

RWWSA

RURAL WOMEN'S SAFETY AUDIT

A Women's Safety Audit (WSA) is a tool for change, that helps create a safer and conducive environment for women, and other vulnerable groups.

Rural Women's Safety Audit: RWSA

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Women are among the most vulnerable to sexual violence in public spaces including sexual harassment and assault. In addition to the violence they face, the fear of violence often structures and restricts women's ability to access public spaces.

Ensuring Women's safety involves:

- Strategies, practices and policies which aim to reduce gender-based violence, including women's fear of them.
- Access to and availability of safe spaces – unrestricted mobility for girls and women without the fear of sexual harassment.
- Freedom of choice and decision making, apart from financial security.
- Shift in social norms towards more gender equitable attitudes.
- Preventive strategies and policies that prevent perpetration and victimisation.

A Women's Safety Audit (WSA) is a tool for change, that helps create a safer and conducive environment for women, and other vulnerable groups. It is a process in which users of a space together evaluate how safe it feels, and identify ways to make it safer.

Most work done around WSA internationally and in India has been in urban settings and university campuses, and hence most of the available literature on women's safety audit is suited to urban areas and is focused on drawing civic attention to gender specific needs of

women who inhabit or utilize that space for a variety of purposes¹.

Rural public spaces differ significantly from urban spaces. They are characterized, in particular, by the openness of the landscape and the absence of clear boundaries between public and private zones (resulting primarily from the nature of their development and from the lifestyle activities of residents).² Rural space is mediated by culture and social relations. Services available here are few and at a primary level.

The other major difference is in the implementation of the needs and demands that emerge from the RWSA.

In urban areas there are multiple bodies responsible for implementation of infrastructure and services. For e.g., the PWD department for roads, the Jal Boards for water related concerns and transport department for issues about safe transport. At the level of a village, the Gram Panchayat (GP) is the only grass roots level governance system which is mandated to address the needs of the citizens. Such a single window for redressal offers both an opportunity but also has its own challenges.

It is therefore important to adapt the WSA as a tool and its method to the rural context in India and assess the specific issues of public space safety faced by women and girls in rural areas.

¹<https://www.cvrld.bc.ca/DocumentCenter/View/1608/42-Womens-Safety-Audit-Pilot-Project-1996?bidId=>

²[https://content.sciendo.com/configurable/contentpage/journals\\$002fbog\\$002f45\\$002f45\\$002farticle-p75.xml](https://content.sciendo.com/configurable/contentpage/journals$002fbog$002f45$002f45$002farticle-p75.xml)



Society for Women's Action and Training Initiatives (SWATI) has been implementing an evaluated model for rural women and girls' public space safety. The project titled 'kNOw Fear' is a gender-integrated, governance-based model, rooted in women's empowerment and community mobilisation. The project is a collaboration between SWATI and International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW). kNOw Fear is an evidence informed intervention research project, which was implemented in 11 villages of Surendranagar district in Gujarat. The project centers around issues of public space sexual violence against women and girls and its impact on their lives. The first phase began in 2016 and the three-year project with 24 months of intervention concluded in June 2019.

RWSA was a key strategic tool in the project, aimed at bringing out women's safety concerns and needs and placing them on the agenda of gram panchayats to address. The politically

symbolic platform of the Mahila Gram Sabha was utilised to mobilise women to frame demands and put them forth to the gram panchayats for inclusion in the Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP).

In the process of implementation, the WSA tool was tested and adapted to suit its application to rural areas. While the basic principle remains the same, the understanding of what constitutes 'rural', the idea of private and public in rural areas, the manner in which rural gets formed, over all socio-cultural fabric of the village and the norms around women's access to public spaces etc. differ. These influence the methodology and the process.

This document is based on SWATI's experience of conducting RWSAs as part of the kNOw Fear project. It is an attempt to understand the 'rural' and describes the method, process and outcomes of the RWSA carried out in six villages of Surendranagar district in Gujarat. (Sedla, Savlas, Nana Goriya, Panva, Bamanva and Gavana)

Understanding the 'Rural' in Women's Safety Audit:

In India rural spaces like road, temples and tea shops and markets in some areas continue to be mediated by gender and caste-privileging men and upper caste. Thus, rural spaces are contested spaces—and the access for women and the marginalised are a product of such contestation.

