

# On Overcoming Prejudice

Rosanna Flamer-Caldera

“Being a woman, a lesbian and a member of a minority community, I’ll leave it to your imagination what kind of discrimination I’ve faced”

By Raisa Wickrematunge  
Picture by Pavithra De Mello

Rosanna Flamer-Caldera has worked innumerable jobs. Migrating to the US when she was 18 years old, her first job was making contact lenses. Then she worked in a travel agency for 12 years. ‘If you want something, you have to work hard to make sure you get it,’ she observes, recalling her time in the US, when she spent nights working in a clothing store, often holding down two or three jobs at a time.

After several years she decided to come back to Sri Lanka, to spend some time with her parents. She then entered into a partnership with a top golfer, starting up a pro golf shop, and going into what she termed an ‘early retirement’ for 2 years. Next, she worked in advertising, joined an event management company and became a dedicated environmentalist (something which she is still passionate about today). But her current post as a founding member and Executive Director of EQUAL GROUND, an LGBTIQ rights organization; (LGBTIQ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transsexual, Inter-sex and Questioning) is something close to her heart. EQUAL GROUND was started in 2004 as Rosanna felt there was a pressing need to address issues of sexual orientation and gender identity. Although Rosanna had co-founded the Women’s Support Group five years earlier, she felt her scope was more limited as men were not included in their work.

Now, Rosanna spends her days in meetings, with Embassy representatives, human rights defenders and civil rights organizations- writing reports, budgets, or lobbying for funding. It’s a far cry from Yala or Wilpattu, where Rosanna says she is most at home- and yet, she feels, she cannot accept the injustice she sees around her.

Through her work, Rosanna has come up against her fair share of prejudice. Shifting the EQUAL GROUND office has become commonplace. ‘Many people refuse to rent out their places other than on a personal basis when they find out the kind of work I do,’ she explained. Her current office is the first place which was rented as an office. In 2009, EQUAL GROUND came under attack from conservative Muslim groups after one of their HIV/AIDS peer education workshops, which included condom demonstration. ‘We got calls, and were being attacked even electronically,’ Rosanna recalled.

‘Being a woman, a lesbian and a member of a minority community, I’ll leave it to your imagination what kind of discrimination I’ve faced,’ she says dryly.

Yet all the inconveniences she faces fades when compared with other people’s stories, Rosanna says. She speaks with emotion as she describes the issues EQUAL GROUND deals with on a daily basis- molestation (both from family members and strangers), abuse, violence, and even cases of extortion and blackmail. Around two or three cases are reported to EQUAL GROUND every month; but these are only the reported cases. ‘A lot of people are traumatized... they don’t know if they can trust us,’ Rosanna explained. Many more are afraid to seek redress, because they are often further harassed and stigmatized. Forced heterosexual marriages are common in Sri Lanka, with parents intervening in 60-70% of cases according to a study, forcing their children into marriage despite knowing the truth about their children’s sexual orientation. This in turn can lead to marital rape, abuse and ultimately, suicide.

The situation is worsened by the fact that the Penal Code 365A criminalizes homosexual relationships- not to mention that it is an old law, being 126 years old- and religious intolerance is a barrier to be overcome as well. ‘More sex education is needed, in order to put aside the shame and taboo associated with sex,’ Rosanna says. EQUAL GROUND has trained counselors, has an anonymous hotline where victims can seek help, and holds sensitization programmes regularly.

Yet even with all of these efforts, Rosanna says, there is a long way to go before there is any level of understanding from the rest of the local community. ‘What we are looking for is not tolerance. We don’t need to be tolerated, we need to be accepted,’ she says, adding that she doesn’t believe in divisions based on race, religion, class or caste, and as such, people should not judge others based on sexual orientation or gender identity.

This is why one of EQUAL GROUND’s main aims is to educate the public at large; to remove the perception that having a different sexual preference or gender identity is wrong.

Similarly, the programme aims to sensitize and educate the LGBT community as well, as they often feel a sense of shame. This is why the ‘Pride’ events, such as the Kite Festival recently held in Mount Lavinia, are so important. ‘Pride allows people to join together and celebrate their different identities,’ Rosanna explained. Educating parents is also vital. Rosanna’s father passed away in 1998, but her mother provided constant support, despite her Catholic upbringing. Many children, especially teenagers, do not have the same luck and turn to drugs or alcohol, Rosanna relates.

‘The Sri Lanka I was born into has changed,’ she added, saying that the situation in terms of prejudice has been deteriorating.

And yet, Rosanna does not believe in obstacles. ‘If I come across an obstacle, I ‘obstacle-ise’ it!’ she says, recounting a saying that she lives by about facing down a bull-elephant in the jungle rather than running. It is this sense of fearlessness which has made Rosanna such a vocal activist in the LGBTIQ community, and which has helped EQUAL GROUND sustain despite an atmosphere of prejudice.