



kNOw Fear:

Reclaiming Rural Public Spaces for Women & Marginalized Communities.

July, 2nd - 3rd, 2025



SWATI
Society for
Women's Action
and Training Initiative



Voices from the Margins: Gender, Justice, and Public Space in Rural India

Violence against women and girls in private spaces has finally begun to receive long-overdue attention, however 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. 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.

This Symposium brings together diverse voices, critical research, and grounded experiences to illuminate how gendered violence, marginalisation, and resistance are experienced and contested in rural India. Drawn from across geographies—Jharkhand, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra, Telangana, Punjab, and beyond—these contributions speak from the fields, forests, schools, courtrooms, Gram Sabhas, digital spaces, and migrant corridors of the country.

From Adivasi and Dalit survivors reclaiming justice, to young girls challenging social norms through sport, from digital helplines addressing online abuse, to safety audits triggering infrastructural change—this collection reflects the intersections of caste, tribe, class, gender, geography, and governance.

It includes qualitative research, grassroots practitioner insights, and participatory methodologies led by feminist collectives, civil society organisations, and community leaders. These 18 contributions do not just describe exclusion and harm—they also spotlight strategies of resilience, resistance, and transformation that centre dignity, rights, and inclusion.

Together, they urge policymakers, development practitioners, and justice providers to rethink safety and equity—not as technical fixes but as deeply political, collective, and location-based processes. This symposium hopes to be both a testimony and a call—to listen to voices from the margins and to act for justice in all spaces, public and private.

Symposium on Rural Public Space Safety and Inclusion

2 -3 July, 2025

Schedule

Day 1: Mapping Violence and Community-Led Resistance

Time	Session Title/Presentation	Abstract (Summary)	Presenter(s)
9:00 AM- 9:45AM	Welcome, Introductions, and Opening Remarks		Collaborating partners
9:45AM- 11:00 AM	Panel 1: General Violence Faced by Women and Girls in Rural Public Spaces		Moderator: Jahnvi Andharia (ISST)
	Rural Public Space Violence and its Gendered Impact	Examines how women and girls navigate fear, surveillance, and exclusion in rural public/educational spaces.	Tara Nair (Work Free and Fair), Poonam Kathuria (SWATI)
	Extent and Impact of Public Space Violence	Links gender-based violence in transit to job insecurity and caste/language barriers that limit migrant women's access to justice and housing.	Ananya Iyer, Keerthana Ragh (Aajeevika Bureau)
	Feminist Application of Complex Adaptive Systems	Uses systems thinking to analyze exclusion patterns and design interventions.	Niveditha Menon (CBPS)
11:00 AM- 11:30 AM		Tea Break	

Time	Session Title/Presentation	Abstract (Summary)	Presenter(s)
11:30 AM-12:45 PM	Panel 2: Community-Led and Survivor-Centred Approaches		Moderator: Trupti Jhaveri Panchal (TISS)
	Count Us	Highlights women’s collectives building local accountability against violence.	Vandana Sharma (Akanksha Sewa Sadan)
	Reimagining Local Governance with Women at the Center	Shows how Mahila Gram Sabhas empower women in grassroots decision-making.	Karen Piniero (SWATI)
	Backlash and Belonging	Examines resistance faced by women claiming space and strategies for resilience.	Camellia Reja (ISST)
12:45 PM-1:45 PM	Panel 3: Formal Institutions and Policy Frameworks		Moderator: Shewli Kumar (TISS)
	Structural Violence in Agriculture	Exposes policy gaps devaluing women’s agricultural labor.	Seema Kulkarni (SOPPECOM)
	Everyday Violence in Agriculture	Documents verbal, physical, and structural violence in women’s farm work across 3 states.	Sejal Dand (ANANDI)
1:45 PM-2:30 PM	Lunch Break		

Time	Session Title/Presentation	Abstract (Summary)	Presenter(s)
2:30 PM-3:30 PM	Panel 4: Tools for Safety Audits and Inclusive Design		Moderator: Rekha Raj (ISST)
	Shakti of Infrastructure and Influence to Address GBV	Connects infrastructure, leadership, and governance reforms to prevent gender-based violence.	Pallavi Sobti Rajapal (Utthan)
	Engendering Local Governance through Safety Audits	Women-led safety audits influence local planning, budgets, and accountability.	Manorma & Bharti (SWATI)
3:30 PM-4:00 PM	Tea Break		
4.00 PM-5.00 PM	Panel 5: From Schooling Norms to Work Barriers		Moderator: Niveditha Menon (CBPS)
	Reproducing Inequality in Rural Schools	Reveals how schools reinforce gender/caste norms for marginalized girls.	Ponam Kathuria (SWATI)
	From Girls' Aspiration to Women in Workforce	Traces social norms Restricting girls' Education/economic Mobility.	Arty Kumari (Breakthrough)
5:00 PM-5:30 PM	Synthesizing Insights: Open Discussion		All Participants

