

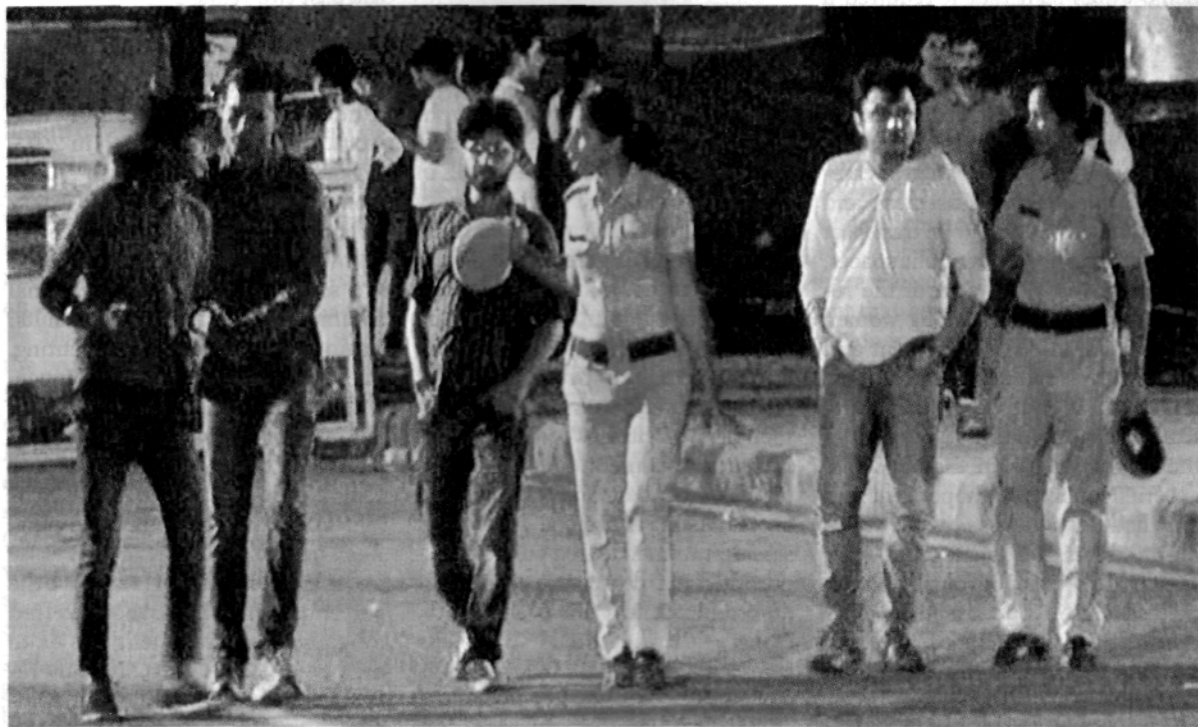
No country for women

Harassment of women in public spaces is a major problem in India that needs urgent addressing. **BY ANUPAMA KATAKAM**

POONA MOBILE (name changed), 15, had to drop out of school because of the incessant harassment she faced while returning home. Poona, who lives in a Mumbai slum, was just a year short of writing her 10th standard examinations. But her parents, fearing for her safety, decided that she should stay within the safe confines of her home and nearby lanes until the issue was resolved.

Public harassment of girls and women and violence against them is a widespread problem. It is well documented that women across the globe fear and experience all manner of sexual violence in public spaces. From lewd and verbally abusive remarks, touching and groping to rape, there are innumerable instances even in some of the safest cities. Such harassment has far-reaching consequences. It can curtail a girl's (or

woman's) freedom of movement, leading to inability to study, work and participate in the community and in recreational activities, women's rights activists said. "The enormity of the problem has to be understood, and the issue has to be addressed on a mature and massive scale," said Medhavinee Namjoshi from Vacha, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) that works with adolescent girls.



SOME YOUNG MEN being arrested for harassing women, on M.G. Road in Gurugram, Haryana, on September 4.

