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FORM AND FUNCTION

Is Delhi University really prepared to enroll transgender students?

Students say the institution does not have mechanisms in place to deal with harassment and other practical problems that transgenders could face.

by *Aarefa Johari*

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lighttripper

Delhi University's decision last week to introduce the 'third gender' category in its post-graduate degree application forms has been hailed as a progressive move towards inclusion. But transgender students fear that the university is rushing through with a measure whose implications it may not be prepared to handle.

The university has introduced a third gender option under the Other Backward Classes category on application forms for post-graduate courses. This has come four months after a Supreme Court judgement gave legal recognition to transgender people and a month after the University Grants Commission asked educational institutions to introduce a third gender option on application forms.

But the decision has raised an array of questions that Delhi University has not yet been able to answer. Will the staff of the university be sensitised, for instance, to handle the admissions of transgender students smoothly? How will it ensure the safety of these students since Delhi University no longer has an inclusive sexual harassment policy? How will the university address

smaller, but vital, issues such as toilet and hostel facilities for them?

Activists are sceptical

“We have been a bit sceptical about the university’s decision because often, such changes happen only on paper,” said Aapurv Jain, the co-ordinator of Delhi University’s informal gender studies group. “Transgenders constantly face a lot of harassment from other students, teachers and college administration, so the university needs to have a plan for their safety before opening up admissions to them.”

Until last year, Delhi University followed its own **Ordinance XV (D)** relating to the prohibition and punishment for sexual harassment on campus. In its definition of sexual harassment, this ordinance included any behaviour that discriminates against a person based on his or her “gender identity or sexual orientation”.

Last year, however, the university adopted the provisions of the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act 2013 to deal with harassment on campus. The new act specifically describes women as the victims of sexual harassment and men as the perpetrators, and makes no mention of different gender identities or sexual orientations.

“The old ordinance was very progressive and was applicable to all genders, and DU did not apply its mind while putting it aside in favour of the new Act,” said Abha Dev Habib, a faculty member of Delhi University’s executive council.

Even though the executive council plays an important role in making major decisions that impact the university, Habib said that the decision to implement the third gender category was not brought up for discussion with council members. “This decision was taken entirely by the administration of the university, although it should have been brought up in meetings of either the executive or the academic councils,” said Habib.

According to DU officials **quoted** in news reports, nine out of the 90,000 post-graduation applicants this year were transgenders. But there is no real way of finding out the total number of transgenders who are already at Delhi University, because students prefer to keep their identities hidden.

“Transgender students are harassed by all kinds of authorities, and face violence – including rape – in hostels,” said Taksh, a Mumbai-based transgender student who spent his first-year of graduation at Delhi University last year.

Getting a school education is itself a difficult achievement for most transgenders, who often have no support from their families and live with severe financial constraints. Many are forced to get college degrees through online courses, and given the hostility towards sexual minorities in Indian society, they end up facing huge problems finding employment, housing or even healthcare. According to Jain of the Delhi University gender studies group, transgenders often face greater social harassment than gay or lesbian students in educational institutions.

“Our system is not accommodating of transgenders as a whole,” said Taksh. “So offering us the opportunity to get just a post-graduate degree is like trying to build a house without a foundation, or telling us to eat cake when we have no bread.”

While DU officials **reportedly** claimed that the third gender option was introduced only in post-graduate courses because it was too late for under-graduate applications this year, Taksh and other university members believe such a move should have been introduced at the lower levels, and should be preceded by sensitivity training for all staff members.

The time is right

“If this move focuses just on getting a tick in the box and not creating attitudinal change, then it won’t make much of a difference to transgender students,” said Anjana Srivastava, an associate professor of English and convener of the women’s development cell at Delhi University's Kamala Nehru College.

However, even though Abha Habib admits the new project could have been implemented better, she believes it is not too early to introduce the third gender option in the university.

“For transgenders to be empowered and to raise their voices, they need to be in classrooms,” said Habib. “If we wait for all the nitty-gritty to be in place first, we will have to wait for a long time.”

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