



EQUITY IN ACTION

**EXPERIENCES OF NON-PROFITS
WORKING TOWARDS SAFE, INCLUSIVE
AND SELF-AFFIRMING WORKSPACES**

TARSHI, 2023

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CONTEXT

There are diverse perspectives on the spaces we inhabit, traverse and co-create at work.

Are these spaces:

SAFE?

INCLUSIVE?

SELF-AFFIRMING?

A combination we refer to as **SISA**

WHERE DO WE STAND ON THESE THEMES IN THE NGO SECTOR?

CAN PEOPLE COMFORTABLY BE WHO THEY ARE AT A WORKPLACE?

TARSHI's work has always incorporated the essence of **SISA** by focusing on shaping attitudes and environments to make them more affirming, inclusive and safe.

But SISA is **dynamic**, and is **work in progress**. We are all, at the same time, experienced and learners, facilitating, participating and directing a stream of change.

Building on earlier efforts, between July and November 2021 in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, we engaged with:

15 ORGANISATIONS

46 INDIVIDUALS

Conducted Interviews with:

Conducted a survey with:

21 INDIVIDUALS

25 RESPONDENTS

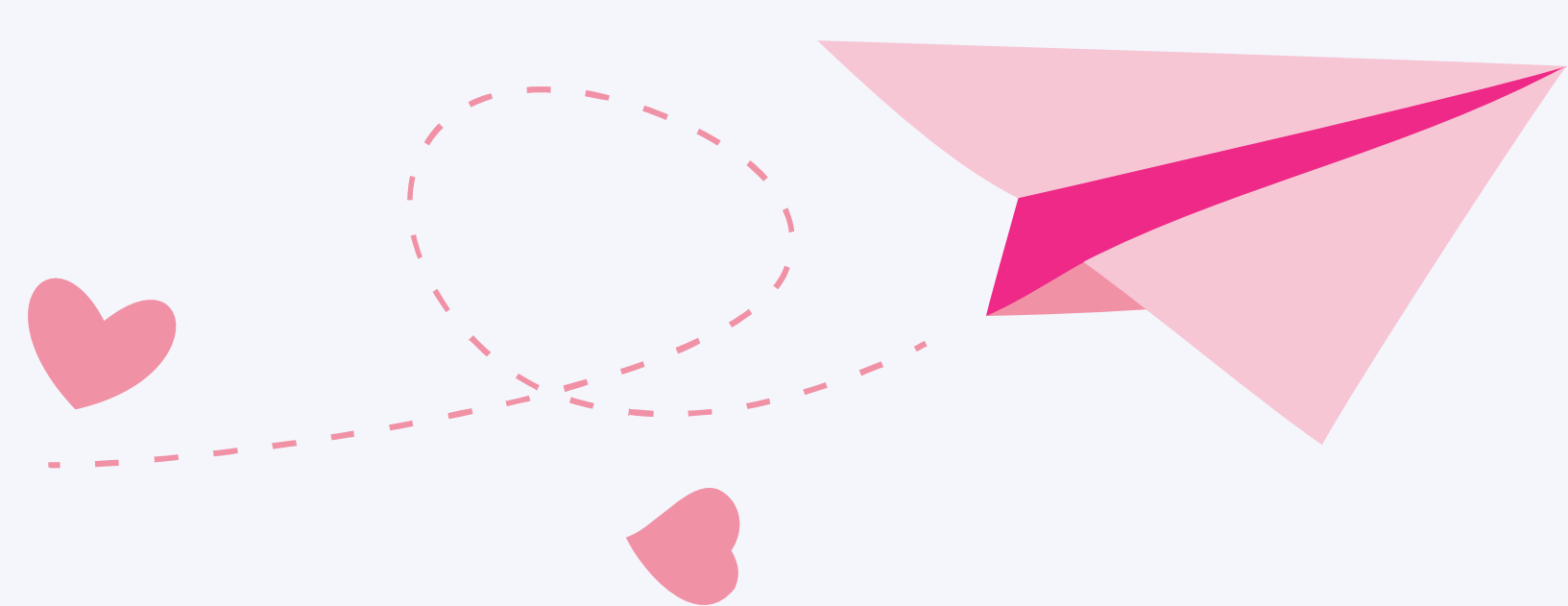
These conversations identified directions for strong, supportive organisational policy and good practice.