In addition, while applying the WSA tool in rural communities, it is necessary to consider conditions of rural living that negatively affect women's personal safety. These include, amongst others:

- Distantly located essential services such as hospitals, police services, government and educational institutions.
- Lack of safe public transport, challenges of geographical isolation – restrictions on mobility.
- Women and girls go out for open defecation to outskirts of village because of lack of proper soak pit facility in their home.
- Inadequate infrastructure like water for drinking and household use, roads or proper sewage disposal.
- Streets with poor or no lighting.



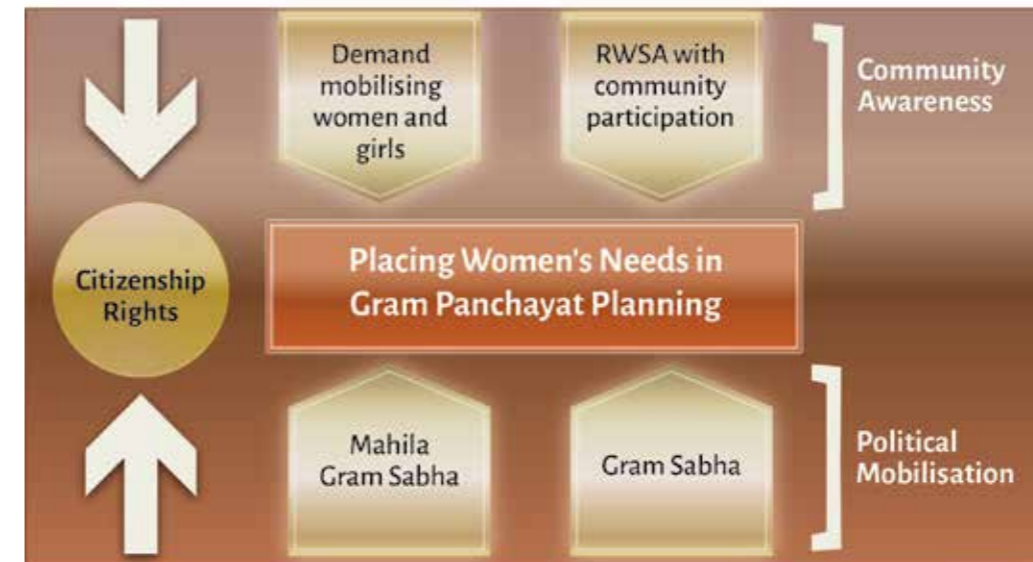


Steps to conducting RWSA:

1. A team of people responsible for conducting WSA was identified –these were representatives from women’s collectives, groups of adolescent girls and young men and GP members (male or female).
2. Capacity building and demonstration of safety walk – process in conducting the audit was carried out with this team.
3. Familiarised the group with questionnaires and formats to be filled during the safety walk.
4. Collected primary quantitative information of villages and filled it in the safety audit formats.
5. Held meetings with women and girls for selection of the route for safety walk and allocation of responsibilities among the team members (people responsible for drawing the map, taking photographs or filling questionnaire formats, observe etc). Drew a basic map of the village for being elaborated during the safety walk.
6. Conducted safety walk on the selected route - once during daylight and once after dark to include all the safety concerns; took photographs as evidence; conducted interviews with girls using the route to understand practical and perceived concerns; developed the safety map etc.
7. Debriefing meeting with the safety audit team to synthesize the findings and fill in the gaps.
8. Presented the findings in Mahila Gram Sabha for validation.
9. Developed charters of demands to be presented at the Gram Sabha for inclusion into the GPDP.



Engendering the Gram Panchayat Development Plan



The Gram Panchayats are constitutionally mandated to prepare Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GPDP) for economic development and social justice utilising resources available with them as well as external sources. The GPDP should be comprehensive and based on participatory process involving the community particularly Gram Sabha.

