

RADHIKA PIRAMAL: 'WE ALL HAVE THESE FEARS ABOUT...

What will happen when we come out'

The VIP Industries MD realised she was gay at 15. Having come out, she says policies at the workplace can help give LGBT colleagues the crucial support they need

rahml.menon@timesgroup.com

It's not often that a leading Indian corporate figure publicly talks about his or her sexual orientation. So, it was a pleasant surprise to hear

Radhika Piramal, managing director, VIP Industries, speaking openly about her sexual journey at the Godrej India Culture Lab in Mumbai event recently.

In her address, the formally dressed Piramal spoke, among other things, about coming out of the closet, workplace equations and the dilemma over Indian laws.

Awareness

"I realised I was gay when I was 15 and the first person I told was my sister (Aparna, who was in the audience)," Piramal said. "I told my parents when I was 17 and they had pretty much a similar response (as many Indian parents). They said, 'Radhika, we love you but let's just keep this to ourselves for now'. I then started telling my good friends, acquaintances in college and it grew over 10-15 years, as I started telling more and more people."

However, "really coming out" happened when she was in a serious relationship. Piramal met her partner when she was in New York and wanted to move back to India. "I didn't want to bring a foreigner all the way to India without some real commitment from

my side," she said. "So, we got married in London in 2011. I was honoured and humbled that all my family – parents, aunts, uncles, cousins – attended my wedding."

However, the wedding was reported in *Mumbai Mirror*. Piramal saw the security guard at her office reading the newspaper and realised it was time to be open

with her colleagues and address them.

"From that day on, I was out at work and out everywhere," she says. "In the long run, *Mumbai Mirror* did me a favour by publishing that story because we all have these fears and anxieties about what will happen when we come out. And, I have realised that the people who are important to me, my immediate family and colleagues at

work, they are not going to judge me for this. They are going to give me their love and support, so what was I really afraid of?"

Impact of coming out

Piramal says no one has said anything negative to her directly about her sexuality. She says she can finally share stories about her family life with people she closely

works with. "It's a natural thing to do," she says. "We, in India, are very community oriented people. We like to talk about our spouses, our children, parents. It's important. So, the fact that I could begin to do that with my team, I think, made me look more like a human and less like a boss."

Piramal, however, acknowledges that she comes from a privileged position. "I manage our family business and my father is my boss," she says. "My father has supported me since I was 17. I lobbied with him for 10 years to be

more and more open. And, he's really open and supportive now. So, I am lucky that the person who has an authority over me at work is supportive and I have no fear."

This is rarely the case with other gay individuals. The challenge for many of them, Piramal believes, is getting acceptance from their parents and not

being discriminated against by the bosses or getting fired. And, that's why people don't come out.

Piramal's advice: "For those who have confidence in those relationships at work or with your parents, open the conversation. You might be surprised. And, it takes effort and lobbying."

equal rights



Radhika Piramal

PIC: SHRIYA PATIL

Turn to page 2 >



Radhika with dad Dilip Piramal

PIC: BHARAT GUJRA

Piramal: We all have these fears about what will happen when we come out

> Continued from page 1

LGBT inclusion and corporate dilemma

According to Piramal, the inclusion of the LGBT community remains a taboo subject in India. But she feels that corporates can play an important role by accepting them and giving them a fair chance, which in turn will offer a sense of legitimacy to LGBT people. "The truth in India is, it's [legitimacy] not going to come from either the legal framework, in the current scenario, or politicians," she says. "It has to come from

family and workplaces because without that, there is going to be an atmosphere of fear and intimidation. All leading American corporations are clear on this. Their policy on non-discrimination is taken for granted there. Indian corporations really have to think about this. Do we see the western model of equal rights as the way forward or would we prefer to stay where we are and follow the current Indian model? That's the dilemma for corporations."

Piramal says Indian companies are bound by the

law of the land. However, the particular law (Section 377) is phrased in a way that it's possible to have non-discrimination policies in effect without going against the law. "Many MNCs do it. It would be, I would say, brave for Indian corporates to follow that [having a formal HR policy on LGBT inclusion]. Few are. We are still in the process of doing that at VIP. We haven't rolled it out."

Difficult to open accounts

Every bank in this country, whether it's MNC or Indian, has

to follow the RBI rules and as long as that's not going to recognise LGBT, it will be difficult to open joint bank accounts, feels Piramal. "This is why I believe the legal framework is central to society. Marriage is a contract between people. The difference between relationships, friendships and marriages is the contract and that gives rights and privileges, including financial. It puts you in the framework of inheritance laws and everything. And, banking laws will follow country laws," she says.