

## Volume 13: May 2023



### From the Editor's Desk

The volume 13 of Tana Bana, the newsletter of Population First, focuses on Theatre as a means to bring about transformative change. We feature a few pioneers who effectively use theatre to bring about social change.

Theatre for social change utilises performances to raise awareness and promote positive societal transformations. Through thought-provoking plays, it addresses critical issues like inequality, injustice, and discrimination, fostering audience empathy and understanding. Presenting real-world challenges on stage, it encourages dialogue and collective action. This transformative art form empowers individuals to challenge societal norms, question social prejudices, and introspect on their internalised biases. Theatre for social change, thus, catalyses activism and inspires individuals to become agents of positive change.

This volume of Tana Bana brings together varied efforts and perspectives on Theatre for Social Change. It features write-ups by Preeti Das, Yogesh Pawar and Dolly Thakore and a candid interview with Manjul Bhardwaj.

I hope you enjoy reading it. I look forward to your feedback.

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# Theatre for Social Change

*Preeti Das is a Stand-up comedian. Storyteller. Academician. Amma.  
Co- founder of Mahila Manch and  
Director of Karnavati Center of Experiential and Immersive Learning.*

*Gujarat's first woman stand-up comedian, Preeti Das, has broken many glass ceilings. She shares with the readers why she thinks "theatre is a space for truth, vulnerability, starting conversation, empathy and respecting diversity—the most powerful space for bringing change."*

A small group of children in the age group of 4 to 10 years. Chatty, full of energy, expressions, and bursting with stories as participants in a summer workshop in a cosy venue in Ahmedabad.

The task given to them is to make faces/expressions of their parents that they remember. One child makes an angry face, one makes a happy face, one stares in anger as if her eyes will pop out, and one puts her hand on the cheeks and pretends to cry very loudly.

As the workshop facilitator, I asked, "Is that your expression when someone hits you?"

The 5-year-old looked at me and, without batting an eyelid, said, "No, aunty, it is not my expression. It is my mother's expression when dad hits her."

I felt helpless and ended the day by telling the children that violence was not right.

What stayed with me was how easily the child could communicate without words about what she was witnessing.

I tried to reach out to the mother and asked if she needed help or anyone to talk to, but like most upper-middle-class families, the domestic abuse was not acknowledged.



*"A minor incident that only underscores what I believe in – theatre is a space for truth, vulnerability, starting conversation, empathy and respecting diversity—the most powerful space for bringing change. "*

As a stand-up comedian who decided to use humour for social change, I must admit that it has not been an easy journey. Stand-up comedy is a form of theatre/performance that is only liked by some. And to top it, the general acceptance level for women with a sense of humour and sarcasm is still between a low and a moderate. Combining applied theatre with the existing ecosystem took much work, but it started showing results slowly.

As the co-founder of an all-woman stand-up comedy collective based in Ahmedabad called Mahila Manch, I put together a comedy show in which one of the performers was an ASHA didi (Accredited Social Health Activist). After sitting with her for a few hours and working on a few aspects of the performance- what she did on stage was inspiring and trailblazing. She described her long working hours, her low haemoglobin count despite talking about it to a woman, how many times she has been harassed, her fight for better pay and an animated description of how it is difficult for a woman to distribute condoms in semi-urban areas.

*"As a stand-up comedian who decided to use humour for social change, I must admit that it has not been an easy journey."*

*"From the proscenium to the streets, cafes and village squares- theatre aims to bring change and challenge power in the boldest manner possible."*

The audience was a mix of people from various classes and communities. There were other ASHAs also in the audience. The performance was not just brilliant, but it started a small change. More of the ASHA activists came together and started sharing the stories. The young urban new generation who only knew them as "polio drop people" did not know how to react to what they heard and saw.

A similar show was curated with the women bootleggers of Ahmedabad (do not forget that we are officially a dry state), with members of the LGBTQIA+ community, with survivors of domestic violence – to name a few.

From the proscenium to the streets, cafes and village squares- theatre aims to bring change and challenge power in the boldest manner possible. The methods and spaces are changing, but the idea and ideology remain intact.

Theatre in Education features differing approaches to children of different ages. For elementary school children, it is geared more towards play for play's sake than performance for an audience. Developmental Drama practitioner and theorist Brian Way suggests that this style is meant "to develop people, not drama."

