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One of the first public displays of anger against attack on women was in Delhi when large groups of young men and women thronged the streets seeking justice for Nirbhaya in 2012.

With a large presence of young men in the protests, many thought it was an indicator that men are getting sensitive to abuse against women and children. Soon, words like male hegemony and toxic masculinity began to be discussed in public platforms and more men started coming out against the violent behaviour of their own gender.

"However, I look at it as a lost opportunity because we could not cash in on that movement, which began spontaneously and with lot of emotions," says Harish Sadani, gender activist and founder of Mumbai-based Men Against Violence and Abuse (MAVA).

Sadani says such a kind of display of sensitivity can improve gender equality in society. Toxic masculinity is not just about men attacking or denigrating women. "Everybody is talking of toxic masculinity and how it impacts women and society but no one is talking about its impact on men. Men are also severely affected by such a behaviour. They don't realize that their own characters too change. That is why we need to talk about sensitizing men about it. Also, there is something called marginalised masculinity, where groups of men have been marginalized by discrimination and face violence."

It is not enough to just tell men to stand up for women's rights to safety. "That is one part. You have to talk about the personal gains that men

# We FOR THEM

## How men can be allies and agents of change for gender equality



**NOT A WOMEN'S ISSUE:** A still from one of the movies shown in the travelling film festival. (Inset) Harish Sadani, gender activist

are going to get when they change their attitude and become sensitive to women. You have to undo the privilege that men think they have while they indulge in violent or dominating behaviour. Men will not give

up on the privilege they have enjoyed for several generations," he explains.

MAVA has been conducting interactive sessions in different colleges in different cities for the past 27

years, and has even started reaching out to youths in colleges and high schools.

The larger impact started becoming visible after Sadani began a travelling film festival on gender diversity (SamaBhava) as part of campaigning.

"We select a series of short films, which look into issues of all genders and how relationships are affecting them. The theme is unique as we are talking of all genders and intersectionality. It gives the wider picture and expresses solidarity with other genders."

SamaBhava, now in its third year, concluded its Kochi edition on Friday. The festival goes to smaller cities and towns as well. "We take the films to colleges. They are screened for two days when students are in the college and they are free to walk in, watch and join discussions," says Sadani.

This year, the film festival, currently being held in 16 locations, began in November 2019 and will conclude in March 2020. It is featuring 16 national and international short films, documentaries and feature films.

The films cover a wide range of gender matters—from various forms of gender-based discrimination/violence against women to homophobia and transphobia to breaking the gender binaries and toxic masculinity.

Dhanya, a Queerila activist, says there is no point in reaching out to adults. "We have always seen that educational institutions are always the catalysts of change. "We should remove the binary thinking of society as men and women and instead, start reflecting people as human beings. There are a lot of suppressed emotions among the youths and there is nobody to discuss sexuality at home. Such travelling festivals will open the world to them. Also, the interactions that follow, exposes people to criticism, which helps in the long run."

Pointing out that the films in his travelling festival reflects the society, Sadani talks about 'Turup', a film set in Bhopal. It tells the story of three women, in the backdrop of growing right-wing fundamentalism. As the boundaries of religion, caste, class, gender become clearer and more visible, lives intersect and engage, throwing open opportunities to subvert and transcend these barriers. As people look for answers, they also encounter new questions. A chess game, which is always played on the roadside, becomes the metaphorical background to the playing out of these negotiations.

S-Durga was another film which he says generated lots of discussions in Kerala too, though people initially said things like moral policing didn't happen in the state. "We aim to build solidarity among genders, only then will the spirit of empathy and understanding come about on how toxic masculinity is touching their lives," says Sadani.



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