Women normally are kept out of most planning process including the gram sabha and their needs get represented through

men. Development planning thus has a male perspective. RWSA with its women centeredness and specific demands related to essential services and infrastructure is an important tool for bringing in women’s concerns in to the GPDP.

In the *kNOw Fear* project women’s collectives and young girls mobilised around their citizenship rights utilised the RWSA as a tool to systematically generate evidence and sharpen their articulation of demanding action to make



public spaces safer by the GPs. Mahila Gram Sabhas are utilised as politically symbolic platforms that provide the space for women to voice these concerns, and the push for inclusion of women’s demands happens at the level of the Gram Sabha where they are taken up for inclusion in GPDP.

Demands Emerging out of RWSA and the Gram Panchayat's Response



Garbage Disposal Systems: Regular garbage collection from streets and removal of heaps of hay and straw from the roads (Bajana, Nana Goriya, Savlas and Bamanva).

GP response: The panchayat of Bamanva responded to women's demand raised through Mahila Gram Sabha and cleaned the roads through GP's fund and allocated separate plots where people can collect and store their field produce and waste.

Streetlights: Provision of streetlights near the bus stand (Savlas, Sedla, Nana Goriya, Bamanva, Panva); near the Aanganwadi and school (Sedla, Panva, Bamanva, Nana Goriya) and around the village pond (Bamanva, Savlas, Sedla).

GP Response: Panchayats in all five villages responded to this demand and fixed the streetlights. Panchayat of Nana Goriya fixed the non-working streetlights and put up new streetlights in areas it was needed, for which it mobilised a sum of 59,000 rupees through Panchayat's internal funds and external resources.

Village Sanitation: Women have demanded a gutter line for disposal of waste water as it collects on streets and is a health hazard. Lack of toilets linked to proper water supply and soak pits is the major reason for open defecation.

GP response: Women leaders in Bamanva presented their demand for a gutter line in the Gram Sabha. In response the GP included this demand in their development plan and mobilised 450,000 rupees towards construction of gutter line. The Panchayat in Gavana mobilised 480,000 rupees for setting up proper systems of sewage and waste disposal in settlements of Vankar and Rabari communities.

Construction and repair of Roads, Bathing and washing Ghats: Women raised demand for construction or repair of approach roads and roads leading to essential services such as aanganwadi (Sedla) and bus stand (Savlas and Nana Goriya)

GP response: GP in Gavana sanctioned the construction of RCC road from school to the Panchayat office and main village intersection. Construction and repair of broken or exposed washing and bathing Ghats in Savlas, Nana Goriya, Bamanva, Panva and Sedla were taken up. Three washing / bathing ghats were repaired and a new covered ghat was constructed by the GP of Sedla village.

Pruning bushes: Women demanded for removal of thick bushes of Gando Bawal (*Prosopis Juliflora*) on roads and around ponds where women reported their fear of men hiding behind them.

GP response: The overgrown bushes covering the village paths were trimmed down in Nana Goriya (Near Thakorvaas and village pond), Bamanva (near the village pond and Vankarvaas), Panva (near the village pond).

Transportation Services: Availability of safe public transport in sync with school timings was a critical demand by women. Girls drop out of school because there is no transport available to travel to the higher education facilities located in other villages or town. There was also a demand for repair and construction of bus stands.

