

## ACCEPTTRANS: ZOYA LOBO

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**ABSTRACT**

*We all are human beings, but I feel like people forget that sometimes. People too often forget that we have a choice in how we want to spend the rest of our life. Humans rights is the belief that everybody should be treated equally and with dignity no matter what their circumstances; which means nobody should be tortured or treated in an inhuman or degrading way. But in case of transgender people, we forget that they are also human and we mistreat them for no reason, we avoid them for no reason, we hate them for no reason.*

*We want to tell such a story of a transwoman, Zoya Thomas Lobo; India's first transgender photojournalist. Zoya was born in Mumbai and right from the very beginning, she knew that she was different but never had courage to reveal her real identity to her family. For some, success is not equivalent to merely hard work and luck. It takes a tectonic amount of courage, tenacity and determination to beat all the odds and turn around your circumstances. The statement holds true for 28-year-old Zoya Lobo, who, with her unshakeable determination, has not only become India's first trans photojournalist, but has also been featured in a Kay Beauty ad with Katrina Kaif. Once she came to our college Satish Pradhan Dnyanasadhana College, Thane, so, we got the chance to know her. Zoya is a very inspiring and hearty, passionate photographer and on top of that, she is a greatly amazing and kind person. She wants to be a famous wildlife photographer one day but who will give her a chance to explore. Even after being featured in a hoard of newspapers and websites, Zoya still has to literally beg to sustain herself. She simultaneously manages a career in photojournalism but hasn't been offered a full-time job yet. Google has launched her as India's first trans photojournalist. Though her photographs have made it to the pages of renowned dailies like the Hindustan Times and the Times of India but she is yet to find permanent employment in this field.*

**INTRODUCTION**

Zoya Thomas Lobo, a rebel who broke the societal norms to become the first transgender photojournalist of India. Zoya is an inspiration for everyone, and she is fighting hard to earn respect for the transgender community of India. Even as she fumbles and stammers when she begins talking about her experience in English, one can only respect her passion for photography and telling stories. Born and brought up in a lower-middle-class family in Mahim, Mumbai, Zoya overcame many obstacles and faced discrimination to gain her own identity as a trans woman.

Zoya has almost seven thousand followers on **Instagram**. People started knowing her as India's first transwoman photojournalist, even though she faces discrimination, and not everyone is comfortable with a transgender photographer but she has not lost hope. She wants to make a better environment for the transgender people in India, so that they get the equal right to live their life respectfully.

**Zoya's Childhood:** Zoya was born in a lower-middle-class family in, Mumbai. She spent her childhood in Mahime Bhatiya, a Brother's Cooperative Housing Society, where her father worked as a watchman. Zoya Lobo grew up in a Christian community. She went to convent school till class five, but dropped out at an early age. Later, her father passed away due to health complications, and the family was forced to flee society owing to an ongoing disagreement over the flat they had rented. Despite her mother's efforts to secure her rights and ultimately acquire the flat, the family decided to leave and go to the mother's sister's home. Lobo moved to Kapad Bazaar in Mahim West with her widowed mother and sister, where she lived the majority of her life. It was difficult for the mother to raise two children on her alone without any financial assistance. She accepted part-time work at a neighboring bakery to help support the family. The family was also given a monthly grocery supply by the Church they went to. On an interview with MAD4INDIA she told that "My childhood days were very memorable. But sometimes my friends used to bully me, tease me. During that time, whenever my elder sister found out that they were bullying me, she would come to my rescue. She fought and argued with them for me."

**Accept Her Inner Calling:** At very young age she started feeling that she was different. she didn't identify herself with either the male or female genders, she increasingly found herself out of place. She enjoyed playing girly games and loved hanging out with girls, mostly. After joining the transgender community, Zoya realized that she is one of them. At the age of 18 she joined the transgender community. But before that also, she used to assume herself as a woman. Zoya told MAD4INDIA on a conversation, "It took me a long time to accept that I'm different I'm a transgender, but eventually; I did accept myself the way I'm".

**Reaction of Family Knowing Her Real Identity:** In the name of family Zoya had her mother and one sister, and she didn't want loose them. She tried hard to hide her identity from her family. But eventually, when she turned 18 she disclosed the fact that she was different, she was queer as it became difficult for her to suppress herself. She was afraid of being punished by her family or, worse, abandoned. But she was lucky, her mother didn't throw her away. It took time, but her mother accepted her real identity and tried to support her. Lobo recalled her mother accompanying her on her first train ride and assisting her in draping the saree every day before she left for work. When her friend came to know that she was trans, they advised her to behave like straight and not otherwise. Lobo told "They always tried correcting me like being me was wrong." They are still friends with her on Instagram and talk to each other. But one of them said that he feels ashamed to talk to her and hang out with her in public. As long as they're talking over the phone, he's okay with it. Even her sister didn't want to talk to her. Zoya's sister once told her that they lose their respect because of Zoya.

**Becoming India's First Transgender Photojournalist:** By the time she found a community that accepted her, she was already living away from her family and found herself with barely any line of work to pursue. This resulted in her begging in the local trains, however, this was not something she wanted to continue doing and yearned to break away from her circumstances. Zoya was also determined to create a new path that created opportunities for transgender community members. Nonetheless, no matter how much she contemplated other avenues of work she always was met with brick walls and therefore continued begging in trains.