Day 2: Margins, Intersectionality and the Digital World

Time	Session Title/Presentation	Abstract (Summary)	Presenter(s)
9:00 AM–9:30 AM	Reflections on Day 1		Moderator: Tara Nair (Work Free & Fair Foundation)
9:30 AM–10:30 AM	Panel 1: Breaking Boundaries: Women and Girls Redefining Possibilities		Moderator: Sejal Dand (ANANDI)
	Beyond the Norm	Highlights women in non-traditional livelihoods (e.g., construction/driving).	Shipra (ISST)
	Adolescent girls: their energy and capacity to take risks in challenging the status quo	Adolescent girls reclaim agency, challenge patriarchy, and lead change through solidarity, leadership, and grassroots innovation.	Renu Arya and Krishna Rawat (MJAS)
10:30 AM–11:30 AM	Panel 2: Structural and Intersectional Violence		Moderator: Poonam Kathuria (SWATI)
	Denied Justice, Denied Space	Discusses systemic exclusion of Dalit women from justice/public space.	Manjula Pradeep (NCWL)
	Margins Within Margins	Explores layered violence against Adivasi/Dalit women in accessing space/justice.	Trupti Jhaveri Panchal & Archita Joshi (Samvedna)
	Slipping Through the Cracks of Justice	Examines institutional failures in addressing violence against Adivasi girls.	Shewli Kumar (TISS)

Time	Session Title/Presentation	Abstract (Summary)	Presenter(s)
11:30 AM–12:00 PM		Tea Break	
12:00 AM–1:00 AM	Panel 3: Unseen Geographies: Queer Feminist Narratives from Rural and Semi-Urban India		Moderator: Tejaswi Sevekeri (Saheli Sangh)
	Queer & Trans Experiences	Discusses queer/trans negotiation of public space and safety.	Omkar Mahesh Shinde (Nazariya)
	We Were Always Here: Gender, Silence, and Mountains	Explores queer invisibility, belonging And resistance in rural Himachal through space, memory and everyday exclusions.	Don Hasar (She/They) (GAWI)
1:00 PM–2:00 PM	Panel 4: Digital and Governance Innovations for Inclusion.		Moderator: Rukmini Bannerjee (DASRA)
	Evolving Nature of Online GBV	Analyses digital gender-based. violence and exclusion.	Ridhima Sharma (Point Of View)
	The Safety Continuum: Bridging Physical and Digital Spaces for Women's Empowerment.	This Karnataka initiative combats digital/gender violence empowering rural women and girls to reclaim public and online spaces.	Aparna Kelley, (IT for Change)

Time	Session Title/Presentation	Abstract (Summary)	Presenter(s)
2:00 PM- 3:00 PM		Lunch Break	
3:00 PM- 5:00 PM	Roundtable	Synthesizing Issues, Learnings, and Way Forward	All Participants

Abstracts

Adolescent Girls and Public Space Sexual Violence: Insights from a Field Study in Western India :

Tara Nair (Work Free and Fair Foundation) Poonam Kathuria(SWATI)

This paper presents the main findings of the research enquiry jointly conducted by SWATI, a feminist organization committed to ending violence against women, and Gujarat Institute of Development Research (GIDR) a research organization into public space sexual harassment and violence as experienced by adolescent girls living in rural areas of the state of Gujarat. Almost all the available studies on the issue of sexual violence against women in public spaces focus on urban contexts. The experiences of rural girls and women have been largely neglected presumably because the strict demarcation of gender roles, close social ties and difficulty in demarcating public and private spaces in a village setting. The research attempted to fill this gap.

The study aimed at understanding the limits to mobility of rural girls, the nature and extent of occurrence of sexual violence in rural public places and comprehending the ways in which young girls deal with such violence. Data were collected from 527 girls (age 14-19 years) with the help of structured questionnaires administered through computer assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) tools.

Staring is the most frequently reported form of harassment followed by sexual remarks, sexually explicit talks and stalking. While, overall, strangers were reported to commit most of sexual harassment and violence, known persons - co-workers, classmates and neighbours - formed a fairly high percentage of among the perpetrators of sexual abuse, stalking and sexual innuendos. In most of the cases the victims of sexual harassment were found not to seek any institutional support which raises questions about both awareness and adequacy of such arrangements.

