

BY SUMUDU CHAMARA  
**Promoting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning plus (LGBTQ+) tourism in Sri Lanka presents both an opportunity and a challenge.**

On the one hand, embracing this growing global tourism segment can significantly boost the country's economy, enhance its international image, and promote diversity and inclusivity. On the other hand, deep-rooted cultural, religious, and social sensitivities must be acknowledged and respected.

Highlighting this, Lecturer in Business Economics at the University of Colombo (Management and Finance Faculty's Business Economics Department) and Ceylon Foundation for Economic Policy-Analysis (CFEP Sri Lanka) Chairperson and Director Pasan M. Wijayawardhana, who was a lead author of a related study published last year 'Sri Lanka's readiness to embrace LGBT tourism: Hindering factors', added that striking the right balance requires a well-thought-out framework that aligns global best practices with local realities.

During an interview with *The Daily Morning*, he noted that such an approach would not only attract LGBTQ+ travellers but also improve understanding, acceptance, and sustainable growth within Sri Lanka's tourism industry.

*Following are excerpts from the interview:*

**What is LGBTQ+ tourism? Does it simply mean having LGBT-friendly tourism or does it go beyond that?**

When talking about LGBT tourism, some people think it's a new field of tourism, but it isn't. It was already discussed in 2010 to 2012. What's happening now with LGBT tourism is the destination, or host country, will create an LGBT-friendly environment, or an LGBT-friendly tourist destination, for foreigners and locals belonging to the LGBT community where they can visit a friendly background in the host country or destination.

The two major benefits from this are the safety and acceptance of LGBT travellers. Especially with reference to the global South, including Sri Lanka, where the LGBT community is already a marginalised group and have reasons to worry about their safety. If a host destination can ensure their safety, that is one of the biggest advantages of LGBT tourism. When they arrive in Sri Lanka or any other host destination, if they receive a warm welcome without discrimination or prejudice they feel accepted. Overall, LGBT tourism will create an LGBT-friendly environment for LGBT travellers, ensuring their safety and acceptance, or to put it simply, inclusiveness.

● **Promotes tourism acceptance for LGBT travellers**

● **LGBT tourism academic researcher Pasan M. Wijayawardhana explains that such tourists are high spending, frequent trip takers due to having a dual income and being unencumbered by children**

tourism means promoting being LGBT, or promoting tourism for LGBT travellers? My answer to this particular question is the focus of LGBT tourism is promoting tourism for LGBT travellers.

From my perception and experience, we cannot influence someone to be an LGBT or a heterosexual person. Environmental factors, advertisements or films might have a small impact on a person's nature, but don't have much influence in converting to LGBT. There are arguments that claim a heterosexual person can convert to a homosexual through visuals like an advertisement, a film or something similar. But, as per my understanding, it is a process of genetics and environmental influence.

Based on the same argument, one can say that heterosexual films or advertisements can influence homosexual persons to be heterosexuals. That does not happen. LGBT-related advertisements, films or such things can have a small impact. I am not saying there's no impact but it's insignificant.

LGBT tourism is widely practiced in the Western world. I'm not saying that whatever is practiced in the Western world should be accepted by us as well. We have our own culture, tradition, and religion. Trying to protect the human rights (HR) of this marginalised community within these boundaries is the best that we can do.

I am not recommending adoption of Western world practices that destroy our culture or tradition. Nightlife and nightclubs are a part of LGBT tourism. Personally, I don't think it's suitable for a country like Sri Lanka, because it creates a different dimension. Prostitution can grow even among homosexuals, creating many problems in terms of health issues as well. We should have a strong legal framework, and a traditional and cultural framework if we are to execute LGBT tourism within the country.

**How large is the global LGBT tourism market, and what is the current international situation or trend?**

When talking about the global tourism market, around 6% is covered by LGBT tourism. There are a lot of segments of tourism including adventure tourism, food tourism, cultural tourism, scenic tourism, and religious tourism. LGBT tourism is one of the growing fields. It's part of the tourism industry covering 6% of the global tourism market.

In 2018, before the Covid-19 pandemic, the world had earned \$ 218 billion only from LGBT tourism. The expected global revenue by 2030 from LGBT tourism is \$ 568.5 billion which is more than double this amount. This is the current global situation where certain countries are leading in this industry.

LGBT tourism is not magic to the Western world. There is a global tracker which analyses the experiences or behaviours of gay travellers. That is called the 'Gay Traveller Index', which was introduced in 2012. Although it



CFEP Sri Lanka Chairperson and Director Pasan M. Wijayawardhana



*Getting funds for research is difficult at times. Even though it's something that should be discussed, because of social stigma, social conflict and social arguments, obtaining funding for research projects is challenging.*

**LGBT TOURISM**

# Pink Dollar can boost economy

was limited to gay persons, later, it explored the travelling behaviours of all tourists belonging to the LGBT community.