Theatre in Health Education became popular during the global AIDS/HIV crisis of the 1980s and 1990s. Traditional methods of spreading information about the danger of unsafe sex were ineffectual in many cases (particularly in parts of the world where the concept was counter-cultural), and theatre was found to be an effective strategy in combatting the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Today such forms address taboo issues – from women’s health to sexuality, child abuse, mental health, sexual pleasure, and many more.

A small production/play called “Voh Ladkiyon Wala Natak: Speaks about a host of taboos” (written by a 23-year-old girl named Chaitali Das), which is gaining popularity in Ahmedabad (it has completed nine shows in less than a year), presents stories of women in various stages of life and speaks about a host of taboos around health, violence and patriarchy. The non-linear style of performance and breaking the fourth wall ensures that the audience also becomes a part of the 75-minute play.

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The play sees many “repeat audiences” coming with their mothers, fathers, and mothers-in-law, sons and daughters. When asked why? most said, “This is the best way to start a conversation around taboo topics.” For many audiences, the stories are an extension of themselves and their lives. The play evolves with every show and ensures the script incorporates different taboos based on audience reactions and input. While there is growth in female-centric storytelling, much work must be done. Women-centric plays, performances, and scripts are essential as they provide insights into women’s issues in more authentic depictions. Women writing male characters is also important as it changes the narrative in many ways.

While pioneers in theatre for change like Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad, Safdar Hashmi, Utpal Dutt, Mallika Taneja, and Tripurari Sharma have set the canvas- there are new voices, especially in the small towns that are working towards using theatre for change, empowerment, equality and advocacy.

As a believer and passionate practitioner of theatre for change, the form continues to ignite minds and stir souls while the styles and spaces have changed.

# Theatre of Relevance and Social Transformation

*Mr Manjul Bhardwaj, is the founder of the Experimental Theatre Foundation. He is an actor, director, writer, facilitator and initiator in theatre who uses theatre to bring about social change. He speaks to Dr Sharada about the Theatre of Relevance and how it is redefining the purpose of theatre as a means to bring about transformational change.*

### Excerpts from the interview:

**Dr Sharada:** How is Theatre of Relevance different from theatre as ordinary people understand it?

**Manjul Bhardwaj:** Theatre of Relevance is a holistic and comprehensive philosophy of Theatre. It breaks the divisive conspiracy of Capitalists and Communists who either use theatre for entertainment or a cause. The world is caged in this perception of Theatre for entertainment or cause.

Theatre of Relevance has broken this jinx and created a perception of Theatre as an inclusive art for Human emancipation. As per Theatre of Relevance, Theatre is a political process for humanity, justice & peace. But in the world, four types of Theatre are practised 1.

Capitalists mainly support theatre for Entertainment. 2. For propaganda practised by the communists, 3. Government-sponsored theatre, which is official propaganda in the name of culture. 4. Theatre of Relevance is people's centric movement for humanistic liberation! Theatre is merely a medium perceived by educated people, but theatre of relevance is a complete human philosophy. It is an ART: A romance with Truth!

**Dr Sharada:** You used street theatre to work on various issues. How impactful is street theatre in influencing people or furthering causes?

**Manjul Bharadwaj:** Street theatre is a protest theatre. It is a potent form of theatre which is accessible to the masses. But it is a very challenging art form. Mostly Street theatre is used for propaganda by political outfits, which are an extension of political slogans or, nowadays, by NGOs which are just superficial attempts to generate awareness of critical people's issues.





Theatre of Relevance performs street theatre keeping the art at its core but protest in form. We question all oppressors with passion, whether government, political forces, societal, religious or cultural hegemony. We properly research the subject and rehearse the play with full passion. We engage the audience in the play; at times audience becomes our performers. Street theatre is very impactful. After the Babri mosque demolition, Mumbai was engulfed in communal riots. Our performers performed 'Door Se Kisi Ne Aawaz Di' in riot-affected areas, bringing normalcy, peace, and restored faith in each other. Likewise, we have numerous stories about our street play performances. Street plays are the oppressed's last resort, requiring honesty, passion and artistic commitment, which could sometimes be life-threatening.

