

Population First

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E-newsletter

Woes of Working Women

After securing a job or some work against great odds, women are reluctant to give it up even if they are confronted by harassment or a hostile environment. They try their best to ignore it or avoid confronting it. It takes immense courage for women to come out into the open about sexual harassment at the workplace.

With the arrest of Hollywood big-wig Harvey Weinstein on charges of sexual abuse a whole new chapter has been added to the history of sexual harassment at the workplace. What began as an accusation by two female actors cascaded into what is now famously known as the # Me Too movement through which hundreds of women went public with accusations of sexual abuse against powerful and influential men. The protest spilt over in symbolic forms at the Oscars, Golden Globe and Cannes film festivals with female and male actors uniting to demand that the "time was up" for such exploitation and it had to stop.

It was Tarana Burke, an African-American civil rights activist from The Bronx, New York who first coined the term # Me Too as she set up an activist group by this name that helped victims of sexual assault who did not have a voice. This was twelve years before the phrase caught on in a big way after several women used it to share their experience of rape and sexual assault.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/15/me-too-founder-tarana-burke-women-sexual-assault>

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On the 26th of May, several newspapers reported how Harvey Weinstein, the co-founder of Miramax Entertainment Company and producer was indicted on multiple rape and sex crime charges at the Manhattan Criminal Court. A report sourced from New York Times stated –

“Prosecutor Joan Illuzi said, “This defendant used his position, money and power to lure young women into situations where he was able to violate them sexually.”

This pretty much sums up the problem.

However, a raging debate followed as feminists too were divided on whether or not the women who spoke about sexual abuse that had happened so many years ago were justified in doing so but we do not want to go into that debate here.

The Indian film industry also felt the tremors of the upheaval in Hollywood and actresses Radhika Apte and Usha Jadhav too have spoken up about sexual harassment. In a BBC World News report, the Padman actor has opened up about the culture of silence in Bollywood, mainly because the perpetrators are huge stars. “Some people are regarded as gods. They are so powerful that people just don't think that my voice is going to matter, or people think that if I speak, probably my career is going to get ruined,” Apte tells BBC's Rajini Vaidyanathan in Bollywood's Dark Secret.

(source: <https://www.indiatvnews.com/entertainment/celebrities-radhika-apte-usha-jadhav-on-sexual-harassment-in-bollywood-439396>)

A lesser known fact with a significant outcome is that in April 2018, Sri Reddy, a little known actress from the Telugu film industry stripped in full public view in front of the Telugu Film Chamber of Commerce to register her protest against sexual harassment in Tollywood, till she was picked up by the police. She also made allegations against specific people in the film industry.

While one may or may not agree with her methods of protest, the support that she got from different quarters is indicative of the changing times and the impact is there for everybody to see. The Movie Artists Association (MAA) was forced to lift the ban they had initially declared on Sri Reddy after women's rights activists submitted a memorandum to the Telangana

government, questioning the ban and pointing out the absence of any mechanism to deal with sexual harassment at the workplace in the Telugu Film Industry. The MAA also announced that it will set up a Committee against Sexual Harassment which will meet once in three months. This is the first time that such a committee will be set up in the entertainment industry.



That a nobody like Sri Reddy could challenge the demi-gods of the Telugu film industry and generate a debate about a subject that was taboo for all these years, certainly says something about the determination of women to live their lives with dignity and the risks they are willing to take to improve the quality of their lives. It also speaks volumes about the collective strength that the women's movement has generated worldwide to sustain and support such protests.

Hazards of Challenging Patriarchy

In the 1960s in Rajasthan, Bhanwari Devi, a social activist working as a 'saathin' became a victim of sexual assault for protesting against the illegal tradition of child marriage. Though all the perpetrators were acquitted, her case triggered the much-needed debate on sexual harassment of women at the workplace.

Subsequently, 1997 saw the coming of a landmark judgement called the Vishaka guidelines by the Supreme Court, known officially as *Vishaka and others vs State of Rajasthan* case. It became mandatory to follow these guidelines until a formal legislation would be passed by the assembly. Today we have the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, which recognizes and protects women from sexual harassment in every organized or unorganized workplace. This act came as an advance from the 1997 Vishaka guidelines as it redefined what we understand as a 'workplace' to begin with. With a huge force of women working in unorganized sectors, this act claims to extend beyond the 'traditional workplace' set up and includes the public and private sectors as well as the organized and unorganized sectors. Provisions of a mandatory setting up of an Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) in every workplace have made reporting of cases more feasible to victims of sexual harassment. While there are efforts being made to broaden the understanding of 'workspaces', an essential argument that comes into light is on the cultural acceptance of a particular kind of work and understanding sexual harassment in that context. Maya Pandit in her article on Gendered Subaltern Sexuality and the State speaks on how harassment and consent continue to be unrecognized and silenced in the process of sexualizing and exploiting lower caste women's bodies (Pandit, M. 2013). While we can trace the timeline of legal developments and look at the leaps and shifts in law on addressing issues of sexual harassment, we are yet to answer

