

## Dimensions of women's safety in urban public places: A cross sectional study of kolkata metropolitan area

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### Abstract

Increasing level of urbanization reflects pace of development of a nation however the urban landscape has never been gender neutral. UN *Sustainable Development Goal (SDG5)* emphasis on achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls, even though every single day a number of young girls and women from all walks of life are being assaulted, molested and violated in urban places.

The present study is an attempt to find out the linkages between women safety and public spaces in urban landscape. It also tries to explore the perception of women about their own safety in public places in different environmental conditions. It also tries to study the nature of harassment and help seeking behaviour of girls and women.

The research paper applies qualitative and quantitative approach, relying on primary sources. It involves mixed methods of data collection along with in-depth interview and focus group discussion. Empirical data consists of 274 women's personal accounts of experiences of harassment and their perception on it in the public spaces of Kolkata city.

From the study it was found that young girls are more vulnerable towards sexual harassment. Urban designs at times lacks to address the need of feeling of being safe in the public space. Duration of daylight has close association with the perception of safety. Urban green spaces are fundamental for sustainability of cities however the same spaces brings a notion of insecurity among female population. Women feel unsafe when there are flaws in the design of infrastructure in public places. Although in their lifetime most of the girls and women experiences some form of harassment ranging from mild to severe, but underreporting of such incidents are widespread. In the present era, many digital tools like application based services are available for free but are often not utilized by girls. There is a need to make the cities safe, resilient, and gender inclusive.

**Keywords:** urban public spaces; women safety, urban infrastructure, Kolkata

### Introduction

Increasing level of urbanization reflects pace of development of a nation however the urban landscape has never been gender neutral. Cases of harassment and violence against girls and women have become regular feature of cities and towns. Nirbhaya Rape Case of Delhi is the very recent example which shocked the whole community. Such cases develop strong sense of insecurity amongst girls especially in urban settings. Though, UN *Sustainable Development Goal (SDG5)* emphasis on achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls, even though every single day young girls and women from all walks of life are being assaulted, molested and violated in urban places.

Cities are considered as the symbol of development, women empowerment, higher level of education, higher status of women and more freedom of movement among women. UN *Sustainable Development Goal: 11* talks about safe, resilient and inclusive cities, which means that women can use any public place at any time without any fear, without any threats of sexual violence and harassment. Even though, the streets, public transport, public space in cities have become the territory of hunters. There is an unspoken war on the streets. Young school and college going girls use backpacks, books to shield themselves, some women wear full covered attire to protect their bodies and some avoid mere glance of roving gaze.

The fear of violence and sexual harassment in public spaces affects the everyday lives of women as it restricts their movement and freedom to exert their rights as citizens of the city---freedom to move, study, work and leisure. Thus harassment faced by women is a crime against women which is a major urban social hazard especially in metropolitan cities where population is dense and the number of working women and female students is high.

The present study is an attempt to find out the linkages between women safety and factors behind it in the urban public spaces. It also tries to discuss the perception of women about their own safety in public places. There are many aspects of women safety for which an attempt has been made in the present study, i.e. what they feel about their safety and what should be done for their safety in the urban public spaces. Is there any linkage between women safety and urban structural designs or is it the societal and community problem. Is there only a perception towards fear or is there any actual threat to women safety in urban public spaces.

### Methods and Materials

The research paper has a constructive, qualitative and quantitative approach, relying on primary sources. It involves mixed methods of data collection along with in-depth interview and focus group discussion. Empirical data consists of 274 women's personal accounts of experiences

of harassment and their perception on it in the public spaces of Kolkata city. The study area was divided into smaller pockets, in which perception survey with the female users of the space was conducted. The perception surveys were structured with questionnaires soliciting response on extent of harassment actually faced, fear of harassment, points where harassment fear is high, elements that make a space appear safe or unsafe, role of apparel in facing such harassment, extent of transport harassment and also on how useful smart apps and helpline numbers are in enforcing a feeling of safety in them. The suggestions regarding what makes a space safe or unsafe have been used for recommendations with regards to designing and governing the public spaces studied.

The target group consisted of women from all genres of life from housewives to working women, school students to college students, and unemployed urban youths to business women, between the ages of 14 to 60 years. Another group was considered consisting of immigrants who've come from other parts of the country and are staying in the city for the purpose of either education or job which will give a brief idea as to how the unfamiliar surroundings affect the perception on safety or unsafety of women in urban public space.