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**Dr Sharada:** You also have written and produced many stage plays on various issues. How are your plays different from other's plays?

**Manjul Bharadwaj:** We don't use typical sets, props or elusive costumes. We use the emptiness of the stage to facilitate the audience's imagination to its fullest. Our performers are out of the box, very passionate, honest and mad for art. Real artists who romance Truth and their mission in life is ART. We have dialogue before & after the show with the

audience. Our performers live together in jungles. Connect with nature. Prepare their bodies as props and can shape their bodies as per the characters of the play. Create music from unusual matter or objects like wood, stones, and utensils with professional excellence and beyond, which touches the audience's soul. Our subjects are relevant and cognitive or, at times, philosophical, so it requires a unique class of performers who believe in art as a process of emancipation. For us, our stage performances are not showbiz but a soul-stirring experience. Theatre is an action of colours. Each colour has a philosophy, like white for peace, red for love etc. While writing the play, I evolve the subject around the colours of life. Our performers decode these philosophies embedded in the plays. We creatively use the lights on stage.

Thankfully, we have an excellent team of performers, primarily girls, who have changed the perception of theatre from entertainment to emancipation. Our plays also changed the typical role for women to lure men or a sas – bahu kind of saga to a liberator who evolves as a creator!

For us, theatre is Revolution. Revolution is not bloodshed caused by power mongers but a change in thought. Theatre of Relevance has been changing the mindsets of the masses since 1992!

# 21 years of driving social change with The Vagina Monologues

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*Yogesh Pawar is a well-known journalist in Mumbai media circles and has over 25 years of experience as a print, web, and TV Journalist. He has been watching the play, The Vagina Monologues, which broke and challenged many taboos about women's bodies and sexuality for many years. He provides us with a birds-eye view of its origins, evolution and impact in India.*

When world-renowned activist-author Mona Eltahawy speaks of “the slap on the face of patriarchy,” she could well be speaking of Eve Ensler’s 27-year-old episodic play *The Vagina Monologues* (TVM), which began its journey in New York, US and has since grown into a global movement of sorts. Through the eyes of women of various ages, races, sexualities, and other demographics, TVM explores consensual/nonconsensual sexual experiences, body image, genital mutilation, direct /indirect encounters with reproduction, vaginal care, menstrual periods, prostitution, among other topics.

Following interviews with over 200 women about their perspectives on sex, relationships, and violence against women, Eve Ensler wrote TVM in 1996. Casual conversations with Ensler’s friends led to anecdotes they’d heard from others. Ensler explained that her focus on vaginas stemmed from “growing up in a violent society.” Underlining how women's empowerment is inextricably linked to their sexuality, she had admitted being concerned with women being violated and raped, and incest.”

Actor-activist Dolly Thakore remembers being stunned by Ensler’s namesake book. “Gripping, powerful, and universal at once, I remember writing a half-page review for the *Sunday Observer*,” she recalled. “After my review, I was keen to lay hands on the actual script of the American adaptation.”

Since Goldie Hawn, hosted by the late socialite Parmeshwar Godrej in Mumbai, was part of the American cast, Thakore pursued that route to no avail.



Two years later, veteran theatre person Mahabanoo Kotwal arrived at her doorstep with the script and Ensler's blessings. "While glad to be part of TVM, I said we should have others. That's how Ankita Akerkar, Jayati Bhatia, Sonali Sachdev, and Mona Ambegaonkar became a part of our Indianised TVM."

Kotwal who has helmed TVM's Indian avatar, points out how TVM's thundering response from the beginning was evidence that it is "a driver of social change." She admits to trepidation about a patriarchal push-back in the beginning. "But even hardcore conservatives who watched seemed hooked by its message. We've taken the play across India to Tier 2 towns and even Sri Lanka. Audiences have been generous in their love and affection." She laments how some of the "misinformed and overzealous" have denied TVM venues for staging. "This has happened at Sophia's and at St Andrew's too. They seem to have a problem with the name of the play. But Ensler is categorical that the name will not be changed. I both see her reason and respect it."



***"But even hardcore conservatives who watched seemed hooked by its message".***

Actor-activist Mona Ambegaonkar, who has been part of TVM for several years, remembers a show after which a young lady confided about being sexually abused as a child. "At another show, a woman told me of marital rape and rape by her spouse's friend." She also recalls a group of gynaecologists at a show who said, "This should be mandatory viewing for all doctors." She credits these responses to Ensler's powerful writing.