We wanted to explore:

- What have been the experiences and outcomes of NGOs' and collectives' efforts to be SISA?
- What can support the creation of safe spaces for acceptance and expression of diversity across work and life?

THIS DOCUMENT PRESENTS THE KEY POINTS THAT EMERGED THROUGH THESE ENGAGEMENTS. THE REPORT ITSELF HAS MORE DETAILS AND GIVES A GREATER CONTEXTUAL AND NUANCED PERSPECTIVE.

(DOWNLOAD THE FULL REPORT HERE)



WHAT IS SISA?

A SISA space is:



a positive,
accepting
space



one that allows for
both individual
growth and social
awareness



where one can
enjoy being, and
feeling good
about oneself.

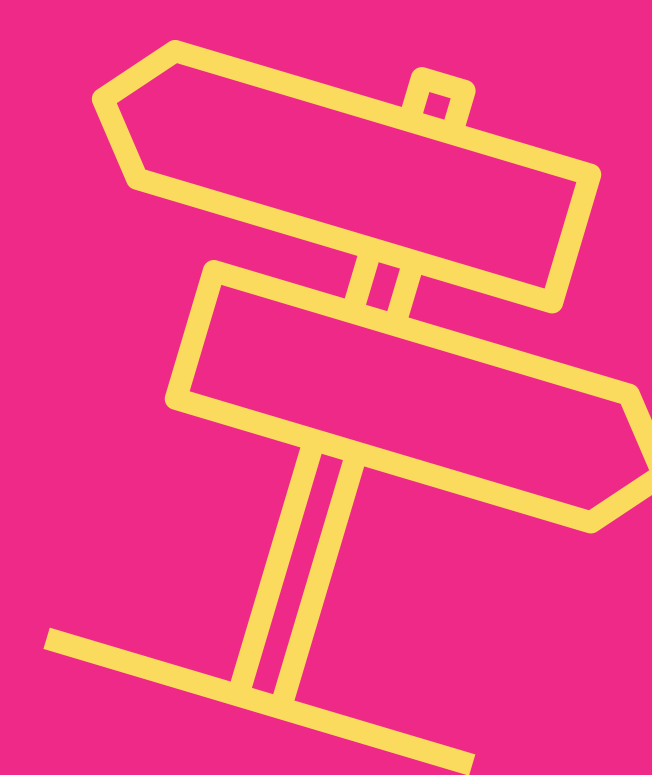
It is:



safe from
judgement, policing,
harassment and
violence



inclusive of
diverse identities
and of diverse
experiences



affirming and
accepting of one's
pursuit of pleasure
and one's choices

Integral to making a space SISA is acknowledging, accepting and learning to work with diversity across the board, and to find meaningful, relevant and dynamic ways to make all members of that space feel safe and included.

We used 4 intersecting themes to focus our conversations:

LGBTQIA+ rights; Disability; Psychosocial wellbeing, particularly stress and burnout prevention; and **Anti-discrimination**.

We understand and appreciate that conversations as well the themes could expand to other areas relating to safety, inclusion and affirmation of one's identity, including religion, caste, education, language, geographic location, and more.

THEMATIC AREAS

LGBTQIA+ RIGHTS

The queer community is not a homogenous group. Intersectionality results in diverse lived experiences.

DISABILITY

Implementing inclusion is more than obligatory compliance to legal provisions.

PSYCHOSOCIAL WELLBEING

Stress may lead to burnout. It stems from individual, institutional (e.g. workplace) and systemic sources. Self and collective care are crucial mitigatory elements.