The study was conducted in Park Circus area of Kolkata City. For the survey, different pockets that had comparatively more inflow of people, along with that diverse type of public spaces were selected. Household surveys, student surveys in schools and colleges, employee surveys, business owner surveys in shops and beauty parlour were also conducted to get idea on how often public spaces are used by women and the harassment faced by them in urban public spaces.

**Results and Discussion**

**Does duration of daylight affects perception of safety?**

The time of day plays an indispensable role when studying the safety perception among individuals especially among women. The perceived safety in public spaces of the respondents was determined by asking if the respondents felt safe returning to their dwellings in the dark. They were also asked regarding the time of the day during which they feel least safe or most unsafe. It was found that Women appeared to have an increased sense of feeling unsafe during night time. In a night time setting women are more likely to be attentive to other people and their surroundings, shaped by the fear that something might happen to them or someone may harass them by making the benefit of darkness during night time. Public spaces that are well lit are less likely to be perceived as unsafe, mostly because light gives women the ability to get an idea and overview of a space. If a space is not well lit and visibility is limited, an increased sense of feeling unsafe is triggered. The fear of becoming victim of such crimes deters women from moving out of their homes, more so after the nightfall than during the day.

From the study it becomes clear that night time, or lack of daylight, has a direct relation with women's safety perception as 81.75% of women stated that they consider night time more unsafe than day time. Only 9.48% think the contrary, for them day time is more unsafe. The argument behind this controversy is that, women stated that venturing out in early morning makes them uncomfortable especially during winter as the streets are deserted and sometimes

visibility is also not good. Besides, around 9% of women said that they are not affected by day and night variation; they consider both as equally unsafe. Some were also of the opinion that day and night has nothing to do with their perception of safety.

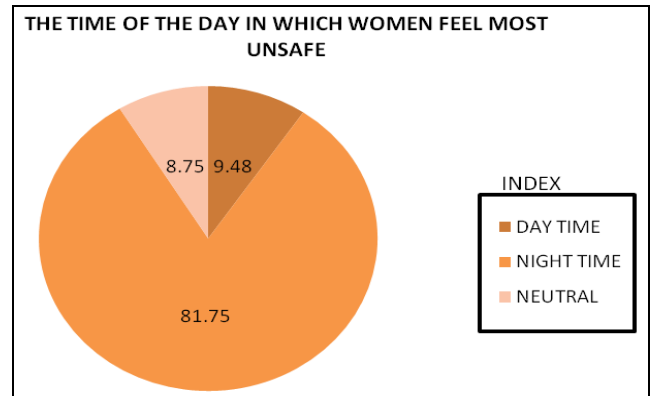


Fig 1

When respondents were asked if they should avoid public spaces when it is dark outside, 72.26% said they should avoid it, and that it is dangerous to use public spaces after daylight. Most of these women were housewives who prefer to stay home during night time. Although around one-fourth of the women said that shouldn't avoid public spaces when it is dark, the argument behind this is, if men can use these spaces during night so can women and that daily activities should not be restricted because of this fear of harassment in public spaces. These women were mostly employed who are compelled to return to their dwelling at night time and by doing so have to make use of public spaces.

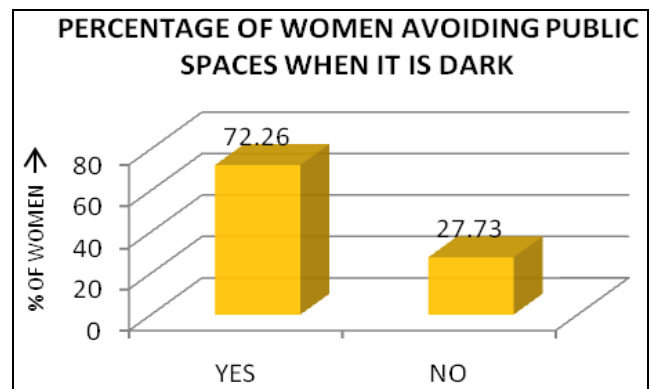


Fig 2

**Safety perception of women working in night shifts**

Working outdoor at night has witness a rising trend in India for both men and women especially with the advent of global outsourcing and increasing number of BPOs. Even today women hesitate to work during night time even in the urban centres. It has been found that women working during nights are not safe; neither on roads nor in public transport that are provided to them at their respective workplaces. Women feel unsafe in returning from their workplaces to their home late night. Families of the women working at night live with uncertainty and insecurity.

Most of the respondents said that working during night shift is difficult for them. Many women are forced to work in night shifts. Although, many companies avoid women to work in the night shifts. According to many women

companies should assign men for night shifts and women should be assigned only for day shifts. Again the role of night time and day time gains importance in the perception of women safety where women working in morning shift feel more secured than women working in afternoon or evening shift. Around 80% of the respondents said that they feel unsafe while returning to their dwelling at night from their workplaces. Whereas 23% said they felt safe returning to their dwelling at night, because they were provided with home drop services from their companies.