She explains why TVM resonates with women. "Women are still viewed, primarily, as baby-making machines and their vaginas as the seat of the family honour. This is a lived reality for most women. As long as this ugly social reality doesn't change, we will need a TVM."



*She laments how Indian women still don't have agency over what they will wear, study or do - even as adults. "For example, in my years of using performing arts for outreach work, I've yet to come across women who come out and embrace their sexual identity publicly. The only ones doing that are already empowered and come from relatively privileged backgrounds. Except for trans-persons, most lesbian or bisexual women stay under the radar, where they feel safe."*

*While admitting that TVM might not address all the issues, she believes women have to be empowered to demand and wrest, from society and the legal structure of the place they live in, not just their right to embrace their sexual identity and reproductive independence freely but also their right to equal opportunity in all fields - education, employment, entrepreneurship, technology, business, sports, endorsements, entertainment, media etc. - and, most importantly, they must be paid the same as men in all these fields.*

*"Financial independence and being able to stand on the same footing as men in remuneration and purchasing power is the only way forward."*

*While none of the TVM team has had any hostile reactions firsthand, Ambegaonkar has heard that some men in the audience make weird remarks. "That shows they feel threatened," she says, adding, "But no one has come up to us to say anything!" She smiles, "Once I've done the Coochie Snorcher/Lesbian experience monologue and ended with the Mother piece, not many men can look me in the eyes without flinching."*

*One can see why Charles Isherwood of The New York Times has called TVM "probably the most important piece of political theatre!"*

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# LAADLI – WOMEN IN THEATRE

*Dolly Thakore is a well-known Television Newscaster, Casting Director, Columnist, Stage and Film Actor. These are some of the hats that she wears, among many others. Here, she writes about some fantastic women in Theatre whose contributions are invaluable.*

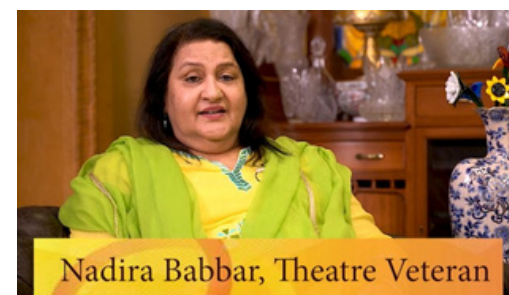
ON THE 6TH OF JULY, we celebrated M.S. SATHYU'S 94TH BIRTHDAY at Bhavan's College, and the room was full of brilliant women writers, directors, and actors of varying ages. It was an IPTA – Indian People's Theatre Association – a celebration of the man who gave us the film GARAM HAVA in 1973 – based on the partition of India, and for which he was awarded the Padma Shri in 1975; and was nominated for the CANNES FILM FESTIVAL: GOLDEN PALM in 1974.

And the announcement of this celebration brought in faces that one has revered as actresses on stage for decades.



Sitting right in front of me was Sarita Joshi, whose SAKUBAI, written by Nadira Zaheer Babbar, brought in packed houses and brought the house down in a simple rib-tickling comedy -- the story touches on the life and issues of Shakuntala, aka Sakubai, the common yet uncommon strong woman who puts on a brave face despite every trouble that comes her way, and tells the tale of all those women who play an indispensable part in our daily lives. Nadira romanticised the house help in Sakubai.