ANTI-DISCRIMINATION

Discrimination manifests as unfair and unsupportive treatment on the basis of any / combination of multiple biases / factors.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

INCLUSION INITIATIVES DRIVEN BY STAFF FROM MARGINALISED COMMUNITIES

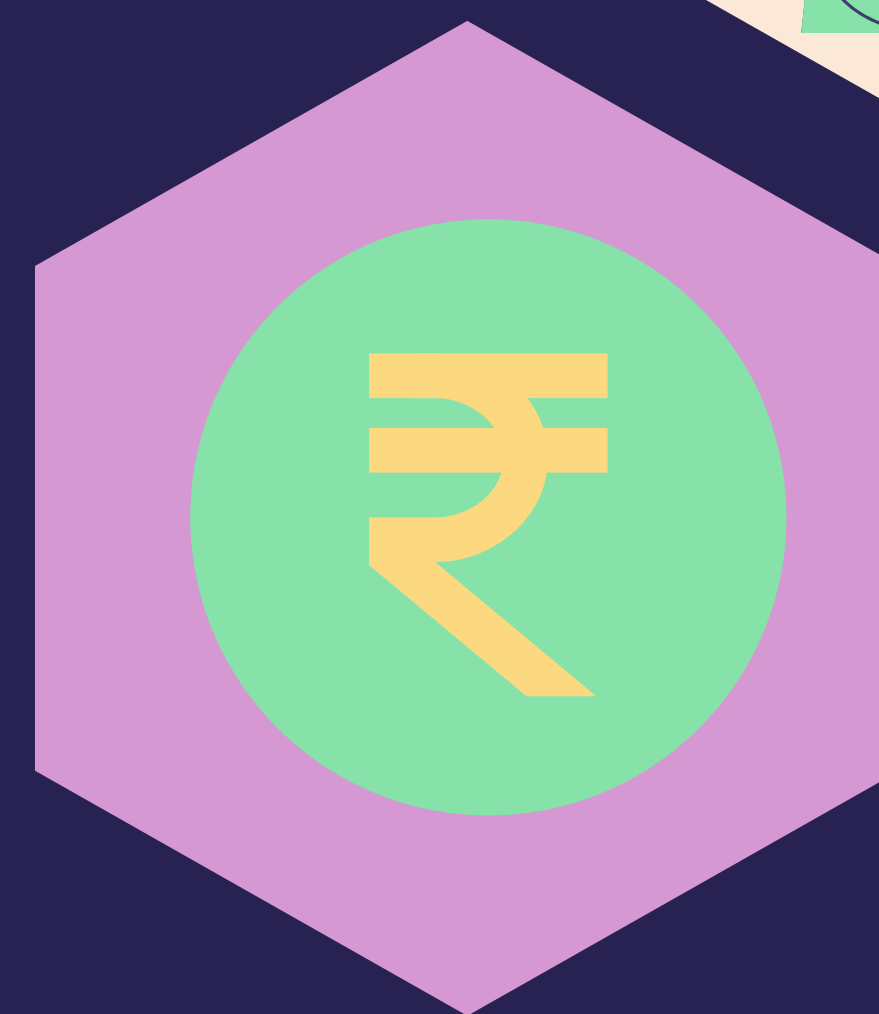
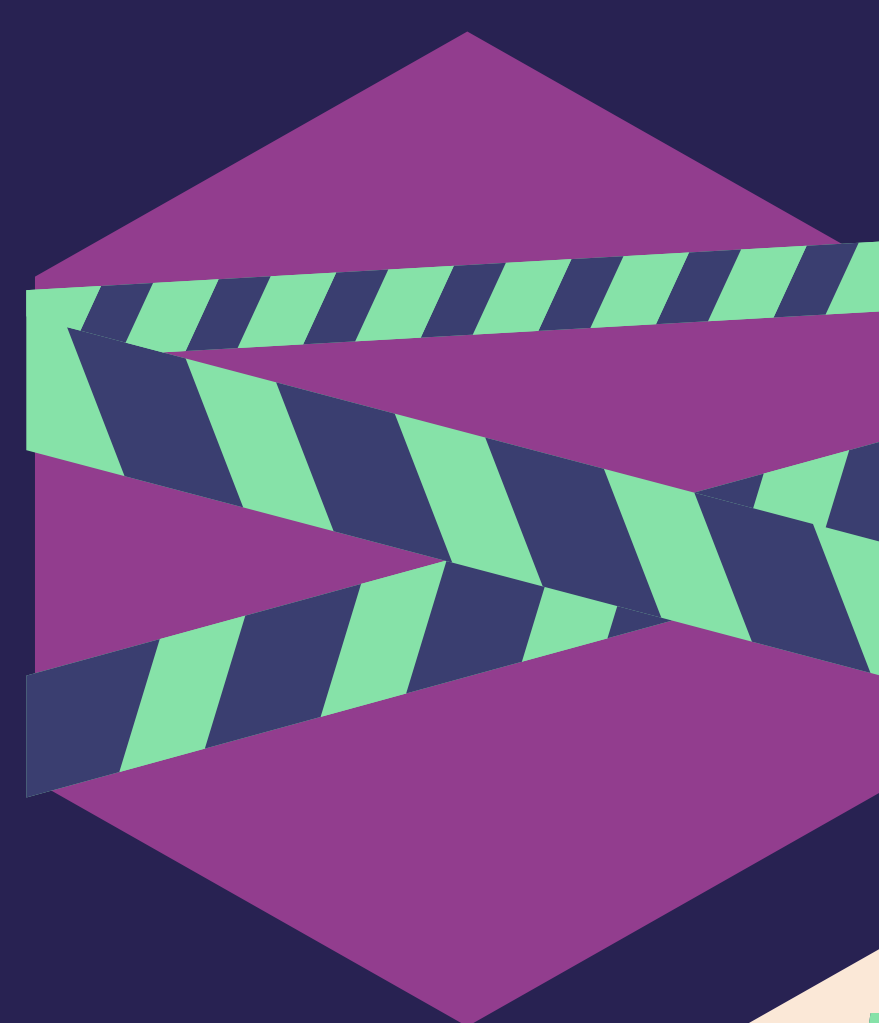
Organisations that are investing in inclusion and diversity with a more exploratory approach have direction and motivation from individuals at senior levels who have a personal stake in the theme.

