

VOLUME 10:MARCH 2023

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Newsletter of Population First

From the Director's Desk

Welcome to our March newsletter! As we celebrate Women's History Month and International Women's Day, the spotlight is on women and the issues affecting them. In this edition, we feature an opinion piece by renowned queer rights activist Harish Iyer, discussing same-sex marriages. We also take a moment to honour our Laadli Media Award winners, whose storytelling has shed light on the challenges and triumphs of women across India.

Additionally, we are excited to share a preview of the film Shout, followed by a panel discussion, which was organised in collaboration with CINTAA and One Life Studio to mark International Women's Day in Mumbai. We are also proud to share news of an event organised in partnership with the Gram Panchayat to empower and uplift women.

Finally, we pay tribute to the women doctors who have made significant contributions to the medical field with a special feature in which we reproduce our blog in the form of a book review. We hope you find this newsletter informative and inspiring.

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Lead Article

Marriage Equality : Light at the end of the long tunnel?

Harish Iyer (he/she)

In the midst of the ongoing debates and opposition surrounding same-sex marriage, we reach out to Harish Iyer, a renowned gender-fluid queer equal rights activist and speaker, to share with us his views and opinions on this contentious issue.

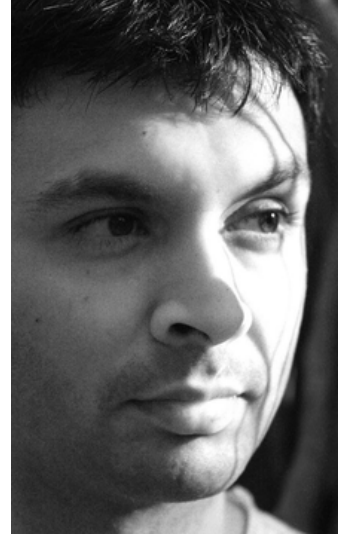
Harish Iyer is an Indian equal rights activist. Iyer engages in advocacy for a number of causes, including promoting the rights of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community, children, women, animals, and survivors of child sexual abuse.

I am as proud an Indian as I am a gender fluid person who loves men. I had no choice in any of this. I didn't choose my place of birth. I did not choose my sexuality. The choice I wish to exercise as a free thinking adult is to not hide in a dungy closet of shame, but to assert my right to be open about my gender and my sexuality. I am an impleader in the Navtej Singh Johar vs Union of India case that led to the decriminalization of consensual sex between adults in private regardless of what gender or sex or sexuality. On 6 September 2018, we walked free from the clutches of our deeply flawed parts of colonial history. We knew that this was only the right to have sex in private and not a free pass of equality in every frontier.

We realized this disparity when covid hit us. There were lay-offs and many organisations shifted to a work from home model. Many queer folks living in bigger cities that gave them the power to be themselves had to move to their parental family and live a lie. Of these were also several one halves of a queer couple. They couldn't tell their families they were queer or that they loved someone so deeply that they considered them their own family. I understand where they come from. My family didn't break

into a happy dance when I came out. The one thing that they worried about more than social sanction, was the threat of loneliness as there were no examples of families of same-sex couples that they knew of.

If this was the state of those who went back home, the state of some of those who stayed back during the pandemic was worse. Raj and Rahul, cis gay men, (name changed to protect identity) had moved out of their homophobic families in the north of India. In Mumbai, they found their own little space to breathe and live a life that they always dreamt of – in each other's arms, as a couple. All was well till covid hit and Raj fell terribly ill not of covid, but some other ailment. Rahul wanted to call Raj's parents and tell them, but couldn't, as it could actually have cost him his life and the relationship. But Raj's condition got worse and soon decisions with regards to his treatment needed to be taken including decisions that could decide whether Raj would live or die peacefully. Rahul couldn't take that decision for Raj, as legally, his relationship with Raj did not hold any water. Raj passed away the same evening that Rahul called Raj's parents and informed them about the situation.