A survey conducted across four countries by Action Aid UK this year has some shocking data on India. It says four in five women in India experience some form of sexual harassment or violence. Respondents in the 18-24 and 25-34 age groups have emerged as the most vulnerable: 92 per cent and 87 per cent of them, respectively, have said that they feel at risk in their cities. Additionally, 84 per cent of women between 25 and 34 experience some manner of public harassment. Seventy-nine per cent of the women surveyed in the age group of 18 to 55 say they have been publicly harassed.

The survey reached out to 502 women living in cities across India. "The fact that women wanted to speak out and were willing to go on record to say they had experienced sexual harassment and even violence in public spaces is a good sign. The numbers are not registered cases, but direct responses," said Sehjo Singh, director, programmes and policy, ActionAid India. "A girl's or woman's movements are seriously hampered by unsafe public areas. This can have an effect on many aspects, including the main one of earning an income." Sehjo Singh said that it required a collaborative effort between the state and volunteer agencies to ensure safer spaces. "The system and processes have to reform for us to see improvement," she said.

The survey was set in two categories: location of harassment and type of harassment. Public transport was the most unsafe of public spaces, said close to 65 per cent of the respondents. Among working women (18-24 and 25-35), 67 per cent and 70 per cent said this. The next most unsafe thing was returning home from work after dark: 58 per cent of the respondents said they had bad experiences. Fifty-eight per cent said they had been harassed while walking on streets. In this category, 74 per cent in the 18-24 age group had experienced abuse. Approximately 40 per cent of the respondents felt unsafe and had experienced harassment in parks and other public spaces for leisure activities. About 30 per cent of the student categories polled said

they dealt with harassment on university campuses; 42 per cent said they had to tackle harassment on the way to schools and colleges and back.

The north of the country is the least safe for women in the overall figures. The average shows a staggering 74 per cent of women in the north having experienced harassment. At 67 per cent, the south is not far behind. Seventy per cent of the women in the north were harassed on the street, says the study. In the north-eastern region, 63 per cent of the respondents said they faced harassment while returning home after dark.

Staring seems to be the most common form of harassment. Sixty-two per cent of the respondents had experienced it. It may be a relatively mild form of abuse, yet it is uncomfortable and should not be dismissed. Being followed came in second at 53 per cent. Insults—name-calling and wolf-whistling polled 43 per cent and 44 per cent respectively. Sexual comments polled 38 per cent, groping 38 per cent, and indecent exposure 34 per cent. The north recorded the highest percentages in all categories.

A PUBLIC PROBLEM

Clearly the numbers indicate that it is a situation across cities and that the state needs to address the problem. Mumbai and Chennai have been listed among the safest cities in India. A Quality of Living survey conducted by a private consultancy firm released in February 2016 rates Chennai as the number one among Indian cities. Mumbai has held the "safest city" position for decades but is now grappling with the problem of women's safety. *Frontline* spoke to members of citizens' groups, activists, urban planners and government officials to understand the issue and how it is being addressed. All of them said that women feared public transport and the prospect of being out after dark. Unless this is dealt with, along with widespread awareness campaigns, Mumbai will lose its safe city tag.

Snehal Velkar, programme coordinator for the Youth for Change and

Safe City projects of Akshara, an NGO in Mumbai, said: "When we interviewed 5,000 women in Mumbai as part of a study on women and public safety in 2011, 95 per cent of them said they had experienced staring, pushing, lewd comments and groping in public transport. The problem is that most of the time the woman ignores it and so it is not addressed."

She added: "Of the women we interviewed, 46 per cent said they experienced harassment on buses. We never thought in Mumbai we would hear this." She said that Akshara had approached Mumbai's bus transport service, BEST. "BEST was extremely interested in helping and even passed an order saying that bus conductors could intervene if a woman complained. Additionally, they have instituted a gender module within their training programmes. These small moves appear to have helped. However, the larger issue comes down to the police backing up the complaint. This is where it fails. Nobody wants to go through the lengthy process of dealing with the law," Snehal Velkar said. Akshara has also conducted safe city audits in the past two years.

