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Media Guidelines

for

Covering news on the LGBTQ+ Community

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INTRODUCTION

Upon receipt of communication from the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting on the issue of media reportage of the LGBTQ+ issues alongwith representation of Shri P. Senthil, the Press Council of India after diligent & in-depth deliberation on the issue, has formulated the guidelines on the issue of portrayal of the LGBTQ+ community by media.

A: BRIEF OVERVIEW & PURPOSE

Language and the usage of words is a critical part of how we engage with each other. Cultures are built with language, the way sentences are stitched together, using words and punctuations. The culture of using Main and Hum is indicative of a place, its history, culture and people. Similarly, the word Aap is a means to show respect for a person who they are to you or their age.

The usage of such words that dignify an equation between two people or more, written or spoken, is as significant as the pronouns of she, he and they are to a person or people, a language and an evolving culture which is moving towards being more inclusive and dignified. The inability or failure to use such pronouns, for instance, is as inappropriate as calling a person 'she' when their assigned gender is male, and therefore should be referred to as he and him. It is as unbecoming of a person referring to a senior in a certain Hindi-speaking culture as Tu rather than Aap.

It is an established fact that words can communicate love, appreciation and respect but can also be misleading, demeaning and hateful.

As stated in *Consciously Speaking** by AvianWe (2021), 'language is not neutral. Inclusive language acknowledges the unique values, skills, viewpoints, experiences, culture, abilities, and experiences of individuals or groups. Derogatory or discriminatory language undervalues individuals or groups, denigrates, humiliates, and perpetuates stereotypes and inequality in society.' In a worst-case scenario, the book says, 'discriminatory language incites hatred or vilification. Discriminatory language and visual representations ignore, exclude, marginalise or under-represent people, rendering them invisible.'

The purpose of this docket is to enhance the understanding of gender, sexuality, its terms and usage. The objective is to take on board a complaint made by Mr P Senthil Kumar and propose a solution through improved language usage so that the press is more conscious of how they refer to the LGBTQIA+ community and what the do's and don'ts are when it comes to representation of this group of people, be it pictorial or through text.

This document isn't perfect in that language, wordage and usage are evolving. It is to recognise that at one time there were no words such as homosexuality and heterosexuality and that now there is a huge rainbow of gender identities (GI)

and sexual orientations (SO) with a plus at the end. There is also an importance given to look at sex characteristics (SC) as different from GI and SO. Therefore, the international forums have started using the words SOCIESC where instead of looking at labels, we look broadly at Gender, Sex and Sexuality.

B. Terminology:

Sex: refers to the biological make-up of a person. The biological make-up is assessed from external body parts and also internal organs, sex chromosomes and/or tissues and organs. Sex is important to understand in the context of sex characteristics. One is either born female, male or persons with intersex variations or Intersex people.

Intersex people/ Persons with Intersex variations (SC): Intersex people are born with physical or biological sex characteristics, such as sexual anatomy, reproductive organs, hormonal patterns and/or chromosomal patterns, which do not fit the typical definitions of male or female. These characteristics may be apparent at birth or emerge later in life, often at puberty. Intersex people can have any sexual orientation and gender identity.

Gender: Gender refers to the attitudes, roles, behaviours, experiences, and feelings that a given culture associates with a person's biological sex. It influences how we perceive ourselves and each other, how we act and interact, and the distribution of power and resources in society. Gender intersects with other factors that drive inequalities, discrimination and marginalisation, such as caste, religion, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, ability, age, geographic location, and sexual orientation, among others.

Gender has two components which are very important to understand:

- Gender Identity

Gender identity reflects a deeply felt and experienced sense of one's own gender. Everyone has a gender identity, which is part of their overall identity.

- Gender Expression

Gender expression is the way in which we express our gender through actions and appearance. Gender expression can be any combination of masculine, feminine and androgynous. For a lot of people, their gender expression goes

along with the ideas that our societies deem to be appropriate for their gender. For other people it does not.

- Transgender man (Transman): A transgender man is a man who was assigned gender female at birth. They may/may not transition for them to align their body with their gender identity.
- Transwomen: A transwoman is a woman who was assigned gender male at birth. They may/may not transition for them to align their body with their gender identity.
- Transgender/Trans*: An umbrella term for people whose gender identity is different from the sex assigned to us at birth. The star/asterisk in ‘trans*’ refers to all non-cisgender gender identities. These will include transwomen, transmen, gender non-conforming, genderqueer, gender non-binary, etc.
- Gender Non-Conforming: People whose gender expression does not conform to the societal expectations with regards to the gender assigned to them at birth.
- Gender Affirming Surgery (GAS): A multi-step process that a trans* person may choose to go/or not go through to align their anatomy with their gender identity and gender expression. For a lot of trans* persons, these surgeries are needed for their well-being relieving them from dysphoria. However, gender affirmation is a deeply personal experience. Not every transgender person will desire or have resources for surgery.
- Transition: A term sometimes used to refer to the process—social, legal, and/or medical—one goes through to discover and/or affirm one’s gender identity. This may, but does not always, include taking hormones; having surgeries; and changing names, pronouns, identification documents, and more. Many individuals choose not to or are unable to transition for a wide range of reasons both within and beyond their control. The validity of an individual’s gender identity does not depend on any social, legal, and/or medical transition; the self-identification itself is what validates the gender identity.