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Marriage Equality : Light at the end of the long tunnel?

Marriage equality is not only about elaborate weddings and lavish instagrammable moments., but also about the right to inheritance, the legal recognition of your love as a partner, the right to adopt as a couple, the right to take life-and-death decisions like “pulling the plug” of your partner’s life support. I filed a petition for marriage equality, because in our nation where we are proud of our principles of plurality and take pride in our diversity, marriage cannot and should not be exclusively a heterosexual privilege.

I sat on debate panels and have interacted with several people of opposing views. Some said that the making of laws should be left to parliamentarians, I responded saying that the reason why this went to the courts was precisely because the parliamentarians did not bring this issue for debate or move any bills in this regard. Also, we were not really asking for a new law, but for a liberal interpretation and extension of existing marriage laws to include all couples. Marriage, in our argument, should be between two persons, regardless of their gender or sexuality.

The government responded with a view that legalizing same sex marriage could cause a “complete havoc” in society. I fail to understand how will someone else’s life be affected if a gay couple’s marriage is legally recognized. How will my shaadi lead to your barbaadi?

Sexuality is not a choice. No one chooses to be gay. Gender is not a choice either. To accept yourself truly and to celebrate your gender and sexual identity is definitely a choice. We are not really interested in creating a havoc in someone’s life. But on the contrary, not having the right to marry, created a complete havoc in Raj and Rahul’s life.

While I write this piece, I have my loved one on the phone telling me that marriage is a failed institution. He and I may not become a happily married couple at the end of this long marriage tunnel that is certain to see the light of the day. I am fighting for this, so that everyone has the choice to be married and so that Rahul and Raj could have a better ending to their love story.



Article on Women's History Month

Stories of women, by women

Hetal Vora, Programme Officer - Gender, Population First

With a strong commitment to women's empowerment, gender equality, and community mobilisation, our organisation is proud to celebrate Women's History Month by featuring the women who bring our stories to life. This article highlights the remarkable contributions of Guneet Monga, Nandita Das, and several of our esteemed LAADLI winners, who are telling unique and significant stories, and paving the way for the future generations in their industries.

March is a significant month for women around the world as we celebrate Women's History Month across various countries. The origin of women's history month dates back to 1981 when the U.S. Congress passed a resolution designating a week in March as Women's History Week. In the coming years this was expanded to a month-long celebration and then later became the global event that it is today. Throughout these years, it has helped to shed light on the work that women have done in the past and are still doing acknowledging the inequalities that exist and how to tackle them to build a world with equity and equality of opportunity to all.

The National Women's History Alliance, which spearheaded the movement for March being declared National Women's History Month, has announced the theme for 2023 to be 'Celebrating Women Who Tell Our Stories.' This theme is intended to recognize and honour women of the past and present who have contributed to all forms of media and storytelling, including print, radio, TV, blogs, podcasts, and stage. By celebrating women's stories, the theme ultimately highlights the human stories that connect us all.

When we talk about Indian women who tell our stories, one name that immediately comes to mind is Guneet Monga, a highly acclaimed film producer, known for producing movies like Masaan, The

Lunchbox, Zubaan, and Pagglait, as well as Oscar winning documentaries - Period. End of Sentence and The Elephant Whisperers.

Guneet is not only an exceptional producer, but also an advocate for gender equality in her everyday life. She has started a cinema collective, called Indian Women Rising, with the motto "A Cinema Collective endeavours to bring forth the unseen and unheard stories in the most democratic way - of, by and for women." She has been instrumental in bringing interesting female voices to the mainstream and creating space for under-represented stories.

Another name worth mentioning is Nandita Das, an accomplished actor and director. Her recent film, Zwigato, has brought her back into the limelight, as it presents a compelling narrative on class and caste issues through her masterful storytelling.