ALIGNING WITH THE LAW

Laws provide a guide rail, and just the fact that they have to be complied with simplifies the 'investment' into policies, for e.g. on leaves, POSH, HR/admin, disability. But many organisations go beyond legal compliances by expanding their policies or practices based on their values and their communities.

COMMUNITY AND ORGANISATIONAL POLICY

Some organisations that are community-based take their cues for policy and practice from what community members want, supporting democratic and decentralised processes of work.



THE ROLES AND RESTRICTIONS OF POLICY

Policies tend to create a framework that restricts conversation and thought to the provisions in the policy. The felt need is to create an environment where factors affecting individuals may be safely brought up for discussion.

CREATING CULTURES OF CARE, SAFETY AND SOLIDARITY

Many organisations described practices and policies to foster team building, self-care and collective care, boundary-setting, and creating safe environments for teams that work in the field or online spaces.

BUDGET

In conversations on inclusion, funding limitations are also discussed. This is in the context of money for infrastructure, for trainings, for hiring from certain candidate groups which may require investments into further training once candidates from those groups are hired.

THEME-SPECIFIC REFLECTIONS

LGBTQIA+ RIGHTS

LIVED EXPERIENCES

A big part of creating SISA spaces is about bringing grassroots, lived experiences and voices to organisations.

PRACTICE

Organisational sensitivity and a supportive environment depend on its people and daily practices. Networking and connecting with those taking forward and providing professional support in this area of intersecting issues, marginalised identities and mental health for example, is integral to expanding the safety net.

“SENSITISATION,” BUT WITH SENSITIVITY

While sensitisation on LGBT*QIA+ issues is crucial, there are concerns about the ways in which sensitisation and awareness of inclusion and diversity tend to be approached, especially as the topic gains mainstream attention.

DISABILITY

HIRING STRATEGIES

Amongst other strategies, hiring processes need to actively include reaching out to persons with disabilities through collectives and communities. ‘Disability’ by itself may not be used as an umbrella term when implementing inclusion.