The study found a fifth of the girls dropping out of school as they felt it unsafe to move about. In fact girls were observed to generally restrict their movement in public places for fear of harassment either on their own volition or due to parental choice. Such voluntary or forced contraction in mobility has serious implications for the development of the capabilities of rural women and girls and demands serious public attention and governance intervention.

Between Identities and Informal Systems: Navigating Public Space Violence and Justice as Adivasi Migrant Women"

Ananya Iyer, Work Fair and Free Foundation, Keertana S. Ragh, Ajeevika Bureau

This presentation explores the extent and impact of public space violence on rural Adivasi migrant women and girls, based on a qualitative study conducted in Banswara (Rajasthan) and Surat (Gujarat). It highlights how caste, gender, tribal, worker, and migrant identities intersect to produce compounded vulnerabilities and barriers to justice. Women face violence across multiple stages of migration—during transit, at worksites, and within community spaces—yet their experiences often remain invisible and unaddressed.

Through interviews with women workers and system actors—Protection Officers, caste leaders, police, and advocates—the study reveals that justice is negotiated along a continuum between formal and informal systems. While state mechanisms often employ informal practices, caste panchayats and other non-state actors wield significant power, frequently reinforcing patriarchal control and subjecting women to public

punishments and forced settlements. Adolescent girls, in particular, remain unrecognized as workers or survivors, with limited avenues for redress.

Women are forced to separate their struggles—approaching labour departments for wage theft and other institutions for violence—falling between systems and identities. Emerging interventions, such as Aajeevika’s women’s help desks and union support during caste hearings, offer hope. The study calls for integrated, responsive justice mechanisms rooted in the lived realities of rural, tribal, and migrant women and girls.

Feminist Application of Complex Adaptive Systems in Gender Violence in Public Spaces

Niveditha Menon, Centre for Budgeting and Policy Studies

Researching gender-based violence is an active exercise of co-creation. The crucial aspect of this endeavor is to put the individuals, their identities, and their experiences at the center of the inquiry. The nature of violence is such that the articulation of individuals who are active agents creating their own realities is not limited to “objective realities” or the visceral experiences of the event but involves subjective, emotional meaning-making. The data produced in our study, *Gender Violence in Public Spaces*, on public spaces, gender violence, and safer spaces comes from the agents operating in multiple contexts while adapting to the constant changes in the contexts. With two years of embedded ethnography, participant observation, and oral narratives, we were able to access the everyday experiences of violence, articulation of these experiences by women and adolescent girls (WAGs), and the contexts in which they operate. The experiences of WAGs are subjected to their identities, wherein every experience of violence is similar but not the same, demanding careful attention and consideration with the cognizance of the researcher’s positionality.

We have applied these feminist principles through the theoretical framework of CAS to study the emergence of safe spaces. Through the three central postulations of CAS—first, anchoring the agents and their various interactions; second, considering the constant change in the interactions that do not allow for the system to be at equilibrium; and third, introducing emergence, a non-linear and dynamic phenomenon that is larger than those interactions—we were able to build an analytical framework that provided us the means to simplify the complexities without compromising on the nuances.

Count Us

Vandana Sharma, Akanksha Sewa Sadan

This study reflects our work to empower women panchayat representatives and strengthen their leadership and political participation in rural Bihar. Despite 50% reservation at the panchayat level, power often remains with upper castes or male relatives of elected women. For these women, asserting their rights and gaining recognition is the first step.

Our interventions work at two levels—engaging with Panchayat stakeholders and with community groups. These processes deepen conversations around patriarchy, gender discrimination, domestic violence, health, reproductive rights, caste and religion-based power, and decision-making. We give focused attention to leadership among women with disabilities, trans persons, and adolescent girls.

Through activities like football and kabaddi, adolescent girls explore bodily autonomy and rights in playful, affirming ways. We treat the Panchayat as a unit of civil rights protection, using rights-based advocacy from village to district and state levels.

Initiatives like the *Me Too Sleep* campaign, dialogues on safe abortion, menstrual health awareness in schools and anganwadis, and outreach to survivors of violence via Sakhi, OSCs, and DLSA, all ensure women and girls can claim space and voice.

Our approach makes Panchayats more inclusive and equitable. By engaging women and girls at all levels and using timely, rights-based strategies, we are not only strengthening participation but also reshaping how governance is practiced—bringing dignity, equality, and real leadership to the grassroots.