questions on how we can set up ICCs in the unorganized labour sectors, how are we to understand sexual harassment in professions which require women to be engaged in socially stigmatized professions that inherently objectify them, why does the narrative and discussion usually cease after the filing of a complaint, how can we highlight the impunity that men enjoy and how power manifests in destroying women's careers. Many cases tend to be fruitless and yield no palpable results as men continue to be given the benefit of a "due process".

The 1960s is regarded as an age where women's movements have been able to politicize issues around sex and sexual violence but what remained then and continues to persist now, as Susan Brownmiller states, is "The complicity of silence on the part of theorists regarding the real life deployment of penis as a weapon." There is no denying that women have always occupied public spaces of work, but they do so with little to no protection against everyday harassment – this is despite all these years of legislations passed to preserve a woman's right to work and live a life with dignity. While today we hear of more voices against sexual harassment of women, this has also led to becoming the very basis for restricting upper class women outside their household spaces on the pretext of it being "unsafe". It is therefore even more essential for us to talk about issues related to sexual harassment while being conscious of such processes that reinstate patriarchal traditions. Thus while we discuss the legal provisions made for sexual harassment against women at workplace, we need to also ask questions and aim to open dialogues on how many women are actually able to recognize and report the harassment they undergo, how many such cases get filed and what we are doing as a nation to give women like Bhanwari Devi their due justice.

Case Study

Mahila Gram Sabha – Key to village development

This is the story of a small village, Khutadi having a population of 324 in the Gram Panchayat of Sarlambe in Shahapur, Thane. Situated at about 20 km from Shahapur, the village lacks a good approach road from the main road, resulting in few vehicles reaching the village. When Population First (PF) started working in the village in September 2016 there were a lot of conflicts among groups and individuals and people did not pay attention to the development of their village.

The picture began to change as PF engaged with people, particularly women, in a discussion on various development issues like malnutrition among children, livelihood for women etc. Women were very happy to participate in the meetings as they were never included in the Gram Sabha or other decision-making fora in the community. As PF carried forward the process of training the women's group on production and marketing of vermi-composting for income generation as well as on malnutrition among children, women began coming together to discuss various other issues. Lack of an approach road came up as the priority issue as it not only limited their opportunities for growth but also posed a problem in marriages of boys of the community. The initial thought that "our village will never change" started giving way to "let's try to change the situation".

PF team made them aware of the rules regarding *Mahila Gram Sabha* and importance of participating in the *Gram Sabha*. They were guided to make their demand in writing to the *Gram Sevak*. Women followed up with the *Gram Sevak* and ensured that the first ever *Mahila Gram Sabha* of Sarlambe Gram Panchayat was conducted in their village. They brought the issue of the road on the agenda of the *Gram Sabha* too. But the *Gram Sevak* conducted the *Gram Sabha* on May 1, 2017 without informing them. They were extremely angry and admonished the *Gram Sevak* for ignoring their demand. The women continued working on the issue and presented their demand in the next *Gram Sabha* on the 15th of August.

Bharati Valate, Kavita Valate, Kalpana Valate, who are members of the vermi-group and the leaders of the action on road construction, were reprimanded by men in their family. Other women too faced a lot of opposition from men in the community. But, they persevered and continued their follow-up. Being a member of the Planning and Monitoring Committee at the block level, PF presented the issue in a government convergence meeting and got the funds sanctioned for the road.

Women dealt with problems pertaining to donation of private land for the road as well as the contract for construction and ensured that the road connecting the village to the main road was constructed. They worked on the issue for more than a year consistently and resolved the long standing problem of approach road and paved the way for the development of their community. They are very happy with their achievement and have found a way of solving their common issues through the *Mahila Gram Sabha*.

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Activities

Consultations on ways of Preventing Violence against Women

With reference to the recent spate of violence against young girls, the Kathua and Unnao cases being the most talked about and the criminals not being brought to book, we decided to have a meeting for some sort of collective action.