Sexuality: Sexuality can be understood as the experience of knowing and expressing oneself. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles, and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, ethical, legal, historical, religious, and spiritual factors.

The two components of Sexuality are:

1. **Sexual Orientation/attraction**: Sexual orientation refers to a person's physical, romantic and/or emotional attraction towards other people. Everyone has a sexual orientation, which is part of their identity. Sexual orientation is not related to gender identity and sex characteristics.
2. **Sexual Behaviour**: This refers to an individual's sexual behaviour with men, women, and/or non-binary people. The concept is most often used in the public health / epidemiological context, where behaviour, rather than orientation or identity, is the focus of attention.

To expand further:

- **Heterosexuality**: Heterosexuality refers to attraction to members of the other genders.
- **Homosexuality**: Homosexuality refers to attraction to members of the same gender.
- **Gay** : A person who identifies as a man and is emotionally and/or sexually and/or romantically attracted to other people who identify as a man. People who are gay need not have had any sexual experience; it is the attraction and self-identification that determine orientation.
- **Lesbian**: The definition of lesbian has undergone major change in recent years. Recently, a lesbian is a person who identifies as a woman and is emotionally and/or sexually and/or romantically attracted to other people who identify as women. People who are lesbian need not have had any sexual experience. John Hopkins University currently changed the

definition of lesbian to include non-binary lesbian persons and it defined lesbians as “non-man attracted to non-men”.

- Bisexual: People who are emotionally and/or romantically and/or sexually attracted towards people of their own gender and a gender different from theirs. People who identify as bisexual need not have had equal experience- or equal levels of attraction- with people across genders, nor any experience at all: it is merely attraction and self-identification that determine orientation.

C. Media Sensitivity in Reporting

There are several aspects to how one uses language as well as a lens or gaze. A simplified example is how the male gaze has always played a role in reporting, film scripts and cinema at large. The same lens and gaze created heroes of men, relegating women to a limited role such as being a housewife (only), or how men wished to see women or assumed women to be as humans. The male gaze and dominance is also a reason why most history erased or excluded women (intentionally or unintentionally).

The result, as research has often pointed to, is the well-established problems of gender roles and stereotypes. Being queer and queerness emerges comfortably when these roles aren't assumed to be the only ones.

As is the case with women reclaiming and claiming their space, so as queer folks. The need for sensitivity towards queer folks, however, requires a different mind and approach as social stigma continues to haunt their existence. Laws, after all, can't change the dignity or status of any marginalised and hated community, overnight.

Language:

Currently, with the law in the favour of LGBTQIA+, it's even more important to be cautious with the language chosen to voice the visibility of the community and also use the words and terms that the community accepts for itself.

- Use a language which does not reduce the Queer community to nothing but 'SEX'
- If someone's gender identity is not clarified, it's best to stick to neutral terms like “them/they” instead of “he”, “she”, or “it”

- Before any reporting of LGBTQIA+ people and issues, consider whether labels such as “gay”, “lesbian”, “bisexual”, or “transgender” are appropriate. If they are not necessary and relevant to the story, they must not be included. A person's sexual orientation or gender identity status should only be mentioned if it is relevant to the story. The community has other identities of caste, class, religion, skills, qualifications and professions which are also important, other than just LGBTQIA. As a norm, and to ‘normalise’, a heterosexual person is never addressed or labelled by their sexuality
- The term “alleged” should not be used when describing LGBTQIA+ identities and relationships (such as “alleged transgender person”, or “alleged relationship”), which are all as real and valid as any other
- Use umbrella terms like “LGBT”, “LGBTQ”, “LGBTQIA+” rather than “the gay community,” which is not an inclusive term. Gay is one particular identity in the LGBTQIA+ community, and doesn’t explain all the other identities. Such usage manifests in limiting the spectrum of sexualities to men who are sexually attracted to men, leaving out so many others. That amounts to erasure and invisibilisation of sexual identities
- Similarly, avoid headlines like, “Let the Gays Marry”. This is a sweeping statement that limits diverse gender identities and sexual orientations into one identity (i.e. gay), whereas gender identity and sexual orientation are really a spectrum that enjoys many expressions. For instance, LGBTQIA+. Try to be as inclusive as possible while giving headlines and captions. It is possible to come up with a catchy headline that is politically correct and inclusive
- Do not use transgenders in your article; 'transgenders' is an adjective. Use transgender person, transwomen, transmen, and/or trans* persons
- Use the more appropriate “Gender Affirmative Surgery (GAS)” instead of “sex-change surgery” or “sex reassignment surgery”
- Do not use “Eunuch”. The right usage is “transgender woman” or “trans woman” and/or Hijra women. However, it is best to check with the persons you are interviewing or referring to
- You do not need to focus on a transgender person’s previous gender identity by using phrases like “He was a She”, or “She was he” or their