Reimagining Local Governance with Women at the Center: Field Insights from Gujarat

Karen Piniero and Alu Ben Sarpanch, SWATI

How do rural women shape and experience governance when invited to speak in public spaces long closed to them? Can formal platforms like Mahila Gram Sabhas (MGS) serve not just as events but as meaningful spaces where women's concerns translate into collective action and state response? As practitioners and policymakers strive to make governance more inclusive, these questions remain central—especially for those working at the intersection of gender, grassroots democracy, and public space safety.

This presentation shares insights from a multi-year effort by SWATI (Society for Women's Action and Training Initiatives) under the 'kNOwFear' project, to strengthen rural women's participation in local governance through Mahila Gram Sabhas (MGS) in Gujarat. Based on fieldwork in Santrampur (Dahod) and Patdi (Surendranagar), the study explores how women's collectives and adolescent groups are leveraging the MGS as a symbolic and political space to articulate issues, mobilize action, and engage with Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs).

Findings surface the complexities of participation: while some villages show strong, sustained collective action, others struggle with fractured leadership, caste-based exclusion, or tokenistic institutional responses. The MGS often marks a powerful emotional and political threshold for women—yet its transformative potential remains unevenly realized. This session will be useful for practitioners designing participatory governance models, policymakers aiming to embed gender-responsive processes in local planning, and researchers interested in the lived intersections of citizenship, care, and state accountability. By foregrounding women's lived experiences and leadership in rural governance, this work presents a replicable model across diverse contexts for institutionalising gender-responsive, accountable, and inclusive local development.

Backlash and Belonging: Women's Leadership and Everyday Violence in Rural India

Camellia Reja, Institute of Social Studies Trust

This paper draws on insights from the Sustaining Power: Women's Struggles Against Contemporary Backlash in South Asia (SuPWR) research project to examine how grassroots women's collectives in rural India confront, and are shaped by, entrenched social norms and backlash. Focusing on two community-led

movements - Kotra Adivasi Vikas Manch in Rajasthan and Samarthan Mahila Sangathan in Gujarat - the paper explores the everyday vulnerabilities faced by women who challenge power structures by reclaiming public spaces, participating in political processes, and delivering community-based justice.

In Kotra, Adivasi women engaged in the Panchayati Raj system and mobilising through the Gram Sabhas under the PESA Act encounter not only deep-seated gender norms within their communities and families but also systemic barriers such as Pati Sarpanch practices and political interference. Their leadership is often met with hostility, including verbal, emotional, and physical violence. In Gujarat, members of Samarthan Mahila Sangathan who operate the Nyay Samiti, a para-legal women-led justice forum, experience backlash for supporting survivors of domestic and caste-based violence. Many of these women, themselves from Dalit communities, face threats and ostracisation by dominant-caste groups, particularly the Darbar community, and are targeted by the families of those accused of violence.

By foregrounding women's narratives and strategies of resistance, the paper examines how normative gender roles, caste hierarchies, and community control over public space intersect to produce layered vulnerabilities. It also reflects on the enabling and obstructive roles played by local institutions such as Gram Panchayats, health, and education systems. Ultimately, the paper argues that while grassroots collectives offer vital spaces of solidarity and transformation, they are simultaneously sites of risk and confrontation. This makes the relationship between empowerment and vulnerability both complex and deeply contextual.

Structural Violence Against Women in Agriculture

Seema Kulkarni, SOPPECOM

This paper draws on a recent study conducted by SOPPECOM in collaboration with MAKAAAM, which examines the structural and gendered dimensions of violence experienced by women in agriculture across Maharashtra, Telangana, and Punjab. Moving beyond narrow definitions, the study conceptualizes violence as embedded within intersecting structures of caste, class, and patriarchy that shape agrarian distress in India. Women farmers face compounded vulnerabilities due to landlessness, economic exploitation, declining labour opportunities, and limited institutional support—despite existing legal safeguards.

The neoliberal transformation of agriculture—marked by mechanization, monocropping, and commercialization—has disproportionately impacted women by shrinking labour opportunities and reinforcing inequalities in land ownership and access to resources. Structural violence is further intensified by rising alcoholism, domestic violence, and the lack of effective redressal mechanisms.

Critically, spaces such as farms, forests, and migration sites are not recognized as formal workplaces, rendering the harassment and exploitation that women face in these sites invisible and unaddressed. This invisibility compounds their exclusion from labour protections and justice mechanisms.

The study calls for a reconceptualization of agricultural and allied sites as gendered workspaces that demand legal recognition, protection, and investment. It urges urgent policy interventions to secure women's access to land and productive resources, recognize their contributions to agriculture, and ensure that all agrarian spaces are made safe and equitable for women. Addressing structural violence in agriculture is essential not only for advancing gender justice but also for fostering a more inclusive and sustainable rural economy.