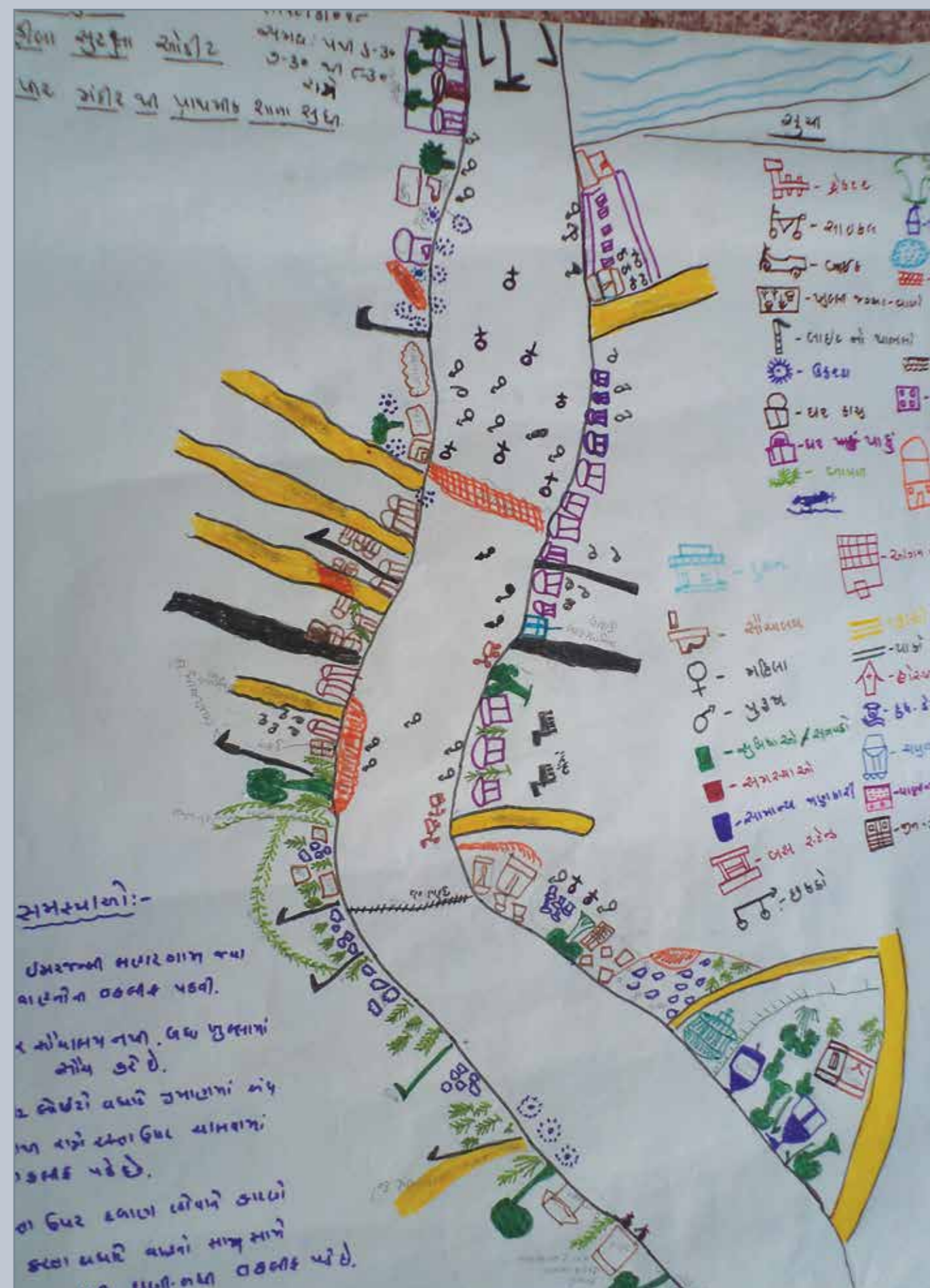


GP response: Applications to the transport department were sent for adding stops for already plying buses and introducing buses at school time for girls in Sedla. Women's collectives followed up for regularising of public bus service to the village so that the girls can continue education. (Sedla, Nana Goriya and Panva).

It was interesting to note that the demands emerging through conducting RWSA were not just related to civic amenities but also related to social behaviors that are a source of discomfort and hinder women's access to public spaces. Thus in almost all safety audits, urinating in open and men hanging around in groups near the main village crossroad, around bus stand and schools were listed and discussed in the Mahila Gram Sabha.



Women's Safety Audit, contextualised for rural areas has emerged as an important tool for women and girls to articulate their demands and present it to the Gram Panchayat, and other planning bodies at the district and state level. In addition, RWSA has helped build public discourse around public space sexual violence faced by women and girls.



Safety Map

