

kNOw Fear

A Symposium on Reclaiming Rural Public Spaces for
Women and Marginalized Communities

Knowledge, Building Solidarity, and Catalyzing Advocacy



Dates: 2nd – 3rd July, 2025

Venue: Center for Women Centered Social Work, School of Social
Work, Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai



SWATI

Society for Women's
Action and Training Initiative



Why This? Why Now?

Background and Context

While violence against women and girls in private spaces has finally begun to receive long-overdue attention, violence in public spaces— especially in rural India—remains largely unacknowledged and neglected, despite its profound impact on access to education, livelihoods, citizenship rights, and overall well being. Public spaces, whether defined in legal or sociological terms, are meant to be open for use and enjoyment by all. Yet, in rural areas, these spaces—streets, agricultural fields, forests, schools, healthcare facilities, panchayat offices, workplaces and even digital platforms remain unsafe OR exclusionary for women, girls, and other marginalised groups, due to intersecting oppressions of caste, tribe, religion, sexuality and disability.

An intersectional approach enables us to reveal how families, society, state systems and markets institutionalise these inequalities. Addressing these inequalities requires an approach rooted in liberation and transformation that challenges social norms, power hierarchies, and systemic neglect.

Since 2017, SWATI has been implementing kNOw Fear, a model that places public space safety for rural women and girls at the heart of local governance. The approach reframes safety as a citizenship right and calls for a governance response, with Gram Panchayats as central actors in creating safer, more inclusive public environments.

The kNOw Fear initiative emerges from a critical gap and a need to centre rural realities in conversations about gender-based violence in public spaces; to expand our understanding of what constitutes public space; and to surface grassroots knowledge and strategies for change. Too often, both data and discourse focus on urban contexts. But rural areas carry distinct challenges—low police presence, inadequate infrastructure, stronger caste and patriarchal norms, and weaker accountability systems. Evidence, research and solidarity are urgently needed to address these systemic barriers.

What We Seek?

While some models are well-documented, we are aware that they continue to evolve as contexts shift and as awareness and leadership capacities are enhanced. We also recognize that many organizations are engaging with gender-based violence in public spaces in rural areas, but their work may not be written up in a formal way —and therefore not accessible for others to learn from. Apart from systematic research, studies We are seeking evidence and insights into the processes, strategies, and outcomes that have contributed to meaningful change, with a particular interest in the diversity of approaches adopted across different contexts. Specifically, we aim to understand the underlying theories of change, the strategies that enabled deeper engagement with rural systems—and how interventions shifted initial assumptions leading to improved effective strategies. We are also interested in strategies that contributed to norm change at the family, community, state, and market levels;

We invite you to share your work, insights, and experiences related to the prevalence of and responses to sexual and gender-based violence and discrimination in public spaces in rural areas. This includes (but is not limited to):v

- The extent, scale, and impact of public space violence on rural women and girls
- Safety in schools for girls and marginalized groups (Dalit, Adivasi, Muslim, trans women and trans feminine and disabled people)

- Occupational safety in informal and rural employment sectors (agriculture, construction, public works, domestic work)
- Access and exclusion linked to frontline worker roles and responsibilities
- Violence in digital public spaces and its offline consequences
- The role of local institutions, especially Gram Panchayats, education and health institutions, in enabling or obstructing safety and inclusion
- The role of collectives, forums, and collaborations that have enabled action—such as solidarity, develop responses and counter violence

This symposium brings together practitioners, researchers and academicians to shape a more grounded, inclusive, and action-oriented advocacy on this critical yet little underexplored issue.

Who we are?

Society for Women's Action and Training Initiatives- SWATI,

A feminist organization based in Gujarat, brings to this initiative over two decades of grounded, field-based experience deepening understanding and strengthening accountability around violence in domestic and public spaces—especially in rural areas. Our work spans gender justice, gender-based violence, governance, and a system's led response interventions. Since 2017, SWATI has led the kNOw Fear model, working with Gram Panchayats, adolescent girls, frontline workers, and rural communities to embed the right to safe public spaces into local governance systems.

Institute for Social Studies and Trust-ISST

established in 1980, has played a pioneering role in advancing gender-sensitive research and community-based development programs. With a focus on the livelihood and well-being of vulnerable communities, ISST employs a gender transformative approach through critical inquiry and field engagement. The four themes that shape their work are Informality, Precarious Work and Care, Gender Based Violence and Work, Gender and Digitalisation of Work, and Women Powering the World of Work.

Center for Women Centered Social Work, School of Social Work, TISS

The Centre's underlying common thread is to enhance within social work epistemology and praxis, the realities of women in all their specificities of location (caste, class, tribe, disability etc.,) through gendered and women centered social work. This requires a deepening dialogue on feminist theorizations, praxis models, praxis trajectories in the global and indigenous contexts. Particularly, the key areas so far based on faculty work and interests include the study of gendered construction women and their identities within specific axis of caste, tribe and religion, their labour, sexuality, fertility and violence, impact of development policies and development practice on gender relations and more specifically women in the mentioned diverse locations.

Together, we bring decades of on-the-ground knowledge, evidence and research-based insight, and a deep commitment to transforming how public space is understood, governed, and reclaimed.



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