Everyday Violence against women in Agriculture

Sejal Dand, Anandi

The study “Everyday Violence Against Women in Agriculture” was done by ANANDI, SOPPECOM of the Feminist Policy Collective in collaboration with Mahila Kisan Adhikaar Manch (MAKAAM). It explores the pervasive and often invisible violence that women face across various agricultural workspaces in India. Conducted in 2021 across seven districts in Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Telangana, the qualitative research employed in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews to understand the experiences of 140 rural women engaged in farming, wage labour, cane cutting, and other agricultural activities.

The research highlights how systemic gender-based violence intersects with caste, class, and socio-economic status, compounding the vulnerability of women—especially widows, single women, Dalits, Adivasis, and migrants. Findings reveal a broad spectrum of everyday violence: physical, verbal, sexual, and psychological harassment; denial of rights and access to land and entitlements; lack of sanitation, childcare, and safety infrastructure; and exploitative labour relations exacerbated by debt and migration. Workplace harassment, often perpetrated by employers, contractors, or officials, leads to severe mental health distress, physical harm, social isolation, and economic instability.

The study also exposes the inadequacies of existing redressal mechanisms. Fear of stigma and retaliation, low legal literacy, and inaccessible complaint systems further silence women. The COVID-19 lockdown intensified these vulnerabilities, deepening economic distress and increasing incidences of violence. By centering the lived experiences of women agricultural workers, this pioneering study calls for urgent, systemic interventions that address both the structural inequalities and the immediate safety concerns of rural working women. It sets the stage for future participatory action research and advocacy efforts that aim to develop genderjust policies and ensure dignity, recognition, and safety for women in agriculture.

Shakti of Infrastructure and Influence to Address GBV: Learnings from a Study on Women's Safety in Rural Public Spaces in Gujarat, India

Pallavi Sobti Rajapal, Utthan Trust

In rural Gujarat, women’s safety in public spaces is closely tied to mobility, infrastructure, access to services, and social identity. This study, conceived by Utthan and jointly undertaken with the Institute for Social Studies Trust (ISST), adopted a gender safety audit approach to assess women's lived experiences in 11 villages across four districts (coastal and tribal). Grounded in the realities of Nyay Samitis and Women’s Sangathans, the study documented women’s perceptions of safety and catalyzed community-led action.

Using the **Shakti Audit Toolkit**, the mixed-methods study engaged 528 individuals through safety perception surveys, 24/7 time-use mapping, FGDs, KIIs, and transect walks. The findings revealed that 22% of rural women had experienced violence in the past year, yet only 12% approached the police. Challenges included inadequate lighting, unsafe roads, poor public transport, and caste-gender norms that hinder access to essential services. Widowed, tribal, and OBC women, especially those commuting long distances for work, were most impacted.

The Shakti tool helped make visible the links between gender, infrastructure, and access, enabling women leaders to advocate effectively. In over 40 villages, the findings were used to engage with Panchayats, leading to tangible changes such as improved roads, toilets, and lighting. In Kotambi village (Dahod), this resulted in higher school attendance among girls and increased participation of women in Gram Sabhas.

This study provides actionable policy recommendations—from integrating gender concerns into Gram Panchayat Development Planning to creating local grievance redress systems. It advocates for a feminist, intersectional approach to rural infrastructure and safety, essential for enabling women and girls to move freely, claim space, and pursue education, work, and leadership without fear—thereby advancing SDG 5 meaningfully.

Reclaiming Rural Public Spaces: The Rural Women’s Safety Audit Approach

Manorama and Bharti, Swati

The kNOw Fear project has adapted the Women’s Safety Audit (WSA) methodology to the rural context of Gujarat, addressing the unique realities of women’s access to public space. In these areas, where infrastructure is minimal and social-cultural ties shape space, safety concerns remain largely invisible. The Rural Women’s Safety Audit (RWSA) is a participatory tool enabling women and marginalized groups to assess safety in shared spaces, articulate their needs, and influence local governance. By mobilizing women’s groups and leveraging the politically symbolic Mahila Gram Sabha, the project integrates safety concerns into the Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP). This presentation highlights the rural-specific adaptation of WSA, the structural challenges of visibility, and the pathways through which RWSA catalyzes gender-responsive planning. The approach has successfully brought community-led evidence to local decision-making and enhanced women’s citizenship, especially in negotiating access to sanitation, lighting, transport, and other critical public services.