CAPACITY AND REASONABLE ACCOMMODATION

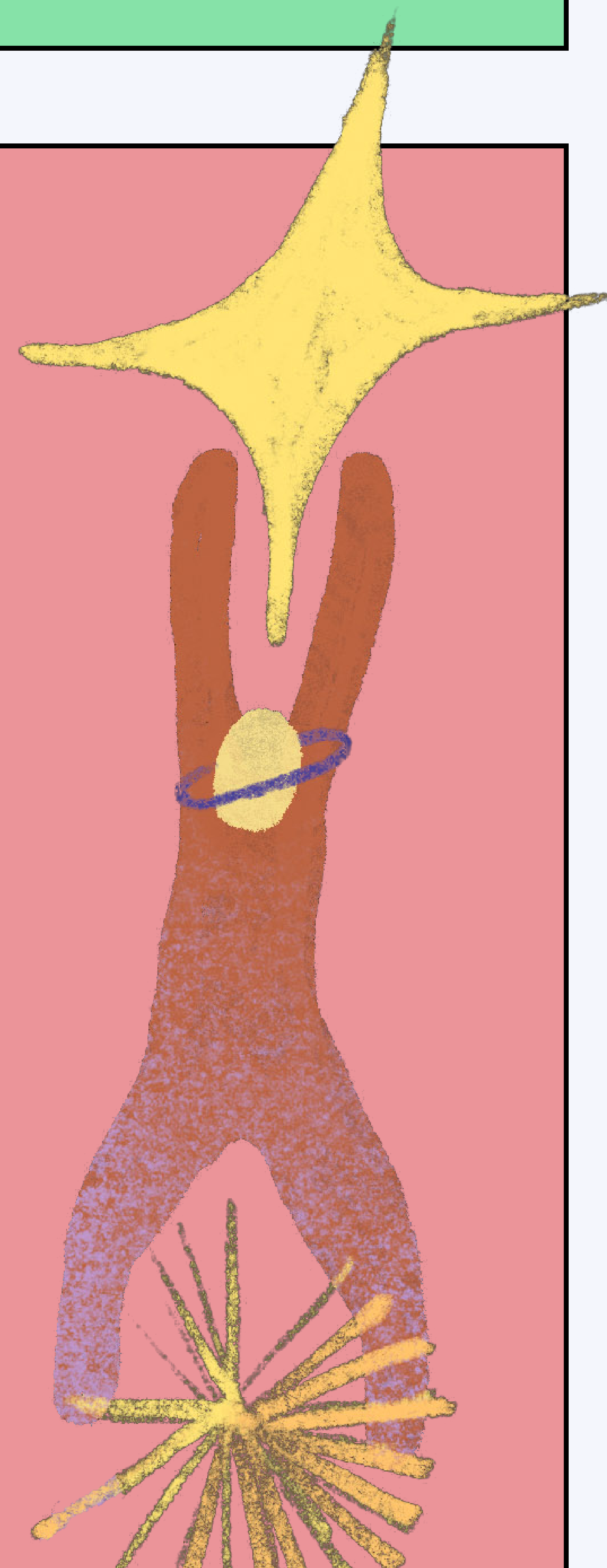
When a candidate with disability qualifies or matches to a job that requires support, it is important to understand and discuss the possible ways in which an organisation approaches this. Reasonable Accommodation is a learning process, and this process itself could be integrated into policy as the organisation experiments with and understands this better.

ACCESSIBILITY

Some organisations have invested in an accessibility audit of their offices and workspaces. They have followed through, with making physical changes as well as efforts to integrate different forms of access support, some less known and familiar than others.

ACCOUNTABILITY

The issue of accountability, and the potential for conflict between what is reasonable accommodation and productivity requirements, comes up often. Negotiating a path between being answerable to stakeholders and creating a supportive environment remains a constant challenge.



GENDER

There is a powerful gender dimension to reasonable accommodation and to accessibility. There are also politics around disclosure, and there is a need to understand disability beyond its construction as a medical condition. The focus needs to be on the support and flexibility of working conditions that the organisation can provide.

VALUING PEOPLE AND VOICES

An organisation's value system influences the creation of an environment and culture where people living with visible as well as invisible disabilities are able to speak up.