transitioning process and surgeries. Too often, it reduces and ridicules the trans experience and their struggle to live a life free of prejudices. It denies them their identity, who they know they are, and who they are. Such references are to a past that they consider as “dead”, and an error assigned at birth

- Avoid headlines like “She Was Not Ashamed of Her Lesbianism” since calling something an ‘ism’ reduces it to a fad or trend rather than an identity
- Take care when using the word “homosexual”. Outside of scientific and clinical discourse, the word has outdated and discredited connotations of psychological disorder
- Do not use words like “sexual preference”, “special rights” and “gay lifestyles”. They are pejorative terms. Being Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay, asexual, or Queer is Sexual Orientation. Secondly, it is not special rights that the community is asking for but “equal rights”

Photos & Confidentiality

- The stock photos used for articles and news pieces on LGBTQIA+ issues should be diverse and representative of the lived realities of our lives. Some of the photos only depict “rainbows”, “pride-parades”, “silhouettes of violence” etc. Make some effort to create a library of photos for LGBTQIA+ persons, taking their consent while making this happen
- It is inappropriate to pick up photographs from people’s social media accounts if you know they identify as LGBTQIA+. They might not feel safe about their gender expression, gender identity or sexual identity being published and available to a larger audience. Even if they are ‘friends’ of yours, always seek their permission since not many LGBTQIA+ people are “out” about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Even when those who are “out” only feel safe about it in certain contexts and settings
- Always ask for permission before disclosing the names, photographs, home or work addresses of those who identify as LGBTQIA+ in any form of publication. Do mention the pros and cons of publishing the photographs or other information to the persons you are interviewing

- It is not ethical to take people into confidence in order to use their private details (i.e. to 'pull a Capote').
- Do not ask for 'old' photos of transgender persons who have undergone Gender Affirmative Surgeries. It is insensitive and unnecessary.

Perspectives:

- LGBT*QIA+ is not a monolith. It is an umbrella term. It consists of persons of diverse sexual orientation, gender identities and sex characteristics. Do not conflate all these in your news items. If you are writing about a transgender person, it is about gender identity; if you are writing about sexuality and attraction, it is about sexual orientation. It is also important to focus on persons with intersex variations
- Make sure you consider a person's class, caste, religion, ethnicity, and other social markers while reporting on their lives. These also affect gender and sexuality
- Persons from marginalized communities must not be treated as 'victims', as it further disempowers them. Avoid 'the saviour syndrome' and 'top-down' statements with a "we must save them" tone. Look for stories on the LGBTQIA+ community that do not focus on their identities as 'victims'
- To increase the visibility of LGBTQIA+ people, look at queer and trans* persons in business, in art, music, literature, human rights activism, scientists and sportspersons
- It's important to build a network of members of the LGBTQIA+ community across the country. Many journalists tend to return to the same people time and again for quotes. This limits journalists' access to the diversity of the LGBTQIA+ community, and also limits the voice of the community in representing themselves, recognising lived experiences and contexts that are diverse
- If you are a beat reporter, insist on seeing a playback of your story to ensure that the desk the editor has not slipped in some politically incorrect statements
- It is definitely not the task of the journalist to be an activist, however, knowing how precarious the lives of LGBT*QIA+ persons are, if you

come across stories of persons who need help, you might connect them with NGOs working with the community

D. References & Acknowledgements:

This document has been put together by Nazariya: A Queer Feminist Resource Group (Nazariya: QFRG) with support from the Rainbow Lit Fest – Queer & Inclusive (RLF).

The document refers to various organisations as resources including *NUJ Pride, Celebrating and Supporting Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Members of the National Union of Journalists*; *Guidelines on LGBTQIA+ reporting by Nazariya: QFRG*; *Consciously Speaking by AvianWE*, and the formal complaint by P Senthil Kumar.

To reach this final yet evolving document on guidelines for the media, has involved an intense process seeking inputs from journalists who ‘belong’ to the LGBTQIA+ community and NGOs working with and for the community. A Winter Internship Programme was also conducted by the Press Council of India and a report submitted by Pradeep Kashyap and Anjali Kumari.

This document by Nazariya: QFRG and RLF, however, has sifted through years of material and references before coming to what it is - present, politically correct and LGBTQIA+ voiced. Both organisations suggest and believe that since language is evolving, these guidelines need to be revisited periodically.