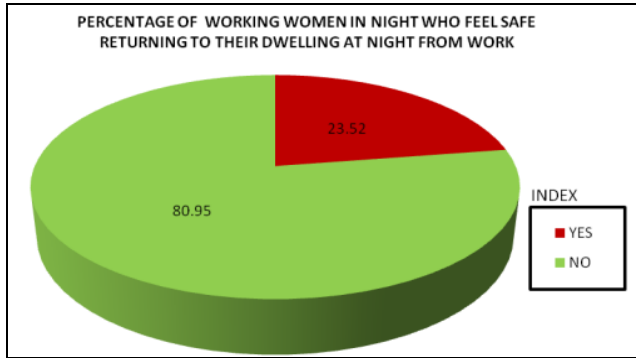


Fig 3

**Seasonal variability and its association with perception of women safety**

Different seasons define the use of the space and for a large part influence the level of comfort. Sunlight is an important factor in relation to the use of public spaces. During warm months, people tend to make more use of public spaces than in colder months, because the temperature and environment allows people to do so. Recreational facilities such as benches, playgrounds and water fountains become attractive and usable when it is warm and sunny outside, adding to the aesthetic value of the public space.

Summer season is apparently much more inviting people to make use of parks, squares and other public spaces. It appears that the majority of the women feel safe during the summer, and that this feeling of safety affects their use of public spaces. Summer season is often associated with longer availability of daylight and warm, sunny weather. Winter season is often seen as cold, dark and not very inviting towards public spaces. This factor was determined by asking the respondents directly as to in which season they feel the least safe. From the survey it was evident that women make more use of public spaces during the summer than in the winter, because of an increased feeling of safety during the summer.

India being a monsoon country has a long and continued monsoon which is characterised by water logging, poor maintenance of streets, potholes and vacant alleys which also adds on to feeling of unsafe among Indian women. Thus seasons indeed play a vital role in determining the level of perceived safety in women.

Around 60% of women responded that they consider winter season as the most unsafe, not only during night time but also during early morning. Winter is the time in which people avoid public spaces during night and dawn owing to fall in temperature and fog which affects visibility. However day time in winter presents pleasant conditions for people to venture out on their day work. Although, 16% of the respondents stated that summer can be unsafe too and that harassments faced by them have mostly occurred during day

time. Many of them consider monsoon as unsafe in Kolkata, and some said that women are unsafe almost in all season throughout the year.

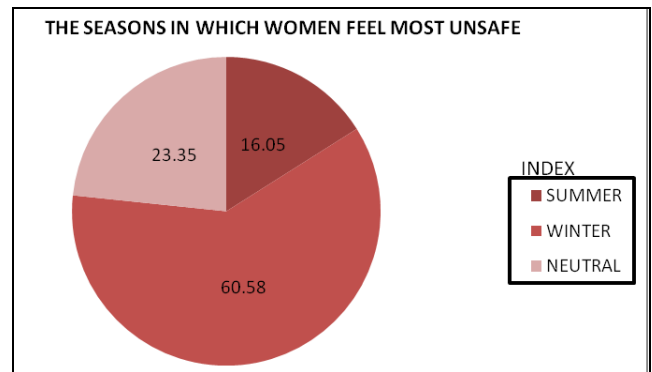


Fig 4

**Urban green spaces from perspective of women safety**

The most effective tool for city beautification is planting trees. Trees when selected and planted in a properly organised manner increase the aesthetic beauty of an urban area to a large extent. Not only that, trees are also beneficial for the mankind. It purifies the atmosphere by absorbing the carbon dioxide and releasing oxygen. It also provides shade and has a cooling effect on the environment. Therefore in recent years the concept of “Green city” has largely emerged. It is very important that urban areas have large green spaces and greenery and this is being incorporated increasingly in projects related to urban planning. However these green infrastructures seem to have some other impacts on the perceived level of safety among women also.

Areas with dense trees are manifested with darkness during night time, they cover the street lights and these areas often tend to be occupied by men involved in alcohol and drugs as these are the perfect hide outs for them. Such spaces are difficult to monitor with surveillance cameras.

A park with lots of small paths and lots of green plants during the day time can attract for the recreational activities, but this same park could be perceived as dangerous during the night if it lacks the needed streetlights for people to see what is going on around them. The amount of trees, bushes and maintenance of green areas can influence the perceived safety of people especially women.