According to its findings, this year, the countries that are open for LGBT tourism on a mega scale include Canada, Iceland, Malta, Portugal, and Spain. Most of these countries are developed ones, and even developed countries have taken very progressive steps to protect HR and open an LGBT-friendly framework for everyone. Some countries like Russia, Afghanistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen are at the bottom in terms of promoting LGBT tourism.

Take Afghanistan for example. It is a country with the lowest happiness in terms of the 'Happiness Index'. Such countries don't create any friendly environment for LGBT travellers.

**What can the authorities do differently to address or manage the backlash surrounding LGBT-related tourism**

**initiatives, and also to support LGBT tourism?**

This kind of backlash is not only common to Sri Lanka, it's a general attitude which is quite common. Social awareness is very important to avoid or mitigate this backlash, and we can start this from the education system. When sex education comes into the syllabus, even small kids will know that there is a gender called male, gender called female, and also a gender identity called non-binary, and that it is natural. Then, from the kids' level, they will understand and start to respect others and other identities. That does not mean that when these are taught in school, heterosexual students turn into homosexuals or vice versa. We can create an environment of respect, and we can start it from the education system.

When it comes to the corporate sector, or those providing services to foreigners, we can provide training for the workforce or

their staff on how to respect this community, how to collaborate with them, and what their needs are. For example, we don't have gender-neutral washroom facilities in most places. When a transgender tourist comes to a hotel where there are no such washrooms, they will face issues. Those are things that need to be addressed by Sri Lanka if we are going to create a healthy environment for LGBT travellers.

The most important thing is the legal framework. Our law must be very supportive to the LGBT community as well as our tradition. Sometimes, when showing respect to HR and inclusiveness, certain unnecessary people might come into Sri Lanka and cultivate bad cultures. It does not matter whether that person is a homosexual or a heterosexual. If they are promoting prostitution or some other detrimental industries within the country, that is something that we should raise a voice against.

We should not promote the bad

side of LGBT tourism and stick instead to its good side in order to protect our culture and future generation from unnecessary practices that could come with the LGBT and inclusivity labels. We should immediately amend our laws, and have a good, strong legal framework for that particular purpose.

**In your opinion, how LGBT-friendly is Sri Lanka's tourism sector at present?**

At present, we don't have a very big trend to talk about. But, if there is a trend, there will be advantages according to the global situation.

**How can Sri Lanka benefit from LGBT tourism?**

To look at why we should target LGBT travellers as a part of the country's tourism sector, we should talk about the global picture. LGBT travellers are generally recognised as more frequent trip takers. Most of the time, LGBT travellers don't have kids, have more time to earn, and have a good income. Most LGBT travellers have two income sources at the minimum. That is why we call them 'Dual Income Earners with No Kids (dual income, no kids, or DINK)', and this concept is known as 'DINK'.

When there are no kids, they take frequent trips. Secondly, since they have a dual income, they have a higher income, resulting in higher average spending per trip. Therefore, we can consider the LGBT community as 'Pink Dollar' bringers. The LGBT community became a target market because of these reasons. It is definitely a good market to focus on, but, with a good legally, culturally, and educationally sound framework.



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**What do you think about the current state of research and academic work on LGBT tourism in Sri Lanka?**

I think that it is very poor at the moment. One of the major problems that I personally saw when I conducted research in this area was that people started to look at me as part of the LGBT community although I am not. There is discrimination and marginalisation against various groups. When talking about marginalised gender groups, many researchers fear there will be a backlash with all these labels.

Secondly, getting funds for research is difficult at times. Even though it's something that should be discussed, because of social stigma, social conflict and social arguments, obtaining funding for research projects is challenging.

At the same time, there is no data available in the Sri Lankan context with regard to the LGBT community. We don't know the population of the LGBT community, and how many LGBT people are in the workforce. We don't have original, readily available data. If there is no secondary data, we should go for primary data. Primary data means that we have to conduct surveys; we have to go to the field and collect data from scratch. To do that, we have to meet LGBT people. But, many LGBT people are not ready to come out of the closet. Hence, data collection is difficult when conducting this kind of research.

*The views and opinions expressed in this column are those of the author, and do not necessarily reflect those of this publication*

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*Backlash at the inception is common and not a problem or attitude prevailing only in SL. Social awareness is very important to avoid or mitigate this backlash, and can be introduced to the education system. When sex education comes into the syllabus, even small kids will know that there is a gender called male, gender called female, and also a gender identity called non-binary, and that it is natural. Then, from the kids' level, they will understand and start to respect others and other identities. We can create a respecting environment*

**Many people take issue with the word 'promotion'. Does LGBT tourism mean promoting being LGBT, or promoting tourism for LGBT travellers? How is this distinction recognised globally, and what are its main components?**

Many people make an issue when using the word 'promotion'. The question is whether LGBT