Snehal Velkar said that since public transport was a critical area of concern, Akshara decided to look at Mumbai's famed local railway network. In a study conducted in 2015, Akshara created a database of 522 women and interviewed them extensively on their travelling experiences; 347 were regular commuters, while 175 said that they were occasional commuters. Here are the results: staring, 56.13 per cent; commenting, 51.34 per cent; unwanted touch, 60.92 per cent. Some women also named more serious forms of sexual harassment: stalking, 29.69 per cent; flashing, 14.37 per cent; pinching, 20.50 per cent; and groping, 15.52 per cent.

The Akshara report says that the percentage of women who preferred to ignore the harassment was quite high at 41.15 per cent. "It sadly reflects how women have become immune to the harassment meted against them in public places. Many



T. VIJAYA KUMAR

SUPERINTENDENT OF POLICE A. Ravi Krishna distributing chilli powder to students of Government Women's College, Kurnool, Andhra Pradesh. He advised them to use it to fend off possible assaults in public spaces. A 2013 photograph.

women would also hesitate to take action against the harasser for fear that their actions might provoke even more harassment," the report says.

It emerged from the study that the way in which railway stations were designed with their tapering stairs, narrow and cramped bridges and congested platforms contributed to the insecurity and discomfort among women, Snehal Velkar said. Additionally, public toilets are badly lit and located. Skywalks have entire sections that are dark. "Our city planners need to realise the fact that infrastructure plays an important part in women's safety," she said. "They need to view planning from a woman's perspective now."

Nearly everyone involved with the problem agrees that the city's infrastructure is crucial in ensuring safety. Thankfully, the Revised Draft Development Plan (DP) 2034 has an entire chapter dedicated to provisions for women in public spaces. Concepts such as housing for single working women, homeless shelters, adhar kendras, skill centres and care centres for children are part of the plans. They may seem too ambitious given the city's real estate problems, but activists are happy that there is some thinking going on. Better and

more toilets, women-exclusive hawkers areas and special timings for women sellers in local markets are also in the DP.

A DIFFERENT APPROACH

"I think the issue of harassment in public spaces has registered with the state, but I don't really think the enormity has sunk in," said Sameera Khan, one of the authors of *Why Loiter*, a book on women and their negotiations of public spaces in India's urban centres. "Even though we talk of smart cities and say women's needs are in infrastructure plans, it's lip service. To begin with the approach and basic attitude is skewed," she said.

Sameera Khan pointed out that much of the public spaces in Mumbai was being privatised. Also, removing hawkers or throwing out pavement-dwellers does not solve anything. Law enforcement agencies advise young women to stay at home after dark, but this approach does not produce solutions. "We have to understand that public spaces are part of exhibiting our citizenry. Everyone in spite of class has to have a vested interest in their public space and therefore has to be included in the city's planning. Unless you allow people to build a relationship with

their space, they will not notice it and that will make it worse. For instance, if there is a park nearby, it won't serve any purpose if you put a gate and lock it up. If you include people, and especially women, they become vigilantes and this will immediately improve the neighbourhood."

Most women today strategise their lives and plan their commute and daily schedule, largely from a felt need to be safe, Sameera Khan said. "It would be liberating to be able to go freely and do what they want when they want. This is what we need to achieve."

CHANGE IN PERCEPTIONS

Harish Sadani, who works with young men on gender issues through the organisation Men Against Violence and Abuse (MAVA), said the absence of gender and sexual education for young people is among the most important factors that have created the present situation. Unless men change their attitude towards women, there will be little change, he said. MAVA works closely with college students and helps both men and women work towards gender equality.

Sadani added that women were now much more empowered than before, and many women had often told him that women's problems should be explained to boys. Only that form of sensitisation will help improve the situation. "If we teach our boys the proper facts with sensitivity, it will go a long way in protecting girls and preventing harassment," said Sadani, pointing out that boys often get their sex education from pornography.

He said one of MAVA's projects in collaboration with UNICEF was to work with eighth and ninth standard boys in 100 schools in Chandrapur, one of Maharashtra's poorest districts.

"We conduct simple sessions on love, infatuation, attraction, the need to respect a girl's lack of interest, and so on. These programmes, if done across class and income levels, will see a change in attitude and in turn an improvement in this bleak scenario," said Sadani. □