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Transgender People from India Reach out to Massachusetts through Quilting

Members of the transgender and gay community in India are appealing for an end to discrimination through a spectacular quilt.



***Henna Pride* on display at Lowell**

Called *Henna Pride*, the quilt carries striking images of long pale hands, painted with henna, that reach up out of the gloom (photo left). The quilt went on display recently for the first time at the New England Quilt Museum in Lowell, Massachusetts, alongside advocacy quilts from Bangladesh, the Congo, Lithuania, Nepal, India, Kenya, and Belize.

The hands on *Henna Pride* were painted by artists from the LGBTI community in Gujarat, India, under the auspices of the [Vikalp Women's Group](#), a partner of [The Advocacy Project \(AP\)](#). [Gisele Bolton](#), a Peace Fellow, helped the artists in India. The quilt was assembled in Maryland by quilters Nancy Evans and John Anderson.

The Lowell exhibition features around 30 quilts on loan from AP and [Quilt for Change](#), a nonprofit that encourages American quilters to produce artistic quilts around development issues. Allison Wilbur, the founder of Quilt for Change and an expert quilter, also assembled two of the AP quilts on display. Allison is one of 52 American quilters who have worked on quilts with AP.

The New England Quilt Museum is at the heart of cultural life in Lowell and a reminder of

Lowell's past as a textile town, which makes it a fitting venue for an exhibition of advocacy quilts. Around 40 people attended the opening on March 21, including business leaders and quilters.

"People respond to quilts. They pull you in and they are non-threatening, but at the same time you are telling a story that is very sad. It's an impressive exhibition," said Nora Burchfield, Executive Director of the Museum.

Henna Pride, from India, carries a strong but subtle message from a community that lives in the shadows. The henna hands were painted for the Vikalp Women's Group by several gay, transgender and tribal artists who have sought solace at Vikalp.

They were led by Mukesh, a gay man who said he lives a "double life" as a married man. Mukesh is also much in demand at weddings, where he paints henna designs on the palms, wrists and feet of newly-weds. Gopi, another gay artist, was able to resist pressure from his family to marry until he too achieved local fame as an artist.

Daksha, a third member of the painting team, left her husband after years of abuse to work for Vikalp's highly successful tribal women's court at Tilakwada, Gujarat state. The court is run by women judges and adjudicates on disputes that affect marginalized women. Transgender women are particularly vulnerable to violence and exclusion.



At work on *Henna Pride* in India



Allison Wilbur (left) from Quilts for Change and Iain Guest from AP at the opening of the Lowell exhibition.

[click here.](#)

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The impact of *Henna Pride* comes from the way the hands are displayed - a design decision that was left to the quilters, Nancy Evans and John Anderson. Nancy has helped to assemble other AP quilts, by survivors of the Vietnam War, sexual violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo and uterine prolapse in Nepal.

Quilters in the US are currently assembling squares made by relatives of the disappeared in Peru and survivors of armed sexual violence in Mali. AP hopes to display these quilts by the summer.

- The Lowell exhibition runs until May 3. For more details [click here](#).
- For more on the Lowell exhibition