Ms. Das is also known for her groundbreaking role in the 1996 film Fire, which presented one of the first depictions of a homosexual relationship in mainstream Bollywood. Her portrayal of a lesbian character in the film was a significant milestone in the representation of LGBTQ+ characters in Indian cinema. She has written, directed, produced and acted in a short film called Listen to Her, that sheds light on the



Stories of women, by women

increase in domestic violence and double burden of work that women have been facing in lockdown.

The Laadli Media initiatives have been bringing to the foreground stories being told by women about women. We salute our winners who have been telling gender sensitive stories through various media like films, journalistic reporting and books.

Women's History Month provides us an opportunity to celebrate the contributions of women to the society and also to recognise the challenges they face. Celebrating women who tell our stories makes us understand the importance of having diverse representation in media and the arts. Women like Tanuja Chandra, Late Kalpana Lajmi, Joopaka Subhadra, Suprita Das and others have made significant impact in various fields and have created a path for future generations.

Similarly, Santoshee Mishra's *Mumbai 400008* and Vinta Nanda's *#Shout* are two documentaries in recent times that tell compelling stories of sexworkers in Kamatipura during the lockdown and women survivors and families of victims of gender based violence who made history by their courage and determination to get justice over decades, respectively.

We are glad to note that women are coming forward to share their stories be it the #MeToo movement or the anti hijab or triple talaq agitations. It is time we give visibility and amplify them in the public domain.

A big thank you to all the women who are telling our stories.





Book Corner

Lady Doctors – The Untold Stories of India's First Women in Medicine

Swathi Chaganty, Former Programme Manager, Population First

Our blog recently featured a compelling book review by Swathi Chaganty, highlighting a group of women whose stories are both inspiring and long overdue. Kavitha Rao's Lady Doctor sheds light on the lives of Anandibai Joshi, Kadambini Ganguly, Rukhmabai Raut, Haimabati Sen, Muthulakshmi Reddy, Mary Poonen Lukose, and many other pioneering women who fought against discrimination and societal norms to become doctors.

Lady Doctors – The Untold Stories of India's First Women in Medicine by Kavitha Rao is a tribute to Anandibai Joshi, Kadambini Ganguly, Rukhmabai Raut, Haimabati Sen, Muthulakshmi Reddy, Mary Poonen Lukose, and other women who dared to become doctors in 19th and early 20th century India. These women overcame tremendous challenges, including child marriages, child widowhood, casteism, patriarchy, sexism, and racism, and battled for better health, sanitation, medical assistance, and female reproductive health among the people.

The book presents a nuanced and respectful account of these women's lives and the complexities of their times, including the politics of colonialism and social reform, and the philosophies of well-known political and social reformers who had a bearing on their lives. It also introduces us to other incredible women of that time who contributed to the legacy of humankind, such as Cornelia Sorabji, Pandita Ramabai, Sarojini Naidu, Ammu Swaminathan, Annie Beasant, Krupabai Sathianandhan, Sethu Lakshmi Bayi, Abala Das, and Rose Govindarajulu.

Despite the immense talent and contributions of these women, only a small percentage of people, mostly from their own communities, are aware of their legacy, and even fewer know the circumstances in which they became doctors. Anandibai Joshi, Kadambini Ganguly, Rukhmabai Raut, Haimabati

Sen, Muthulakshmi Reddy, and Mary Poonen Lukose have little to no works written or developed on them. Only a few of them have had books, plays, or movies made about their lives, such as Anandibai Joshi, whose life has been depicted in popular culture.

Muthulakshmi Reddy's Cancer Institute, established in 1952, is a pioneer in cancer research in Asia, and Rukhmabai Raut's clinics in Gujarat are active even today. Mary Poonen Lukose's tenacity laid the foundations for much of the public health system of Kerala and compulsory vaccination in India. Haimabati Sen's diaries came to light several decades after her death.