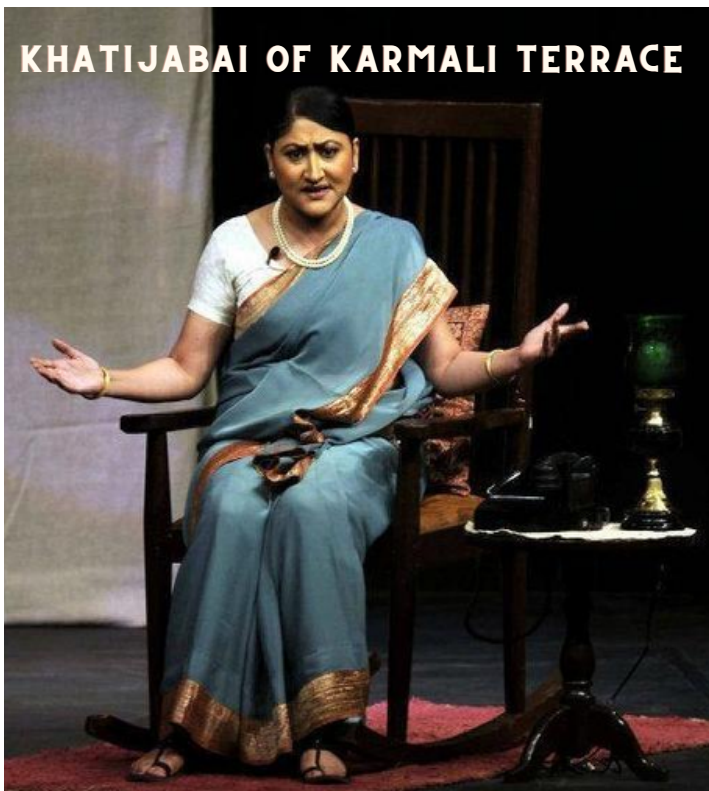
And when I turned around, there was Nadira surrounded by her faithful protege Hanif Patni of Ekjute Theatre Group, attentive to every need of this founder of the most influential and iconic theatre group of India....and a remarkable actress who captures the elegance and poise and continues to thrill us with her aristocratic stature as BEGUM JAAN.



And JYOTI DOGRE is known for One Night with the King, Satya, and Gulaal. Her latest play MAAS deals with the politics of flab in female bodies. MAAS served society's gaze on a fat, female, middle-aged body in the most entertaining and disturbing ways.

Her practice involves making devised pieces which are not narrative or text-based. She has been developing, directing and performing original works strongly invested in the body, exploring physical and vocal imagery with minimal design support. Her work looks at life in big cities with metaphors created with the body, voice and text. She has collaborated with the Noh Theatre with the Japanese and with the multi-media theatre piece with German filmmaker Bernd Luetzeler.

She recently directed a devised piece TOYE based on Fire and the Rain by Girish Karnad -- a name that many will remember. For the more serious readers, her theatre practice is inspired by the actors' processes in the Grotowski tradition and her training in Yoga, Kathakali, and Seraikela Chau.



KHATIJABAI OF KARMALI TERRACE brought in a strange encounter with an elegant Bohri couple when it played at the Prithvi theatre. They cornered JAYATI BHATIA, who enacted Kathijabai's life from age 13 to 80....because they lived in a building called Karmali Terrace.

It is the story of Nothingness in one too many ways. To quote from the programme note: It is a joyful yet poignant tale of a woman's life. It tells the story of an orphan Khatija, who marries into the Karmali household...from then on, her life unfolds... how an orphan child grows up to be the Queen Bee of South Bombay society....and because it's all so familiar, Jayati endears herself to the audience.

Some years ago, Alyque Padamsee staged Mahesh Dattani's play TARA about gender discrimination...such a relevant play about the injustice being perpetuated by the victim's mother whose preference for the male child shows that it is the woman who continues the chain of injustice. TARA is the story of every girl child born in an Indian family – whether urban or rural. And this being for a Laadli Newsletter, there is nothing more relevant.

Anjula Bedi -- who we rarely see on stage, though she does act for Ila Arun quite often -- played the mother. And her daughter Tarini was cast as Tara. I wish we could find sponsors to relive that era.

And writing for Laadli, how can I forget Eve Ensler's THE VAGINA MONOLOGUES, now in its 20th year.... I have been a part of it. Director and fellow actor Mahabanoo Modi Kotwal has converted thousands of female hearts -- and some males. During an early performance at the Prithvi – when I was a sprightly sixty – an eighty-year-old grandfather shuffled onto the stage at the curtain call and, holding my hand warmly, said, "I am so glad to be alive to witness how much the Indian women have evolved!"

Since then, we have changed Accents, venues, pronunciations, names, and references to make it appeal to all sections and every stratum of women in every part of the country – be it Bengali, Maharashtrian, Gujarati, Parsee, South Indian, et al.