Reproducing Inequality: Status of Gender Equality and Safety in Rural School Settings of Gujarat

Poonam Kathuria, Swati

Rooted in SWATI’s long-standing engagement with adolescent girls, boys, and school communities, this study examines how school environments in select blocks of two districts in Gujarat often reinforce rather than challenge existing gender unequal norms. Gender safety—understood as enabling all students to learn, participate, and thrive without fear of psychological, social, or physical harm—can only be realised by addressing the deeper question of gender equality in everyday school experiences.

The study used a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach across eight villages in two districts of Gujarat. Data was collected through 12 focus group discussions (4 with girls, 8 with boys) and 18 in-depth interviews with teachers, principals, and parents. In addition, we conducted gender safety audits in eight schools, assessing adherence to the 2024 Gender Safety Guidelines issued by the Gujarat education department.

Findings point to significant gaps in the implementation of these guidelines. Girls reported emotional attachment to certain school spaces, yet access to key facilities like libraries, laboratories, and playgrounds remained restricted—often mediated through roles like cleaning. The absence of female staff, rigid rules, and lack of support mechanisms exacerbated girls’ discomfort. Menstruation and reproductive health

remained taboo topics, while unequal responsibilities, mobility restrictions, and discriminatory norms further entrenched inequality within school spaces and structures.

These school-level patterns reflect larger systemic, structural, and policy-induced barriers—ranging from caste and gender-based notions of honour to lack of local employment and systemic discrimination in welfare delivery. The study offers recommendations at both local and policy levels to foster truly gender-equal and safe learning environments.

From Girls' Aspiration to Women in Workforce

Arty Kumari, Breakthrough Trust

Despite progressive laws and policies in India, entrenched gender norms and patriarchal structures continue to limit the educational and economic agency of girls and women. Structural discrimination begins at birth and persists throughout a girl's life, restricting access to education, training, technology, and markets—key pillars for inclusive development.

Haryana, a state with strong economic indicators, starkly reflects this contradiction. In 2024, the sex ratio at birth dropped to 910 girls per 1,000 boys—the lowest in eight years—revealing continued son preference. A recent study found that 88% of girls who dropped out of school were aged 15–18, with household chores, menstruation, and illness as key factors. Despite strong academic performance, many girls are denied higher education, especially in STEM, due to concerns over safety and mobility.

Drawing from Breakthrough's grassroots experience in Haryana, this paper explores how restrictions on girls' mobility—often justified by safety concerns—emerge as a major barrier to their development. These limitations not only reinforce early marriage and violence but also prevent girls from transitioning into the workforce. The presentation argues for disrupting harmful gender norms, ensuring continued education, and enabling mobility as critical pathways to achieving gender equality and unlocking the potential of young women.

Beyond the Norm: Reclaiming Rural Public Spaces through NonTraditional Livelihoods and Everyday Acts of Agency

Shipra, Institute of Social Studies Trust.

This presentation draws on findings from the *Beyond the Norm* study, which explores how women and marginalized individuals in rural India reclaim public spaces and challenge exclusionary norms through participation in non-traditional livelihoods (NTLs) such as driving, construction, and mobile repair. Despite persistent gender, caste, and class barriers, the study reveals that women's entry into these male-dominated sectors acts as a catalyst for incremental change, fostering both individual agency and broader shifts in community perceptions.

Using qualitative case studies across four Indian states and framed by intersectional and rights-based approaches, the research highlights the complex negotiations women undertake with families, communities, and institutions to access and sustain NTL opportunities. Critical enablers include supportive kinship networks, organizational handholding, and exposure to gender-just curricula, while barriers such as care burdens, time poverty, and lack of safe infrastructure persist.

The study documents “small wins”—such as securing formal employment, gaining digital skills, or influencing local hiring practices—that collectively disrupt entrenched norms and expand the citizenship of women and trans persons in rural public spaces. It further underscores how intersecting identities—caste, religion, marital status, and disability—shape both opportunities and vulnerabilities, with institutional responses often inadequate or gender-blind.

The findings call for strengthening supportive ecosystems, embedding gender-transformative curricula in skilling programs, and institutionalizing women’s representation in local governance and markets. Ultimately, *Beyond the Norm* demonstrates that NTL skilling is not merely about employment, but about enabling everyday acts of resistance and solidarity that lay the groundwork for more inclusive, equitable, and safe rural futures. The research offers actionable insights for designing intersectional, community-led interventions that reclaim rural public spaces for women and marginalized groups, directly aligning with the symposium’s agenda for collaborative, cross-sectoral action.