Lady Doctors is not just a book about medicine and medical history, but also a book about social and political history. It highlights the struggles of marginalised communities and the need for advocacy for better health, sanitation, medical assistance, and female reproductive health. It shows how these women's lives were impacted by the politics of colonialism and social reform and how their contributions helped shape the legacy of humankind. The book is a reminder that the history of India is much richer than we know and are taught.



Happenings

Screening for #SHOUT held by Population First and UNFPA in Partnership with CINTAA and One Life Studios.

On International Women's Day 2023, Population First and UNFPA, in partnership with Cine and TV Artistes Association (CINTAA) and One Life Studios, held a preview of their new documentary film, #SHOUT Directed by Vinta Nanda and produced by Gayatri Gill, Rahul Kumar Tewary, and Siddharth Kumar Tewary, the film was shot throughout India and features a wide range of voices on issues related to women and patriarchy.

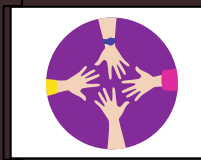
#SHOUT is a feature-length documentary that explores the #MeToo movement and the history of feminism in India. The film examines patriarchy through stories of the past and present, including the self-immolation of Roop Kanwar, the gang rape of Bhanwari Devi, and the brutal murder of 8-year-old Asifa. The film also features feminist art, literature, music, and performances that place these issues in context. The preview was followed by a panel discussion and audience interaction.

The panel was moderated by Dr. AL Sharada, Director of Population First and Laadli Media Awards. The panellists included Javed Jaffrey, Heeba Shah, Rukmini Sen, Sapna Bhavnani, and Kitu Gidwani. Anuja Gulati, Program Management Specialist UNFPA, also spoke, stating that it is up to women to have a #MeToo movement every year, and that men need to be educated and have their sensibilities aroused in order for change to occur. Actor Javed Jaffrey noted that the system is the primary obstacle to progress and emphasised the importance of changing the "Woh toh ladka hai... usse toh chalega (he's a boy, excuse him) mentality."



The film was praised for its ability to bring attention to the issue of patriarchy and for giving a platform to a diverse group of voices. The film's anthem, performed by Usha Uthup, a pioneer of women's equality and inclusion in India, also received a great deal of praise from the audience.

Overall, the preview of #SHOUT was a success, with attendees leaving feeling inspired and hopeful for the future. The film's ability to capture the symphony of voices of Indian women and men and to explore the many social, economic, cultural, and caste divides that exist in India was particularly notable, and it is sure to be a valuable addition to the ongoing conversation about women's rights in India and beyond.



Happenings

Celebration of International Women's Day

Population First, a non-profit organisation, organised a World Women's Day celebration event on 10th March 2023 at village Amberje. Over 100 women from nearby villages attended the program which had the theme of "Economic Independence of Women". The event aimed to empower women economically and highlighted the need for women's financial independence.

The program included a detailed session on various topics related to economic empowerment for women. It covered new professions for women and opportunities in both government and non-government sectors. The session showcased successful businesswomen who run their own businesses and generate income. The session emphasised how women's role in their family and society can be redefined once they become financially independent. They can make their own decisions, take care of their health, and guide their children towards a better future.

The program also focused on the responsibility of women in teaching their sons to respect women and to think of them as equals. Women PRI members, Gramsevak, teachers, and ZP women members attended the program. The Gram Panchayat of Amberje village distributed sanitary pads to the women who attended the program.



The women who participated in the program were happy and excited. They danced and sang songs on women empowerment. Harshada Gotarne, a women Gram Panchayat member of Amberje, expressed her happiness by saying, "This was the first big event I have attended after being elected as a PRI member. I feel so special because I was the chairperson of the program, and I realised that I should fight for women's rights and handle the Gram Panchayat. It was my first time speaking on stage, and it was really nice. All the women who listened to me appreciated my speech. I am happy to see the huge crowd of women and request all women to participate in Women Gram Sabha and General Gram Sabha to present their issues so that we can work together to solve their priorities."



