

Youth against cross-border tobacco advertising in films

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Youth from 27 countries that met at the 2nd Global Youth Meet (GYM) in the lead up to the 14th World Conference on Tobacco Or Health (WCTOH) in Mumbai, India, expressed their common ire against cross-border tobacco advertising in films.

Satellite televisions, cinema theatres, CDs, DVDs are some of the ways movies made in any part of the world and dubbed in local languages, reach the youth. Despite of ban on smoking in films at the country level, there is no effective way to curb this channel of films made elsewhere portraying tobacco use in them.

Internet was another medium that was identified by the youth that is difficult to control by country level laws against tobacco advertising on internet.

In January 2009, the Delhi High Court had overturned a government ban on showing smoking scenes in films. The court said that the ban violated the fundamental right of film-makers to freedom of speech and expression. "The director of films should not have multifarious authorities breathing down their necks when indulging in creative art," had said Justice Sanjay Kishan Kaul.

Tobacco is reported to kill more than a million people in India alone every year.

"One of the easiest ways to significantly bring down number of children and youth who get initiated to tobacco use in India, without any budgetary allocation for this public health exercise, is to remove depiction of tobacco use in films and TV", had rightly said Dr Ramadoss at the last World Conference on Tobacco or Health in USA.

One of the major influences on the uptake of teen tobacco use is the glamourisation of tobacco use in movies and on television. This has been well documented by comprehensive research studies in India and US. On-screen or smoking in public view by bollywood film-stars will influence young minds to smoke.

In an earlier study done by World Health Organization and Indian Ministry of Health and Family Welfare in 2003 it was revealed that 76% of Indian movies had tobacco use shown in them. In 1991, where 22% of top box office movie hits had lead characters using tobacco on-screen, in 2002, this escalated to 53% tobacco use depiction by lead characters in Indian movies. This study also demonstrated that 52.2% of children in India who had their first smoke were influenced by tobacco use depicted in movies.

A repeat follow-up study conducted by WHO and Ministry of Health and Family Welfare in India on top box office movie hits during 2004-2005 demonstrated that tobacco use depiction in movies has become more aggressive as compared to previous years. During 2004-2005, 89% of all movies analyzed contained tobacco use on screen and 75.5% movies depicted leading stars using tobacco on screen. Moreover 41% of movies screened had clear and distinct tobacco brand placement.

Dr Ramadoss says categorically that stopping depiction of tobacco use in films is an evidence based public health measure.

India, says Dr Ramadoss, has the world's largest film industry rolling out over 900 films per year. Through cinema theatres, these movies reach 60 million people and through cable television network, they further reach another 70 million people in India. "Influence of cinema is paramount in India" says Dr Ramadoss.

Exposure to tobacco use in movies is clearly linked to youth tobacco use. Simply put, more must be done to ensure that tobacco use in movies is removed from films seen by our nation's youth. We have within our power one simple and effective way to jump start the decline in youth tobacco use - delete tobacco use in films from the list of influences that rob our youth of longer and healthier lives by removing tobacco use from movies, unless they clearly depict the negative health effects.

The influence of film-stars on the youth is paramount and let us hope the currently ongoing 14th World Conference on Tobacco or Health (WCTOH), shall give an impetus to authorities to re-impose the ban on portrayal of smoking in films.