PSYCHOSOCIAL WELLBEING, MANAGING STRESS AND PREVENTING BURNOUT

POLICY PROVISIONS

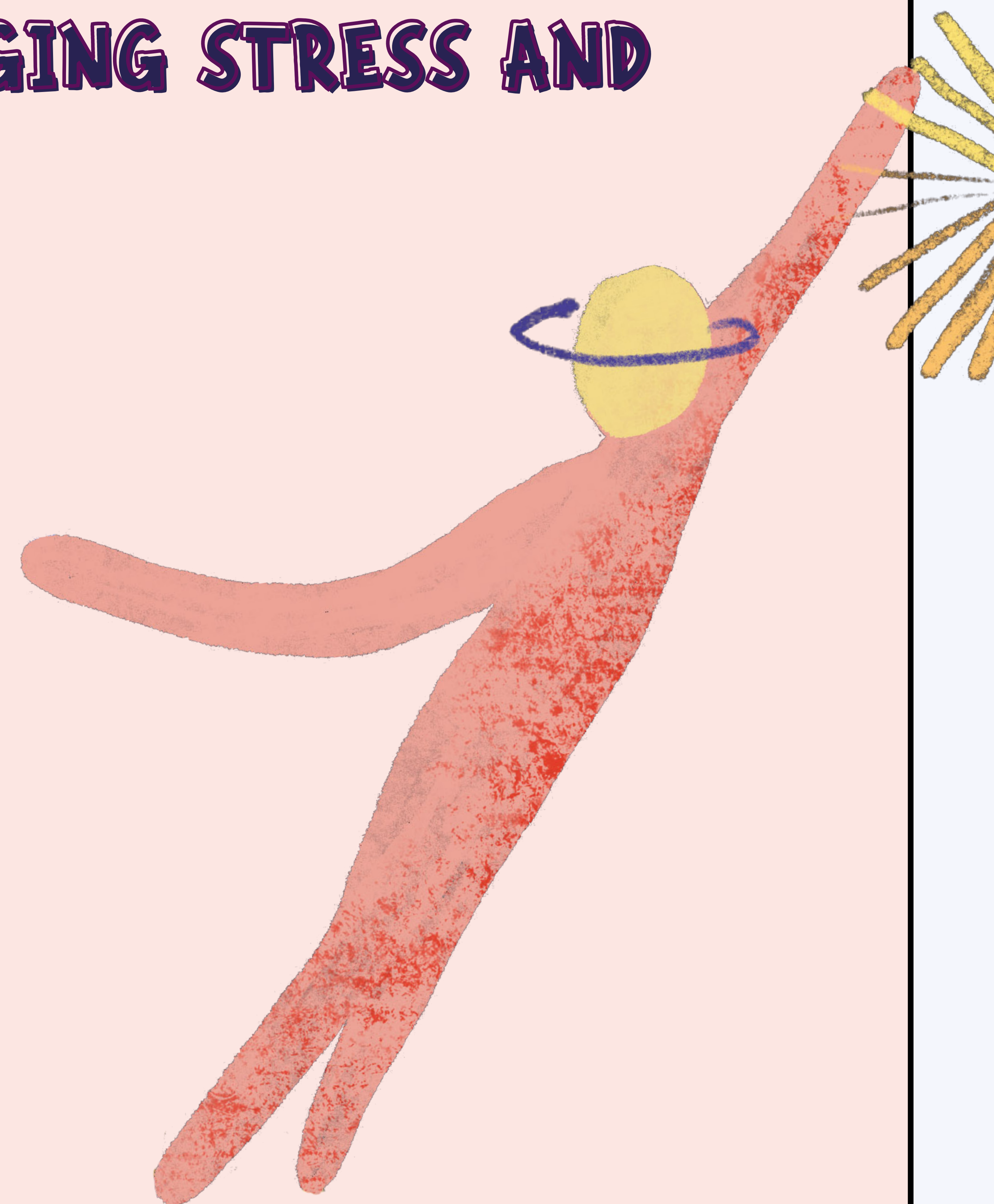
Many organisations have instituted some provisions in policy that approach wellbeing and mental health support to varying degrees.

THE ENGAGEMENT WITH MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health connects to all aspects of life experience and identity, yet engagement with this aspect at the level of policy and evolving practice does not adequately reflect this. It is important to understand the differences between mental health, mental illness, wellbeing. Practice must take these into account and understand that responses must be customised to requirement.

DIVERSITY + VARIETY

Wellbeing and mental health unfold in colourful variety at the level of the individual in relationship with themselves and others. It is crucial to understand, accept and learn to work with the fact that mental health and wellbeing are integral to who we are and how we experience life.