Meetings of different organizations and individuals were convened by Population First on the 4th and 23rd of May, with the purpose of starting a dialogue and doing some networking in order to create an atmosphere with zero tolerance to violence in society. It was attended by representatives of organizations like Akshara, UNFPA, B.M.Ruia Girls College, FPAI, Narotam Sekhsaria Foundation, Vacha, Prema and Holy Name School. The meetings were brainstorming sessions on how we as a community can address issues relating to rape and violence in society.

The purpose of the meetings was to try and put some mechanisms in place for more accountability in cases of crimes against women and children and to come out of our project modes and come together to reach out to the community on a much wider scale.

The agenda of starting dialogues with the youth in the community, reaching out to maximum number of people through schools, colleges, 'bastis' to break the silence around violence and try to prevent violence, devising strategies to encourage bystander intervention in the case of sexual harassment in public spaces, pooling impactful resources like films etc. to start dialogues with the youth and advocating for more accountability of the perpetrators of violence was discussed at length with different people coming up with innovative suggestions.



Some of the suggestions were as follows:

- Using social media for online activism to garner the support of people
- Programs to mobilize adolescent girls, map places where eve teasing and crimes are likely to take place and present audits to police; police mitras to be identified from among the community
- Make college girls aware of exploitation and empower them by giving them information about laws protecting women against different crimes and mechanisms which they can turn to when in trouble
- To work with boys in different community based programs and teach them about consent, that when a woman says "No" it means no and her decision needs to be respected irrespective of the fact that they may be in a relationship or may have been in one in the past
- To form 'Mohalla' committees to create awareness about violence and be more vigilant in order to prevent violence
- Propagate 'Jeevan Kaushal', a module about life skills, safety and share it with colleges
- Screening films to build bridges and start conversations with the youth in different communities and educational institutions
- To work at the community level to make safe zones or zero tolerance to violence zones
- The 'gana rewrite' initiative to make students realize how sexist some of the lyrics are and how we normalize gender discriminatory content
- To form a coalition of NGOs and representatives of educational institutions at primary, secondary and higher levels to analyze why crimes are so prevalent and the streets are not safe.
- Conscientization at the family level and an all-pervasive atmosphere to investigate why values are not penetrating to the families, teachers and students
- Concerning the judiciary, we should know the status of the cases that are in process. A uniform database within our judiciary like an MIS to know the status of each case and to bring faster justice to the survivors
- Posters with women's rights and legal recourse available to women to be put up outside police stations to make it easier for women to register complaints
- Mapping unsafe spaces in communities and colleges
- Providing legal assistance in communities
- Engaging with men and boys to encourage conversations in a non-judgmental way
- Devising some ice breaking activities that could be uniformly used in most of our organizational workshops
- Forming youth groups to address issues or even participate in awareness programmes
- support groups of boys
- Painting walls in slums with gender sensitive images, also school walls, public toilet walls or other public spaces
- Collaborating with popular social media pages, like scroll.in, wire, vagabomb, askmen to circulate gender sensitive material and articles
- Announcements on gender sensitivity in local trains in Mumbai on the public address system focussing on bystander intervention to fight against sexual harassment
- Making a gender sensitive film that highlights sexual harassment in everyday life and teaches women on how to fight back
- A song rewriting workshop
- Building conversations among communities and strengthening outreach work to reach out to the youth.

The meetings ended on a positive note with all the participants agreeing to keep in touch and take this initiative forward. Dr. Sharada also informed everybody that Population First would be publishing a white paper on the way incidents of violence are reported in the media, very soon. Those who could not attend have vouched their support for future initiatives.

Workshop on Effective Implementation of PCPNDT Act

18th May, 2018, Yashada, Pune



The one day workshop for effective implementation of the PCPNDT Act was organized by State Family Welfare Bureau, Pune in coordination with UNFPA, Thane and Population First as the Maharashtra partner of Pratigya Campaign for safe abortion was invited to make a presentation on the conflation of the MTP and PCPNDT Acts.

