

Stop to Gender-Based Violence in Transport

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One day I was travelling by local train in Mumbai with my mother and siblings. It was extremely crowded and just before we could alight at our destination, I felt my skirt being lifted and someone groping my private parts. I couldn't move to swat the hand away nor could I raise an alarm as my voice would have been drowned in the noise of the crowd. All I could do was cringe in shame and hope I made it out of the train as fast as possible. I was only thirteen years old.

That incident stuck in my mind and whether I acknowledged it or not, had a lasting effect on me. I hate crowded spaces and hated travelling by local train in Mumbai for years afterward. However, I did not make the association till a few years ago when I started my organisation - Safecity - to work on the issue of gender-based violence. Since then, I have made every effort to take the local train in Mumbai and overcome my fear.

I am not alone in my experience of sexual violence.

Many women and girls experience sexual violence in public spaces, including public transportation, every day, everywhere. A recent national survey on sexual harassment and assault by Stop Street Harassment indicates that one in four women experienced sexual harassment or assault on public transit in the United States. A survey in France found that 100% of women in the Paris area had experienced sexual harassment on the regional transit systems. A Reuters survey of 16 major cities worldwide found that women in Latin American cities faced the highest rates of harassment, with about 6 in 10 women reporting physical harassment on public transit systems.

In India, where I am based, the recent Safecity Railway Audit report showed it's a problem here, too. Based on interviews with over 1000 people at seven railway stations in Mumbai, 54% said they had experienced sexual harassment. Out of these, 88% were women. Touching and groping was the form of sexual harassment more frequently reported, and 34% of the women said they felt unsafe at the railway stations. Nearly all women (94%) said they did not report their experience to the police, and 83% were not aware of their rights under the law. Indeed, most people who said during the Safecity audit that they were harassed refused to report it even on the Safecity mapping platform, stating that sexual harassment is just a part of their everyday life.

Not reporting sexual harassment is a common occurrence. Some people are afraid that people around them will blame them for the incident, pressurising them to prove their innocence, or that they will bring shame to themselves and their families. Often reporting to a higher authority like the police can be traumatic as they may come across as insensitive. The lack of knowledge of existing legislations can also be a barrier. All these issues can create a culture of silence that makes it hard for a survivor to speak up.

When the issue is under-reported, it is difficult to then make the issue fully visible and plan appropriate interventions. However, there are ways in which we can encourage women to break their silence around the issue and create safe spaces for all travellers.

Some of our recommendations based on the railway audits include the following:

- 1) Improve the lighting as it had a direct influence on the perception of safety.
- 2) Have more entry and exit points to ease the congestion.

- 3) Improve infrastructures like toilets, staircases and footbridges.
- 4) Increase the presence of police personnel including women police at peak times to be a deterrent for perpetrators.
- 5) Display advertisements educating people on the spectrum of abuse as well as the legislation. This will embolden women to seek help but also encourage bystanders to intervene.
- 6) Use posters and wall art to educate people on the issue both inside the train and on the platforms.
- 7) Publicise helpline numbers.
- 8) Have a functional and visible helpdesk where people can get immediate assistance.
- 9) Make reporting incidents simple and easy so that more women do it – this can help show the patterns and trends and lead to pre-emptive solutions.

Sexual violence is a global pandemic that needs immediate redressal. In the context of the space in which it takes place, it carries corollary implications for individuals and communities. When women lose access to public spaces because of sexual violence in public transport they lose opportunities and civic rights. If a State is unable to provide for equal access to public spaces for all, it is by default not allowing for the full realisations of the rights of the affected persons and its developmental potential. Sexual violence is increasingly a developmental challenge that needs primary attention and resolution for building the possibility of a supportive environment that can drive other development.

Useful links

National Study on Sexual Harassment and Assault, Executive Summary:

<http://www.stopstreetharassment.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Executive-Summary-2018-National-Study-on-Sexual-Harassment-and-Assault.pdf>

100 per cent of Frenchwomen 'victims of sexual harassment on public transport'

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/11545643/100-per-cent-of-Frenchwomen-victims-of-sexual-harassment-on-public-transport.html>

Latin American cities have most dangerous transport for women, NYC best

<https://uk.reuters.com/article/women-poll/exclusive-poll-latin-american-cities-have-most-dangerous-transport-for-women-nyc-best-idUKL6N0S32MQ20141029>

A Gender Sensitive Approach to Transport in Mumbai: <http://safecity.in/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/WBMRVC-ppt.pdf>

Safecity website: <http://www.safecity.in/>