

The Development Project's blog— For women who make movies. And for the people who love them. Globally.

Vaishnavi Sundar, activist filmmaker



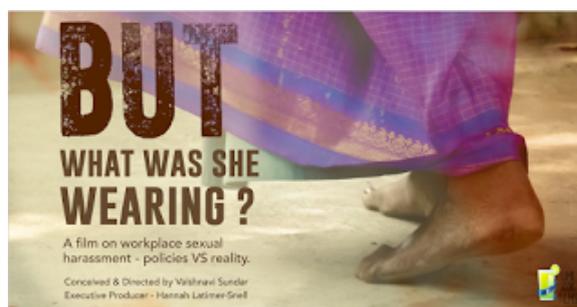
July 22, 2017



Activist #womeninfilmm from around the world are my major online blessings. Vaishnavi Sundar, from Chennai, India, is one of these. We met when she supported [the open letter to Cannes](#) that a group of us circulated a couple of months ago and [then wrote about the letter](#) for her [Women Making Films](#) site, 'an online platform with an offline collaboration model. Women come together, create'.

Vaishnavi's [Lime Soda](#) company has made a group of short films and docos and her [Aage Jake Left](#) (*Go Ahead and Take Left*) has been selected for this year's London Feminist Film Festival.

Vaishnavi is currently [crowd-funding](#) for her *But What Was She Wearing?*, exposing Indian policies of workplace sexual harassment, with an all-women crew.



WW *You started out in a completely different field. What made you pivot towards film? Was there an 'inciting incident'?*

VS No, there was no inciting incident, but a lot of clues from the universe. I have always hated to conform to the rat race that is Indian school education. I preferred, and really enjoyed the non-academic activities like sports, and cultural activities a lot more. I took to theatre during college, and have since performed, directed, wrote plays that were staged in India, UK etc.

It took me 27 years before I realised filmmaking is what I wanted to do. I wrote a short story at first and I decided to turn that into a film. After having hung out in a lot of film sets as an actor, I took the risk to give it a shot, albeit without any film school training.

WW *How useful are the skills and experiences from your former work life?*

VS I am a graduate in Business Administration, and all my jobs in my past have had some creative aspect to it, be it Marketing, Public Relations, Media, Copywriting and a handful of other jobs, that involved some aspects of wearing a creative hat if you will. I took and gave a lot from the double lives I had as an artist, and as a business professional. So in a way, both the life experiences interspersed to aid one another on a regular basis, until five years ago when I decided to be an entrepreneur and a filmmaker and regulate all the skills and experiences into a single outcome.



WW How did you gather your filmmaking skills? Who influenced you and your filmmaking style?

VS I learnt on the job. Film education everywhere comes at a price that makes it unattainable for a lot of people like me. Nonetheless I decided to put my experience of being in a creative field for years to good use. I have always been a fast learner, and if it is something that interests me, I get to the bottom of it as if it were some kind of obsession. When I made my first film, I had a reasonable understanding of going about it, thanks to my experience of being an actor and around a film set for days. I invested time in understanding film theory and of course, watched hell a lot of films. Assisting some friends for their films came in handy for some street tricks too. But mostly, filmmaking is common sense with or without formal film education. If you can afford it, great, but if you can't it doesn't mean you can't make films at all.

There are so many filmmakers who I have been inspired by, learnt from that it is hard to make a definitive list. I try to identify and isolate specific techniques from different departments, I watch the work of editors a lot and I try to gain insights from films of the silent era. If a filmmaker can get through to you with no words at all, I think that filmmaker can achieve absolutely anything. Take Dorothy Arzner or Adela Sequeyro Haro for example: back in the early 1900s these women made not just any film, but films with powerful female characters, without saying a word.

I think I largely try to create experiences through my scenes, shots or the edit choice. I have consciously tried to touch a nerve, disturb normalcy, and make people uncomfortable with my writing (and films), and I enjoy what comes out of it, when people read, or watch my work, I observe what experience it offers, and I try to make it better every time.



WW You're at a key point in your film career, establishing yourself. Why add Women Making Films?

VS I founded WMF in July 2015 out of frustration and honestly I wish somebody else had founded it. I needed a breathing space to gather my thoughts in the middle of this global manifest. I realised it must be helpful for some more women too, so I floated the idea and it was an instant hit.

I work double time on it, it is very time-consuming. Sometimes I think about shutting it down because it can get very overwhelming.