Women were asked if they felt unsafe in areas where there are lots of trees to which 67% agreed and said that areas with too many trees and bushes make them feel uncomfortable and uneasy especially during night time.

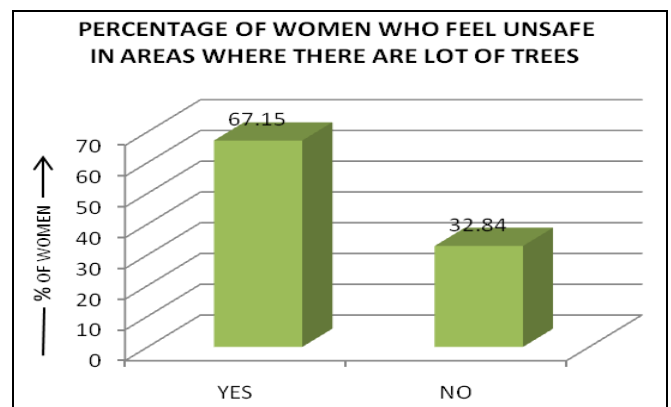


Fig 5

Respondents who agreed were also asked as to why they feel so unsafe in places of tall trees to which 39% said it is because trees cover street lights during night time. Around 20% of women said that such places are deserted and the majority i.e. 41% of women said that they fear green areas because such places tend to be occupied by men involved in drugs and alcohol during night time.

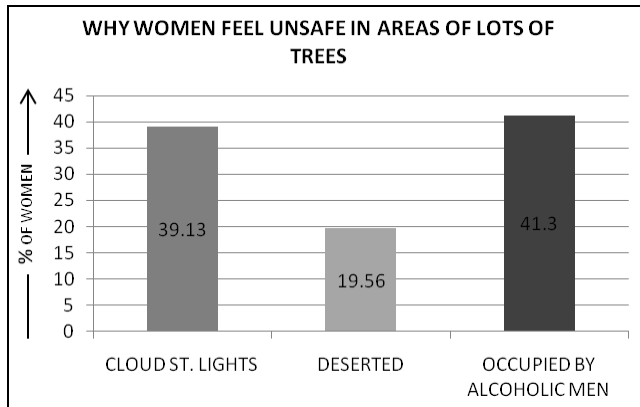


Fig 6

**Perception towards Women Safety and Urban Public Space**

Women feel insecure in urban public spaces due to a wide range of factors including poor design and infrastructural facilities of urban places (Greed, 2014). Men and women experience public spaces differently. Men have traditionally dominated public space, while women are ‘situationally disadvantaged’ in public places, where they are constantly subject to the possibility of harassment.

Urban infrastructure refers to the human-made structures that provide space for human activities, interactions and community life. It ranges from buildings, community gardens and green spaces, water supply and drainage, transportation system and so on.

Women feel unsafe while travelling when there are flaws in the design of infrastructure that is absence of services such as footpaths crossings, poor location of bus stops, and high floor of buses, inefficient street lighting etc. There are some specific factors that contribute in feeling unsafe by the women in the urban public places, such as:

**Dark deserted alleys**

Dark alleys make women feel unsafe and vulnerable. Such areas are less visible to others or nobody watches over that place. Access to help in case of any danger is also very unlikely. Numerous studies show that dark deserted alleys are the most feared spaces among women.

**Public toilets**

Public toilets in most of the city areas are found to be unusable as they have broken doors or are in a filthy state. There have been various instances where the public toilets of men and women are so close to each other and have open roofs that visual and verbal violence become very common while using such toilets.

**Dilapidated buildings and plots**

It has been observed that women feel uncomfortable walking besides large empty walls or empty plots and dilapidated buildings for the fear of not receiving help on

being attacked. Studies indicate that the deserted buildings are also the place of fear, as they mostly are shady and dominated by men who are engaged in illicit activities further increasing the fear of violence among women.

**Gendered public spaces**

Women do not prefer to use the public places which are dominated by men. Women find large groups of men intimidating, they feel that running away in time of need would be more difficult around such areas. Thus women usually avoid going to such places where larger number of men occupy the space. Women feel uncomfortable in male dominated spaces such as cigarette shops, ‘dhabas’ (roadside tea and food stalls), taxi stands, certain street corners, helmet stands in car/bike parking, liquor shops etc. Women not only hesitate to use any of these spaces but also are reluctant to be present near them for fear of harassment. Women respondents were asked whether they feel safe in the public space of the city, and if they feel unsafe then which type of public spaces make them feel least safe. Among all the surveyed women, around 47% of them said, vacant deserted alleys make them feel most unsafe in the city. Besides this, 18% of respondents said that male dominated spaces like cigarette shops; liquor shops etc also make them feel unsafe. There are some other places in the city area like public toilets, park with dense trees, dilapidated buildings and plots which are considered as unsafe place by the respondents. Though public transport system considered safe in terms of women safety, but some of the respondents reported these places as unsafe for them.