The event was a great success, and the attendees left the venue with a sense of empowerment and inspiration. It was an excellent opportunity to raise awareness about the importance of women's financial independence and to encourage women to take charge of their lives.



Happenings

Two-day LAADLI Fellowship Orientation Workshop, 2023

On March 23rd and 24th, 2023, journalists from across India participated in the two-day Laadli Fellowship orientation program. The event, supported by the United Nations Population Fund, focused on four sessions covering gender and patriarchy, climate change, disability, and the digital divide. The first day's sessions were led by Dr. Leena Pujari, Associate Professor and Head of Dept. of Sociology, KC College, and Mr. Manas Rath from LEAP Cities.

The event began via Zoom at 2:00 PM, and Dr. A.L. Sharada welcomed the participants and provided a brief overview of the fellowship and the importance of the orientation workshop in getting fellows oriented with the themes. Ms. Pinky Pradhan, Communication and Media Specialist with the United Nations Population Fund in India, opened the event with an introductory speech. She highlighted UNFPA's transformative goals and how they address questions of gender equality by addressing regressive social norms that limit the potential of girls and women. Supporting the LAADLI campaign is a key component of the gender equality campaign. Ms. Pradhan emphasised the importance of all agencies and stakeholders, especially the media, coming together to create a more representative and gender-just world.

Dr. Pujari led the first session titled "Sex, Gender and Patriarchy: Mapping Intersections." The presentation challenged traditional understandings of sex and gender and encouraged unlearning and relearning. Dr. Pujari explained that all identities are socially constructed, fluid, and a continuum. She discussed the concept of performativity in gender expression and highlighted the heteronormative nature of the world, which creates exclusions. In conclusion, she stressed the importance of adopting an intersectional framework to gain a better perspective and being aware of our own social locations.

In the second session, Mr. Manas Rath discussed the relationship between gender and climate change. He explained the effects of climate change, including heat waves, rising sea levels, desertification, and melting ice caps, and the causes, such as rising CO2 levels due to industries, vehicles, agriculture, electricity generation, and digital warehousing. He also talked about a tool called Systems thinking for climate change and how areas impacted by climate change will affect women differently. For example, the burden of water security will fall mainly on women. Mr. Rath insisted that journalists blame humans, not the climate, and consider direct and indirect, long-term and short-term, and visible and non-visible impacts of climate change on gender.

On the second day of the event, Ms. Ritika Sahni, Founder and Director of Trinayani, and Dr. Farzana Khan, Head of Programs at MyChoices





Happenings

Two day LAADLI Fellowship Orientation Workshop, 2023

Foundation, led the sessions. Ms. Sahni's session focused on gender and disability. She emphasised the importance of recognising the media's power in shaping our understanding of the world and stressed the need for accurate and sensitive portrayal of different subjects. With 1.3 billion people worldwide having disabilities and India having the second-largest population of people with disabilities, she highlighted how misinformation and assumptions stem from limited interactions with them in schools and workplaces. She clarified the difference between impairment and disability and discussed the marginalisation of both men and women with disabilities, which compounds for disabled women.



how cultural and social norms limit women's opportunities for education, communication, and economic empowerment, making them more vulnerable to the digital divide. The session also covered the issue of online violence and harassment against women, and Dr. Khan concluded by discussing a report on the portrayal, participation, and representation of women in news media.



The workshop ended with Dr. A.L Sharada expressing her gratitude and providing words of encouragement to the participants.

Dr. Farzana Khan presented the second session of the day on the gender digital divide and its impact on women and girls. The Oxfam India Inequality Report 2022 highlighted the unequal distribution of access to digital technology for marginalised communities, and Indian women were found to be 15% less likely to own mobile phones and 33% less likely to use mobile internet services from 2018-2022. Dr. Khan emphasised

Population First



Laadli

Celebrate Her Life

An Initiative by Population First

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