ANTI-DISCRIMINATION

DECONSTRUCTING FAMILIAR OFFICE CULTURE

Different organisations have taken steps to create a culture that is open, visibly inclusive and requires the deconstruction of familiar office-culture structures and practices reflecting social class and hierarchies.

HIRING POLICIES AND PRACTICES

Hiring policies and practices offer the opportunity for inclusion and many organisations are evolving their own processes and understanding of what this means. Some interviewees articulated caution around reactive hiring. Irrespective of the presence of persons from marginalised communities in the organisation, active policies towards inclusion and safety need to be in place for all.

INTERSECTIONALITY

Factors such as class, caste and gender identity must be considered in the context of impact. For example, impact on education, access to support, or socio-cultural exposure. Some immediate challenges include deciding performance evaluation measures and organisational support.



CHANGES BROUGHT ABOUT BY COVID-19 AND REMOTE WORK



FLEXIBLE TIMINGS

This took various forms, for example, sign in and sign out were dispensed with, official meetings were pre-planned and specific timings set aside for these. Almost every organisation mentioned mental health leave and flexibility of work hours.



STAFF MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING IN SHARPER FOCUS

There is a clear line between before and during the pandemic. Organisations spoke about aspects such as understanding that home is not a safe space for all (in the context of work from home) – so digital interactions and protocols need to be situation-specific; addressing digital fatigue; flexible leaves covering caregiving, bereavement etc.; morale and energy boosting initiatives; and self-care practices that included individual and organisational initiatives.

Other wellbeing, safety and inclusion related aspects – These included preparing COVID-19 safety guidelines for field teams, initiatives for team building, and checking in on each other, sign language being incorporated into online meetings, material and financial support for remote work, and so on.

OF INTERSECTIONALITY & EMERGING FRONTS

THEMATIC SENSITIVITIES

Organisations specifically working in any of these theme areas have a unique sensitivity to that theme. Theme areas not specifically in the work mandate tend to receive less organisational energy.

THE EMERGING FRONTS

Different and unfamiliar contexts have to be foregrounded. Just as there has traditionally been a steady focus on the management of organisation and company, factors that impact safety, inclusion and psychosocial experiences require a similar focus.

A NEW LANGUAGE

To integrate: mind and emotion, spirit, purpose, cooperation, support and acceptance of diversity. It is only when we look at the lived experience of marginalisation that we find the insights we need for rights-based work.

GROWTH, PRIORITIES & PRACTICES

Policies become increasingly important as small teams begin to increase in size. Training and sensitisation and learning exchange processes are key.



SISA SPACES MUST INCLUDE SPACE FOR SELF-REFLECTION AND CRITICAL THINKING

From the interviews and survey responses, we see that sometimes there are gaps and differences between the understanding and experiences of senior leadership, and mid or non-senior staff to many of the issues under consideration.

Different respondents from the same organisation with different responses to issues of discrimination and disrespect point to another challenge: that of simply not knowing – that you don't know how someone else is feeling, or what their experience has been.

Considering these points, as a survey respondent has said, “allowing space for criticism and self-reflection,” and as others have strongly emphasised, a continuing conversation, is crucial practice.

**Policy is neither the beginning nor the end, but evolves
with practice and is meant to guide practice.**



About TARSHI

TARSHI is an NGO based in New Delhi, India, working on sexuality, Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) and wellbeing since 1996. TARSHI believes that all people have the right to sexual wellbeing and to a self-affirming and enjoyable sexuality, irrespective of their age, gender identity, and disability and mental health status. Our perspective is sex-positive, non-heteronormative, pleasure-affirming, and not fear-based. TARSHI's work includes strengthening the capacity of practitioners in the field on sexuality, SRHR, sexuality education, self-care and collective care. TARSHI also provides information and resources on these topics for young people, service providers, parents, teachers. We also seek to create platforms for organisations and individuals in the development sector to discuss how to create workspaces that are safe, inclusive and self-affirming for all individuals, especially in the contexts of gender and sexuality, disability, psychosocial wellbeing, and anti-discrimination.

Visit www.tarshi.net to know more.