On behalf of Pratigya, Ujjwala Mhatre made a presentation on Reproductive Rights of Women, thus steering the discussion from emphasis only on PCPNDT implementation to correct implementation of the law in order to balance prevention of sex determination and access to safe abortion. The highlights of the presentation were as follows:

- Laadli Campaign also began due to the concern regarding the results of the 2001 Census that showed a skewed sex ratio at birth
- However, while implementing the Law to prevent sex determination the focus often shifts to tracking pregnancies and abortion thus restricting access to safe abortion
- When distinction between sex selection and sex determination are not clear – the focus shifts from 'determination' to 'selection.'
- It is only when society begins to give equal importance and opportunities to girls and women that they will develop into productive and empowered members of society and the gender bias/ son preference will gradually be reduced.
- Conflation of the PCPNDT and MTP laws created a lot of confusion. Many women who genuinely needed an induced abortion were denied access to safe and legal abortions in registered medical facilities. This did not stop them from getting the abortion done. It only drove them to unregistered practitioners to have an unsafe abortion often leading to complications and even death.
- Lack of awareness about the MTP law was also responsible for authorities tracking pregnancies instead of sex determination tests.
- Thus while safeguarding the right to prevention of sex determination we were jeopardizing the right of women to safe and legal abortion and putting their health and life in danger.
- A fact from the latest Lancet Global Health study, quoted recently in one of the daily newspapers, was stated that – “More than 200,000 girls under the age of five die each year in the country owing to neglect due to gender discrimination.”
- Terms that should be avoided while reporting on abortion were also given like – female foeticide as it suggested it was a murder, sex selective abortion which linked sex determination with abortion giving the impression that all abortions were done for sex selection. The terms mother and child should be avoided as it personified the foetus and equated abortion to ending a life.
- The terms that could be used safely were Safe Abortion, Pre birth sex – determination, Medical Termination of Pregnancy and Gender biased sex selection.
- The fact that - Globally 25mn unsafe abortions take place every year – (Business Standard on the 16th of May) pointed to the need to strike a balance between preventing sex selection and making safe and legal abortions easily accessible to all women as a right.

Women lead the brigade in the Commonwealth Games Medalists

The commonwealth games have proved beyond doubt that Indian Sportswomen are determined to claim their place under the sun, despite different challenges and poor facilities, dismal hostel accommodation and nutrition. In the Common Wealth Games held this year (2018), it was raining gold medals and maximum number of medals were won by our sportswomen.

Needless to say that nothing can replace the tough routines and focused, rigorous fitness schedules, practice and controlled diets that these sportswomen must have followed, often sacrificing their personal time and resources to shape up their performance for the ultimate goal, to play for their country.

Recently various corporate houses have launched a number of initiatives for sportswomen all over the world including India. This may have encouraged many women to share their personal journeys and get the much required boost to support their hard work and regular workouts. While selling their products the corporates are focusing on sportswomen and gender equality, in keeping with current trends and as a result giving exposure to the stories of these amazing women.

Examples of some of these initiatives are:

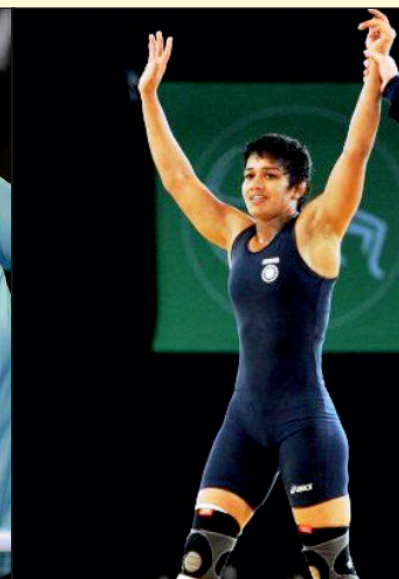
Nike has launched a women's initiative — called #betterforit — to inspire women to be active, take on new challenges and conquer personal goals. It is a call to action to share and promote women's fitness and sports online. A tagline says it all - If you're brave enough to try, you're strong enough to finish.
#betterforit

Reebok has hosted a #PerfectNever conference to promote female empowerment and positive body image. The conference addresses women from all fields of life, encouraging them to accept that who they are is wonderful. #PerfectNever is part of Reebok's "Be More Human" marketing initiative.

The key message of Star Plus 'Chal, Kar Pehel' is to encourage women to take the first step towards 'Gender Equality'. STAR Plus urges the women to follow their dreams, voice their opinions, raise their voice against discrimination and demand equal rights, opportunities, freedom and respect. The 'Chal, Kar Pehel Walkathon,' a 3 km walkathon saw men and women from all walks of life come together in support for the cause of 'gender equality' in 2015. The first walkathon saw several women participating and taking a pledge to stand up against gender inequality.

More power to our sportswomen!

For the list of women medalists who did our country proud go to the link given below:
(Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/India_at_the_2018_Commonwealth_Games)



Contact Us:

Population First, Ratan Manzil ,Ground Flr, 64
Wodehouse Road, Colaba, Mumbai 400 005

Tel: 91 9167902776

Email: info@populationfirst.org

Website: www.populationfirst.org

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