Adolescent girls: their energy and capacity to take risks in challenging the status quo

Renu Arya and Krishna Rawat , Mahila Jan Adhikar Samiti

This presentation highlights the journeys of adolescent girls from rural, marginalized communities in central Rajasthan who are challenging systemic oppression and asserting their agency in powerful ways. Through personal narratives—like Aarti fighting for justice after surviving abuse, Maya negotiating her dreams post-child marriage, and Ramghani pursuing education and community leadership despite domestic violence—we see the courage and resilience of young women defying norms. These girls are part of the Mahila Jan Adhikar Samiti (MJAS), a 25-year-old organization led by rural women that fosters local leadership, continuous learning, and innovation. MJAS engages over 3000 adolescent girls through platforms like Football for Freedom, Tech Sakhi, and grassroots journalism, helping them build confidence, skills, and solidarity. Working across four generations, MJAS emphasizes intergenerational dialogue and youth-led change. This presentation reflects on how young girls perceive themselves, navigate challenges, and claim public space and voice. It asks: Can systems grounded in adult knowledge make space for the ideas, innovation, and leadership of the next generation?

Adolescent girls reclaim agency, challenge patriarchy, and lead change through solidarity, leadership, and grassroots innovation.

Denied Justice, Denied Space: The Struggles of Rural Dalit and Adivasi Survivors of Sexual Violence

Manjula Pradeep, NCWL

This presentation draws from two national studies by the National Council of Women Leaders (NCWL) that document sexual violence against Dalit and Adivasi women and girls across 14 states and 1 UT. These studies reveal how caste, tribe, gender, and rural geographies intersect to deny them safety and justice. Public spaces—fields, forest paths, hostels, school routes—are often sites of violence by dominant caste men.

Survivors face severe challenges: FIRs not filed, intimidation, exclusion from Panchayats, poor medical care, two-finger tests, and failed trials—even under SC/ST and POCSO Acts. These failures represent systemic denial of justice.

At the same time, rural Dalit and Adivasi women are leading resistance—through protests, legal petitions, documentation, and support groups. Their fight is not just about justice, but about reclaiming dignity, space, and constitutional rights.

This presentation argues that public space for marginalized women is political. Their access to it is a collective imperative—one that demands recognition and action.

Margins Within Margins: Exclusion of Bedia Women from Rural Public Spaces in Madhya Pradesh

Dr. Trupti Jhaveri Panchal & Archita Joshi, Samvedna

Even as discussions around rural women's safety grow, the experiences of Denotified Tribes (DNTs), like the Bedia community, remain invisible. Historically criminalised, Bedia women in Madhya Pradesh are excluded from public and institutional spaces such as schools, PHCs, and Gram Sabhas due to the community's association with prostitution. Drawing from fieldwork in Bedia-dominated villages, we highlight how institutions fail these women—denying entitlements, jobs, and dignity.

Community norms and dominant caste discrimination further restrict mobility and reinforce stigma. Women trying to exit prostitution find little occupational safety or support. Their erasure from digital spaces, due to lack of literacy and access, adds another layer of exclusion.

Yet, resistance is emerging. Women are forming informal collectives, demanding ration cards, and girls are asserting their right to study. These small shifts hint at deeper change.

This presentation raises questions about what kind of change is needed to ensure that institutions are truly inclusive and accountable, and that Bedia women are not invisible to gender justice frameworks.

The Adivasi Women: Voice, Assertion and Violence:

Shewli Kumar, Tata Institute of Social Sciences

This paper explores intersectional and structural sexual violence faced by adivasi women and girls in India based on research across 10 states – Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Manipur and Assam. An analysis of 33 purposively selected cases of sexual violence (2018–2024), documented by activists reveals the compounded effect of discrimination, exclusionary practices, and systemic failures by both state actors and dominant caste communities. These factors result in entrenched, structural violence, denying adivasi girls safe access to public spaces – forest, farm lands, schools – that are traditionally their own.

The incursion of extractive industries and the states development agenda have further marginalised, adivasi communities, weaponizing, sexual violence to suppress resistance and assert dominance. Stereotyping adivasi women as 'sexually available' fuels, impunity and normalises violence. Schools and Ashramshala,

ostensibly safe spaces are often sites of sexual abuse with institutional actors themselves complicit. The study underscores how education and protection systems are often replicate structural violence rather than mitigate. The paper calls for urgent intersectional and culturally grounded policy responses. These include accountability from duty bearers such as police and education officials; access to culturally sensitive, shelter and counselling services, protection for families of survivors and rigorous implementation of existing laws, especially the SC/ST (prevention of atrocities) act without these adiwasi women and girls will continue to slip through the cracks of justice.

Reimagining Safety: Queer and Trans experiences and survivor centered and community led responses.

