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Social Psychology
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The Day of Compassion

The English dictionary defines "compassion" as a deep awareness of the suffering of another coupled with the wish to relieve it, but I personally feel that it is more than that. For me, compassion is the act of relieving suffering, especially in situations where acts of compassion are restricted or limited. It takes great strength to be compassionate in the areas where society does not approve of your actions.

My Background

I was married when I was 21, and after three months of my marriage, my husband left me for another person. I got divorced. Professionally, I am a successful person—well settled in a managerial job and financially doing well, but socially, life has been pretty harsh. I live in the southern part of India, which is traditional and doesn't understand the plight of divorced women or treat them equally. There is a stigma associated with divorced women. Many of my long-term friends ask me not to visit their homes or hangout with them publicly, because their parents feel that it would affect their future marriage proposals. I am not included in traditional ceremonies, because people consider me to be inauspicious. I am not welcomed in most social groups, and men sometimes make advances toward me based on a belief that I will be an easy target. I have even been advised by a group of so-called "well-wishers" not to disclose my marital status. In short, I have been the victim of prejudice and discrimination.

So, coming back to the Day of Compassion, I wanted to spend my day with a group of people who are suffering like me—people who are judged, discriminated against, and ill-treated. Members of society who are in need of more compassion and help, but don't get it.

Who Are They?

I chose to be with transgender people, a gender minority that's treated poorly, abused, and ridiculed by the majority of society. Most transgender people are not accepted by their own families; they are cast away by their family at an early age when they start to identify their gender and display its characteristics.

My country may have entered into digital age, adopted Western culture, and become globalized, but the plight of transgender people remains largely unrecognized. People turn a blind eye toward them, and the third gender is rarely recognized. Besides being outcasts, they have to deal with enormous problems that range from accommodations to illiteracy to unemployment. They are treated as untouchables, and most of them do not have friends outside their transgender community. The main source of their income is often begging or prostitution, which they are forced into.

What Did I Do?

After some research, I got in touch with the Transgender Rights Association, a community-based organization founded and managed by Ms. Jeeva Rangaraj—a transgender woman who was disowned from her family when she was 13 years old (see photo at right). With the help of a nongovernmental organization, she completed her bachelor's degree in sociology and her PG diploma in social entrepreneurship. She is also a guest lecturer at educational institutions in the field of transgender history and social awareness.



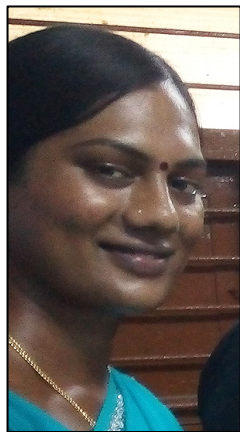
Ms. Rangaraj founded the Transgender Rights Association in 2007, and since that time she has been reaching out to transgender people who have been forced into becoming beggars or sex workers (some of whom are infected with HIV). She then offers training and counseling to help them improve their situation. She also works for transgender rights and the elimination of discrimination toward transgender people.

My Visit to the Transgender Rights Association

On my Day of Compassion, I visited the office of the Transgender Rights Association and met with Ms. Rangaraj and 13 other transgender people who were there. My goals were to get to know them and to help them feel valued and included in society. I see inclusion as an essential element of solving the problems they face.

As soon as I entered the room, they smiled at me happily, but I cried. Tears started rolling down my cheeks as I felt a sense of unity with them. We were all victims of discrimination, but their sorrow and plight was much larger than mine.

We introduced ourselves, and I shook hands with them. They were surprised and told me that no one had done that with them before. I addressed them as *akka* (sister) in the Indian language of Tamil, which made them happy (female is the gender they identify with, but it's not recognized by others).



I sat on the floor with them and shared my story first and listened to their stories one by one. They seemed comfortable telling me their stories of crisis, despair, pain, and expected redemption.

One inspiring story was told by Shama (shown at left), a 26-year-old who was chased away by her family when they found out she was transgender. She was educated by the Transgender Rights Association and employed there as a transgender advocacy officer. She in turn has adopted and supports two transgender kids, a boy and a girl.

I learned that two other women, Moni (age 38) and Sanjana (age 25), were sex workers who were rescued, trained, and appointed as crisis committee

members for the welfare of their community. And Surekha (age 22) is now working as an office assistant at a corporation.

After sharing many other stories, they invited me for lunch, which I immediately accepted with pleasure. They felt happy because most people outside their community wouldn't eat with them. But I was there to break the stereotypes and let them know that they're valued members of society (not a different species, as society often treats them). For them, it was a totally new experience.

Because my birthday was coming up in two days, I had decide to celebrate it early with them, and I had brought along a cake and some sweet treats. After lunch, I told them about my birthday and the cake. They were excited like little kids and started singing happy birthday to me while I cut the cake. They hugged me and made me feel like family, and I could tell that their birthday wishes were truly from the heart.



I told them that they would be my friends hereafter, and that it was not a big deal if the outside world didn't accept this divorcée friend of theirs. I also made a commitment to Ms. Rangaraj that I would do the following things with them in the future:

1. Train them on computers and communication skills during weekends
2. Refer them to my friends and family to place them in jobs

3. Create a web portal for them to display their skills and their work to create job opportunities
4. Help individuals I know become more aware of transgender people and the need to include them in society (I have added them to my Facebook page to let the world know that I'm connected to them and that they can do the same)
5. Join them in their fight for social justice

Connecting to My Soul

Looking back on this experience, I prefer my "Day of Compassion self" to my "normal self" because these activities connected me to my soul. This more compassionate person is who I am, but conformity and group dynamics kept me from doing these things before.

The psychological benefits of behaving compassionately were that I was able to be empathic and, in the process, be more compassionate toward myself. I was able to accept myself and my self-worth after seeing people who face even greater discrimination and who are trying to be happy and fight injustice. As a result of this Day of Compassion, I believe that I will be a more positive and compassionate person in the future.