We even do it in Hindi... and Mahabanoo is working on a Gujarati version. Since I don't speak Gujarati, I won't be in the cast. And at 80, I cannot take up the challenge of learning Gujarati!

The Indian theatre movement is more decadent for women like the ones I have mentioned. And I will continue to be at every offering – including BETRAYAL, directed by Rachel D'sousa, which I saw last night.





# World Environment Day and Laadli Day Celebration

On June 9th, 2023, Population First celebrated World Environment Day and Laadli Day, commemorating the launch of Laadli in 2005. The event was held at the Savitribai Phule Gender Resource Centre. The event was organised in collaboration with LEAP Cities and supported by UNFPA. It aimed to honour the invaluable contribution of Stree Mukti Sanghatana (SMS) in waste management and raise awareness about gender issues in waste management.



The event commenced with an inspiring song by Stree Mukti Sanghatana team, paying homage to Savitribai Phule. They enthralled the audiences throughout the programme. Mr Bobby Sista, Executive Trustee of Population First, warmly welcomed around 130 waste pickers, the SMS team, and all the panellists. He acknowledged the waste warriors' dedication and vital role in creating a cleaner and healthier Mumbai. Mr Sista also lauded Laadli's efforts in empowering women and promoting inclusivity.

A short video showcasing the impact of the Laadli Initiative and its programs was presented, commemorating Laadli Day. Jyoti Mhapsekar, the Founder and President of Stree Mukti Sanghatana, in her opening remarks highlighted the challenges faced by Waste Warriors and the significance of their work in creating more livable cities.

Ms Dolly Thakore, National Coordinator of Laadli Media and Advertising Awards for Gender Sensitivity presented the Waste Warriors Award to Stree Mukti Sanghatana, recognising their contribution to making Mumbai cleaner and empowering women.



Conversations with the Waste Warriors featured Indu Ahire, Vanarasi Lokhande, and Saraswati Sadawart, who shared their experiences and challenges in waste management. They discussed how SMS interventions have transformed their lives, providing financial literacy and access to many other opportunities and medical facilities. The waste workers expressed concerns about occupational hazards, lack of compensation for injuries, and the need to recognise their contributions to Swacch Bharat initiatives.



The second panel discussion included experts in waste management -Sushila Sable from Parisar Bhagini Vikas Sangh, Ambily Adithyan from Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA), and Purav Desai from Refillable. They highlighted the importance of community-based initiatives in waste management and the urgent need to address single-use plastic pollution. They emphasised the role of collaboration and community acceptance in achieving sustainable waste practices.

In conclusion, the event shed light on the specific experiences of women waste workers and the need for better recognition and support for their contributions. The event was a powerful reminder of our collective responsibility to protect and preserve the environment for future generations.

# Two-Day Training of Trainers in Facilitation Skills for Gender-Sensitive Media Portrayal

A Two-Day Training of Trainers (TOT) in Facilitation Skills was organised on June 26th and 27th, 2023, at the Byke Suraj Plaza in Thane. The workshop aimed to address the need for creating a pool of skilled trainers to foster gender sensitivity in media. It sought to equip participants with facilitation skills to create a respectful and introspective environment for challenging gender biases and promoting inclusivity.

Ms Anuja Gulati, introducing the collaboration with UNFPA, emphasised the importance of facilitation skills in gender media workshops.

Dr Sharada conducted an interactive session on facilitation skills, distinguishing it from teaching and training. She said it is a collaborative process involving active participation from both facilitator and participants in an egalitarian and non-judgmental space.

She practically demonstrated using brainstorming sessions, games, group activities, case studies, storytelling, and sharing of films and ads to initiate conversation. She demonstrated how icebreakers and energizers can be used to help participants deep dive into the issue with ease.



On Day 2, each group independently conducted a one-hour session to apply their learnings on facilitation skills. They demonstrated their understanding of the core concepts, initiating meaningful conversations on the topics assigned to them.

The workshop equipped participants with valuable skills in facilitating gender-sensitive conversations, challenging biases, and promoting inclusivity. It provided a safe environment for self-reflection and empowered participants to initiate change in their perceptions and communication.. With their newfound knowledge and commitment, they are motivated to use facilitation skills to initiate conversations on gender with various stakeholders.

# Population First

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Laadli

Celebrate Her Life

An Initiative by Population First

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