Omkar Mahesh Shinde (They/he) , Nazariya: A Queer Feminist Resource Group

Persons marginalised on the basis of gender and sexuality (LBQ and transgender persons) face violence and discrimination in public places because of their identities. There is a belief system that persons from rural India have less access to safe and discrimination free public spaces. However, it is mostly seen that LBQT persons from rural, semi urban and settlement colonies sometimes have more access to some public spaces.

Everyday mobility and daily functioning are subject to surveillance, threats of violence, and familial control across multiple environments—including homes, educational and healthcare institutions, workplaces, and other public spaces. Drawing from our experiences at Nazariya: A Queer Feminist Resource Group, and our work with Queer feminist networks in India, where we engage with crisis cases of LBQT individuals across other intersectional identities such as caste, religion, ability, we want to explore and present the layered, context specific and intersectional safety challenges faced in rural and also in comparison with urban or semi urban contexts. We also want to share our experiences of being a community based organisation who work on bringing the lived realities of LBQT persons to the discussions.

We Were Always Here: Gender, Silence, and Mountains

Don Hasar (She/They) GAWI

Over 90 percent of Himachal's population lives in rural areas, yet public space remains deeply gendered and exclusionary. What happens when the language to name queer or trans existence does not exist, but the lives do.

This presentation reflects on everyday negotiations of visibility, belonging, and silence in the hills. It engages with moments of cultural resistance and community care, including the region's first Pride walk. It also considers how exclusion unfolds in ordinary ways through who has access to a school, a hospital, a ration shop, or the freedom to walk a public road without fear or scrutiny.

Through photographs, memory, and discussions, the session invites participants to reimagine who is seen, who is missing, and how space itself becomes political

It closes with a quiet question: Who do you think exists? even though you do not see them.

Evolving nature of Online Gender-Based Violence: Insights from Tech Sakhi

Riddhima Sharma, Point of View

In an increasingly *phygital* world—where digital and physical realities intersect—gender norms flow seamlessly across online and offline spaces, shaping unequal access, usage, expression, privacy, and safety. The GSMA Mobile Gender Gap Report 2025 reveals persistent disparities in digital access in India: only 38% of women own a smartphone compared to 58% of men, and mobile internet adoption among women is 39%, compared to 58% for men. These gaps are not just technological—they reflect deeper, systemic gender inequalities.

Point of View's work with digitally marginalized communities shows that a major barrier to digital inclusion is the widespread digital insecurity and abuse faced by women, queer, trans, and gender-diverse persons. Cybercrimes against women made up nearly 20% of all cybercrimes in 2021, making it one of the fastest-growing categories of violence. A 2024 report identifies safety and security as one of the top three barriers to mobile phone use among women in India.

This paper draws on data from *TechSakhi*, Point of View's multilingual digital security helpline, to map the expanding forms and impact of online gender-based violence (oGBV) in India. The evidence points to a rapidly evolving and intersectional landscape of harm—ranging from doxxing and image-based abuse to surveillance, impersonation, and hate speech—all of which disproportionately affect women and LGBTQIAP+ individuals.

The presentation highlights the urgent need for nuanced, gender-sensitive, and context-aware responses to oGBV. Building safe and inclusive digital spaces is essential not only for protecting rights but also for enabling full and free participation in India's digital future. Addressing oGBV is critical to closing the digital gender gap and ensuring that marginalized communities can access, use, and thrive in digital spaces without fear.

The Safety Continuum: Bridging Physical and Digital Spaces for Women's Empowerment.

Aparna Kelley, (IT for Change)

In rural Karnataka, where only 24.8% of women have internet access, digital exclusion heightens gender-based vulnerabilities. This intervention addresses the intertwined challenges women and adolescent girls face in navigating both physical and digital spaces. Anchored on three pillars—school-based Kishori Clubs, women-led Namma Mahiti Kendras (community information hubs), and targeted digital literacy and cyber safety training—the program fosters interconnected safety networks.

The initiative recognizes the growing disconnect between adolescent girls, as unsupervised "digital natives," and their "digital immigrant" parents. It particularly addresses the compounded marginalization of Dalit women, religious minorities, and single mothers. Over 4,500 welfare claims have been processed by scooter-riding Sakhis, while 750+ women receive rights training annually. Kishoris have successfully advocated for scholarships and transport facilities, contributing to community change.

Key insights reveal that restrictive control over girls' digital use often leads to unsafe behaviors. The program's integrated, rights-based approach builds confidence and autonomy. All 25 Kishori Champions report greater agency, with many delaying early marriage and continuing education. By bridging digital literacy, governance, and safety, the program enables women and girls to reclaim both physical and digital spaces.

About the Organizers

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.



SWATI
Society for
Women's Action
and Training Initiative



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