, Mr. Tinesh C and Ms. Pooja F, both of whom work at HST, talked about their relationship as brother and sister. They shared that it sprouted from the desire to understand each other's life while Tinesh identified as a gay man and Pooja as a heterosexual, cis-gendered woman. In each other they found acceptance, security, and a support structure of sort, becoming a part of each other's chosen family. Finally, another member of HST Sudhanshu, talked about one person from his chosen family, Kajree - who offered him a lot of support throughout his coming out journey, with her being the second person he ever came out to. He talked about the ways in which she would identify his mental health space and offer support during times of crisis, eventually leading to be a core of each other's chosen and biological family. Towards the end, there was a brief discussion about the mental health benefits of having friends turned family of choice because a person could find safety in these relationships due to the unconditional support. A family of choice brings balance to a person's life to due the circumstances that brought the people together and the trust upon which these relationships are built. There were suggestions that if parents could do this for their kids, it would build trust that was based on understanding and respect between them, leading to the biological family and the chosen family of the child becoming one. It was also stated that a child does not have to choose between one or the other but could share their life with one of them more and their relations with the other.

The last session focusing on Families of choice was high on emotional energy due to the qualitative participation of the rainbow parents as well as the invited speakers. The common goal of creating an inclusive and empowering space for LGBTQ+ communities at every end bound everyone's movement towards one direction, which was upward towards progression.

The Prabal Empowerment program of 2022 was a huge success owing to the structure of the program, the participation of parents led by Sweekar, and all the facilitators that contributed to the process. The program ended on a hopeful and exciting note to continue the engagement of Rainbow parents in future LGBTQ+ activities and a return of offline normalcy to lives after a heavy mentally taxing pandemic that became a huge barrier to access to safe, brave, inclusive spaces.