It was her honest reaction and feedback to Vikas Mahajan's short film titled 'Hijara Shap Ki Vardan' that landed her a job in the sequel. The film was well-received and Zoya was awarded the Best Actress and Human Being Award. During the film's success party when Zoya got the opportunity to get on stage, she took advantage of the situation and spoke on behalf of the community and raised important questions. Her fiery speech and self-confidence caught the attention of Mr Shreeneth Singh, Editor of College Times Education Media, who offered her a job as a freelance reporter towards the end of 2019. This got her foot in the door, however, from a financial point of sustenance, it was still a very volatile proposition. She didn't give up hope and continued to collect funds to acquire a camera. Zoya has a proclivity for images and wanted to experiment with photography, but didn't know how to go about with it. She researched and sought the advice of photographers, and eventually learnt her tricks of the trade.

She got recognition when she shot photos of the migrant labourers' protest in Bandra in April 2020. She was the only one who had those photos and these were taken by agencies, newspapers like HT, TOI, Lokmat, Mumbai Mirror and few more publications. This is when she got some recognition, at least among the photographers in Mumbai. Even Lokshahi News wanted her to join them as a fulltime 'Lokshahi News Journalist' but she demanded the tag as 'First Transgender Photojournalist' which they couldn't accept. Zoya has been awarded by the Journalist Union of Maharashtra. Slowly and steadily, people started knowing that Zoya Lobo is India's first trans photojournalist. Her elder sister who shunned her away after she came out as trans, now recognizes her work and is proud of her.

Soon after Zoya's pictures of the migrant labourers' protest at Bandra station went viral and were picked up by major publications, she received her first international assignment. From landing this huge opportunity with the Canadian publication *La Presse*, turning a face model for Kay Beauty, and to being featured on Google India's banners, Zoya Lobo says she still has a long way to go and looks forward to bigger achievements in the future.

**Transphobia Hampers Zoya's Dream:** Transphobia describes someone who has hate, fear, or disgust for transgender people or anyone who does not fit into the male/female gender binary. For example, a transphobic person may express disgust for a "tomboy" or for a masculine-appearing person wearing a dress. Another example would be someone no longer wanting to continue a friendship after finding out their friend is transgender. These are just a few interpersonal examples of transphobia that do not represent the whole scope of the issue.

There are also overarching societal examples. Transgender people face discrimination in the workplace, healthcare settings, and the housing market, among other areas of daily life. There are endless ways that transphobia can show up, including: **using incorrect pronouns, using a transgender person's "deadname.", bullying, violence, workplace discrimination, medical discrimination, housing discrimination.**

Transphobia can cause depression, anxiety, isolation, and feelings of hopelessness in transgender people. It can also lead to suicide. 82% of transgender people have considered suicide, while 40% of trans people have attempted it at some point in their lives. Just 1.6% of the general population has attempted suicide, showing that the rates for transgender people are exponentially higher.

Internalized transphobia happens when a trans person has absorbed messages of shame they received as a child about gender nonconforming people or their own gender nonconforming behaviors or desires. According to the Office for Victims for Crime, this can lead to transgender people getting into relationships with domestic violence and can also lead transgender survivors of violent crimes to believe they deserved what happened to them.

Zoya says that she was privileged because at least her mother accepted her and supported her. Before gaining recognition, Zoya has faced lots of inhuman treatment from the society that leave her depressed. She used to face discrimination, behavior like she didn't belong to this society. Seeing her, people make faces and told her to stay away from them, not to touch them as she is a transgender. These instances were a little heartbreaking for the photojournalist. She hailed from a humble background and her journey to becoming the first trans photojournalist was not the easiest.

Even after being featured in a hoard of newspapers and websites, Zoya still has to literally beg to sustain herself. Though many national and international media outlets have recognized her work, Lobo is still struggling to secure a full-time job as a photojournalist, turning her passion into employment. This is happened because of the mindset of our society who resist to accept them as a part of this society.

**Summary and Conclusions:** Zoya, who was born a male biologically, realized gender dysphoria. She started experiencing feminine traits, enjoyed playing with dolls and games said to be meant for girls and was attracted to boys. Zoya had to hide her identity from the family for the fear of being thrashed. But at the age of 18 she gathered the courage to tell her mother. Later she joined the transgender community and used to travel in trains and beg for her bread and butter. This is not what she wanted to do for the rest of her life. During the pandemic she captured some photographs which give her some fame and people started knowing her as India's first trans photojournalist. Zoya, who wishes to be a wildlife photographer, still searching for a fulltime employment.

Her dream is to be able to show the truth like the mirror of society, like true journalists. She wants to raise awareness about her community and the people part of it, she urges parents to be accepting and appreciative of their children unconditionally. "Today when my sister reads my name in the newspapers she sends me encouraging words and that makes me feel accepted. I want to tell families that if you have a trans child in your house please support them. Educate them so they don't have to enter local trains to beg." told Zoya to Mac Cosmetics India.

**Our Point of View on Transgender and Transphobia:** Educating yourself about transgender rights, gender identity issues, and how to respect transgender people is the best way to fight against transphobia. Here are some small things we can do:

- Never ask a transgender person about their genitals, whether or not they've had surgery, or if they are on hormones.
- Avoid backhanded compliments like "I would never guess you are transgender!"
- Ask people for their pronouns instead of assuming.
- Use gender-inclusive language when talking to a group, like "folks" or "people."
- Use a trans person's correct name and pronouns. Do not ask them about their previous name or pronouns.
- Let the transgender people in your life know you are an ally and that you want to support them.
- If you are an academician, then try to help them completing their education.

#### NOTES

- Zoya Lobo's Interview with Adityobarna Mukherjee, MAD4INDIA, November 23, 2021.
- Exclusive Conversation with *iDiva*, Jun 22, 2022.
- [www.google.com](http://www.google.com).