

Living Rotary's Values Through Diversity, Equity & Inclusion

An interview with Zainab Patel, Member – Rotary Club of Mumbai Inspire

• KALA SHRIDHAR

Zainab Patel, a member of Rotary Club of Mumbai Inspire, is one of India's most respected transgender rights leaders and a champion of corporate inclusion. A petitioner in the landmark *NALSA v. Union of India* case and former DEI leader with global corporations and the UN, Zainab's life is a mirror to the systemic barriers trans people face—and a testament to what dignity, visibility, and opportunity can achieve.

What does Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion mean to you in the context of Rotary?

Zainab Patel: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion are at the core of Rotary's mission. They are not just an initiative, they are woven into the principle of Service Above Self. To me, DEI means ensuring every Rotarian feels valued and included, every community we serve feels respected, and every project we undertake reflects the rich diversity of our world. It is about serving with dignity and ensuring no one is left behind, aligning with Rotary



International's vision of cultivating a diverse, equitable, and inclusive culture to create lasting change.

Why is DEI a priority for District 3141 right now?

Zainab: Mumbai is a city of incredible diversity but also stark inequality. Women entrepreneurs struggle for access to resources, people with disabilities face unseen barriers, LGBTQ+ individuals are often overlooked, and many communities remain marginalized. District Governor Dr. Manish Motwani has emphasized that DEI is central to our work, not an afterthought. With his leadership and the guidance of mentors like Dr. Indumati Gopinathan, we are advancing Rotary's commitment to value contributions from all backgrounds and foster equity in our communities.

What is your vision for DEI in the district?

Zainab: My vision is for every Rotary club in District 3141 to mirror the diversity of our society, with membership that reflects our communities and service projects that uplift the most marginalized. This means welcoming more women, youth, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people with disabilities into our clubs and leadership roles. It means designing initiatives that prioritize those furthest behind, as Rotary International encourages, to advance equity and create an inclusive culture where everyone feels valued. At my club, the Rotary Club of Mumbai Inspire, President Shanta Vallury Gandhi has shown that inclusion is a way of being, not just a project. I want this spirit to inspire the entire district.

Kala: What practical steps are you taking to advance this vision?

Zainab: We are taking intentional steps to embed DEI into our work. We encourage clubs to recruit members from diverse backgrounds to reflect our communities more fully. We are introducing

a DEI lens for projects, asking clubs to consider who else can benefit and whose voice is missing. We are hosting workshops and discussions for club leaders, focusing on practical tools to implement Rotary's DEI principles. We also plan to celebrate clubs that lead in inclusion, sharing their successes to inspire others across the district.

What challenges do you see in this journey?

Zainab: Change can be difficult. Rotary's traditions are strong, and it can feel easier to stay within familiar networks. Reaching out to diverse communities requires courage and openness. Another challenge is shifting mindsets. DEI is not about charity, it is about creating equitable opportunities for all, as Rotary International's DEI statement emphasizes. Overcoming these habits and perspectives is essential to building a truly inclusive organization.

How can individual Rotarians contribute to this effort?

Zainab: Inclusion begins with personal action. Every Rotarian can

reflect on who in their community is missing from Rotary and invite them to join. They can design projects to reach those often overlooked, ensuring diverse voices are heard. Simple choices, how we speak in meetings, welcome newcomers, or value different perspectives, build an inclusive culture. By taking ownership, Rotarians can make DEI a lived reality, aligning with Rotary's commitment to transparency and growth in its DEI journey.

What message would you like to leave with fellow Rotarians?

Zainab: DEI is about living Rotary's values authentically. It is not about meeting quotas, it is about creating a welcoming space where everyone feels they belong, as Rotary International's DEI vision underscores. I invite every Rotarian to examine their club, their projects, and their influence, and ask, whose voice is missing? That is where our work starts. With the leadership of District Governor Dr. Manish Motwani, we are turning Rotary's DEI commitment into action in District 3141.