Coming out isn’t as easy as you think for a LGBT+ person of colour

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It has been more than 50 years since the decriminalisation of homosexuality in the United Kingdom. We have seen some great strides made towards LGBT+ rights – from the repeal of Section 28 to same sex marriage and adoption and the Gender Recognition Act of 2004. In fact, the last general election in 2017 saw a staggering 45 LGBT+ members of parliament elected to the House of Commons.
But while Britain celebrates being one of the more progressive countries in the world, it is important to understand how our country can do better in championing diversity for the many LGBT+ people here and around the world.

Britain might have gotten rid of its infamous Buggery Act – that criminalised “unnatural sexual acts” – but remnants of it still exist in former colonies including the country of my birth, India, where Section 377 looms large, criminalising non-procreative sexual acts, creating a culture of homophobia and social exclusion for many LGBT+ people.

Similar examples exist in other Asian and African countries. While many LGBT+ individuals from those countries continue to escape oppression, seeking asylum and refuge in this country, it is somewhat ironic to see this Government not only harass and intimidate queer asylum seekers but also send thousands back to countries where they face the threat of death and physical violence (see queer activist Kelechi Chioba’s case for instance).

South Asian LGBT+ people I have spoken to also complained about the humiliation many had to face when being aggressively questioned by the Home Office about their asylum claims.

Against this backdrop, there has been a tremendous cut to LGBT+ services – the closure of mental health service Pace in 2016, the shut-down of the UK’s only LGBT+ domestic violence helpline, Broken Rainbow, and a surge in the number of homeless queer people. Austerity has been particularly harsh on queer people of colour who face vulnerable situations, especially if they are migrants or seeking benefits.

A study conducted by the charity Centred in 2012 reported that while the total LGBT+ voluntary sector income was around £5.5m, the average income amongst Black, Asian and Minority ethnic (BAME) LGBT+ organisations was only £9,627.
Political representation and engagement has also been rather patchy when it comes to LGBT+ people of colour. When I stood for Parliament in 2017 – as the only queer person of colour that year – I felt shocked that despite so much progress, our political system remains rigid when it comes to intersectional representation. In fact other than Lord Waheed Alli there are no other high profile Black LGBT+ politicians.

One of the often-heard arguments is how it is hard to reach queer people of colour in this country and it astounds me that some of the interesting and radical work done by charities such as Naz Project London and Imaan remain marginalised.

In my own research which focuses on South Asian queer men, I have found that many of my research participants are twice marginalised – facing racism (and Islamophobia) within mainstream white queer spaces and homophobia within “safe” BAME spaces. Our identities are not mutually exclusive but rather they are inextricably linked – the question is why are queer people of colour being let down today?

The answer to this lies in queer assimilation politics where social progress is measured by securing rights to marriage and adoption while erasing issues of oppression and social injustice faced by queer people of colour and those who are poor.

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There is much more potential for coalition politics. As Audre Lorde said, there is no hierarchy of oppression. But for this to work one must understand that lived realities of people are different and the narrowness of single-issue politics will not close the gaps that the movement currently faces.
Queer activists calling for visibility and “coming out” need to recognise that visibility politics is based on the creation of the “model” gay/lesbian/trans individual. The pressure of “being visible” can disproportionately harm queers of colour and those with limited economic privilege. The challenging act of coming out involves privilege – racial, social, economic – that is not equally available to all people.

The narrowness of white, corporatised, homonormative queerness does not and cannot represent the needs and interests of all queer people, and is invested, instead, in making the movement palatable for the very people opposed to it. At a time when we are facing devastating attacks on our health system, jobs and education we need to leave no one behind and return to the radical potential of queer politics towards social justice. It is time to argue not just for mere inclusion but positive intersectional transformation.

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