I look back at what I have managed to pull off here, and I don't have the courage to end it. WMF now has members from 16 countries, and some of them have collaborated with each other. WMF has also created a revolution in talking about/screening films made by women, not just in India, but also outside. People refer WMF to filmmakers looking for technicians, and film lovers access WMF for information about filmmakers from around the world. Most importantly, WMF fearlessly brings to light the hypocrisy of the film industry, and acts as a repository of information for all things feminist. I did an AMA with Nina Paley - how often does that happen?



To think that I am at the helm of all these accomplishments make me happy, humble and responsible. I have already scaled to build international liaisons with other feminist organisations in the US, UK, Pakistan and now New Zealand – it is only going to get bigger and better!

I am still making films, and WMF is providing me the safe space that I have always wanted, now with a lot of other amazing organisations' collaborations, it has made my film career better.

WW 'Non-profit' is important to you. Women Making Films is non-profit and some of your films are for non-profits. How do you achieve a balance between non-profit and activist work and making living?

VS That is the question.

WW Women Making Films has a festival. How important is this to your programme and why?

VS At this stage, WMF has screened films in 12 cities in India, and a couple of times in the US. I hope that the film screenings will expand to other countries too. For me, these film festivals are very important because it makes watching a film made by women a frequent and normal event, it keeps the discussion going. I hope that in the future, I am able to find a business model that would allow me to welcome film tourists, engage in cross-cultural discussions on women and cinema, and show them the side of India which is not a Bollywood version of it alone. This is a large-scale undertaking and would require quite a bit of investment and people to work for it, but I do wish to bring these amazing filmmakers from around the world for master classes, workshops, and what have you!

I want to hold offline WMF meetups, film competitions, and carry on the Children Outreach Programme.



WW *When I look at your introduction to But What Was She Wearing, there's so much that relates to sexual harassment everywhere. It's a universal story. What inspired you to make it? Personal experience?*

VS My own personal experiences with harassment and violence have made me aware of the shortcomings in our system: the all-pervasive patriarchy, and that helped me approach this topic with ease. But it is not limited to purely my experiences alone, in fact, it is a collective outrage over the way the legal system works, where let alone redressal, even making a complaint can make a woman go out of job, be called names, and rendered powerless in an instant. And the culprit walks away scot free. Yes it is a universal story, so there is all the more urgency is making these stories heard, changes implemented, and stakeholders held accountable.

It is 2017 where women are in powerful positions in government, academia, some are corporate CEOs and law makers - and yet the overbearing effect of patriarchy has not diminished. On the contrary, it has become doubly difficult for women to get where they are these days, because we disrupt the status quo, and that does not sit well with the male gender. Patriarchy systematically favour one gender, while oppresses the other – and if you are an ambitious woman, all hell breaks loose on you! The film needs to have been made 100 years ago, and patriarchy shredded to bits even earlier. The time to end patriarchy is now.

WW *How far have you got with the project?*

VS We are 2 weeks into the campaign right now, and have managed to raise 27% of our goal so far. This is not a bad pace, but it is so important that we hit the goal, if not exceed it. Although the production doesn't begin until September, I have been researching and developing it since December 2016, and we have 6 more months to go before we have the film in hand. And if filmmaking has taught us anything, we know that until the film is in hand, practically anything can go wrong. So I am very anxious about fund raising because of all the challenges we are willing to face in this journey, we sincerely hope that money won't be one of them.

The main film, which contains an all-woman crew is rather refreshing to most of the interviewees – they welcome it with cheer, and I am certain they will be absolutely comfortable talking about a subject like this. As for the stories of survivors, a lot of them have spoken to me over these past six months, and almost nobody wants to go on record. But the few women who have come forth, have already been campaigning about their horrific stories and demanding their organisation to apologise. These are extremely powerful women, who are unafraid or unaffected by taboos associated with it.

It is also an exciting time because not only is the crew all women, it is also very diverse. Hannah is the intern/EP who is from Portland, our editor Lisa is from Germany, and our composer Miriam, who has worked in films like *Saving Private Ryan*, *Ratatouille*, *The Terminal*, *The Lost World* among other things, is an American too. WMF is crunching the distance and erasing borders.

WW *How can people help your campaign?*

VS Of the four films that I have made, two of them have been crowdfunded. I have immense faith in the power of the crowd, and the fruits that we can enjoy together when an entire community works towards

a common goal. In my experience, both as a filmmaker and an activist, it is formidable to have so many people backing your work, whether or not they get a direct, tangible benefit from it. It is a validation for filmmakers too, to strive on despite (and especially during) difficult circumstance.

Every single contribution will help us get one step closer to making corporate and decision makers to take workplace harassment seriously, and ensure a fundamental redressal forum is set up. I hope our film would be a reminder to all women that their experience is not trivial, and their abuser belongs in jail. The link to contribute is [here](#).

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