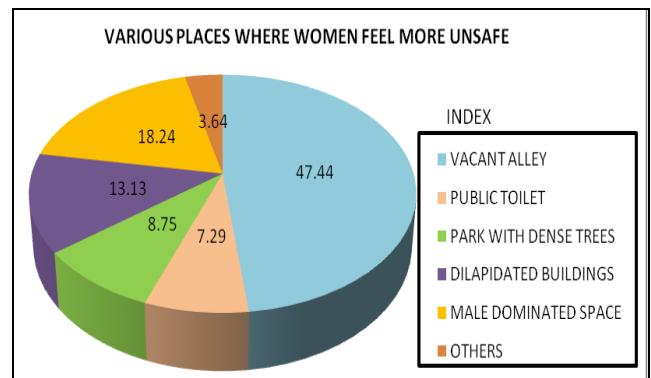


Fig 7

**Factors Contributing To Feeling Unsafe In Public Places Lack of proper lighting**

Dark streets, corners and spaces have been highlighted as one of the major concern of women while using public spaces. Dark entry and exit points of public spaces and car parks cause discomfort to women in the night. Many women while waiting for the bus on the street or travelling or just walking along the public space specifically avoid such spots or stretches (UNHABITAT *et al.*, 2010).

**Poor maintenance of public spaces**

Overall in all studies women have suggested that having poorly maintained spaces not only give rise to the fear of violence but also to the fear of accidents and health issues. Hence pot holes that are not fixed, sidewalks that cannot be walked on etc. further threaten women while using public spaces. Thus the ill-maintained spaces cause discomfort to women and many times leads to women avoiding those

spots or finding alternative routes to avoid the fear of violence or discomfort.

**Denser public spaces**

Women while using public spaces not only fear of violence and harassment but also keep the expectation that when in need people would come forward for their protection. This factor is highlighted in the fact that vacant and deserted areas are avoided by women. Women feel more secure in crowded places so that they can call for help when needed. Again women prefer to be around familiar surroundings with familiar people who would readily come to rescue them from unpleasant situation.

**Inadequate security**

Security means protection of a person against threats such as crime or attacks. People look forward to police system to seek protection in times of danger. But if police is not found doing patrolling in the public spaces, then inadequate security becomes a grave problem for women. In areas of police surveillance women feel safer than in areas without it.

Respondents were asked about the factors, they think contribute the most in making them feel unsafe. Around 40% of the women respondents feel that lack of proper street lighting make them most unsafe, other 29% respondent said lack of people to call for help is a cause for making them feel unsafe in the public places, 7% said poor maintenance of public places contributes the most to feeling unsafe. 18% said it was inadequate security which they think make them fell most unsafe, another 3% of respondents said that presence of too many trees and bushes make them feel unsafe.

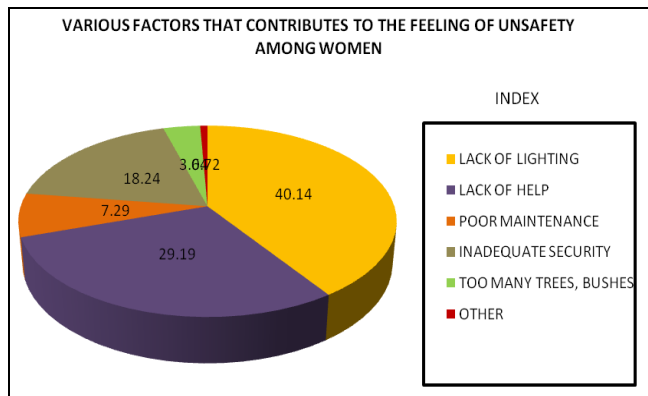


Fig 8

**Public transport**

Public transport is considered as the most economical and efficient ways of transportation especially in third world countries like India. Public transport is the most common form of transport in India especially in metropolitan cities like Kolkata where population is dense and number of working women and students is high. There have been frequent cases of eve teasing, passing sexual comments, doing indecent gesture, groping, flashing and molestation on public transport. In India, besides the Nirbhaya case, instances of Uber or Ola cab drivers or even private

Company commissioned taxi services' driver, sexually harassing and even assaulting women have been reported. Again lack of availability of public transport has also become a major point of women's sexual harassment and lack of safety on the streets.

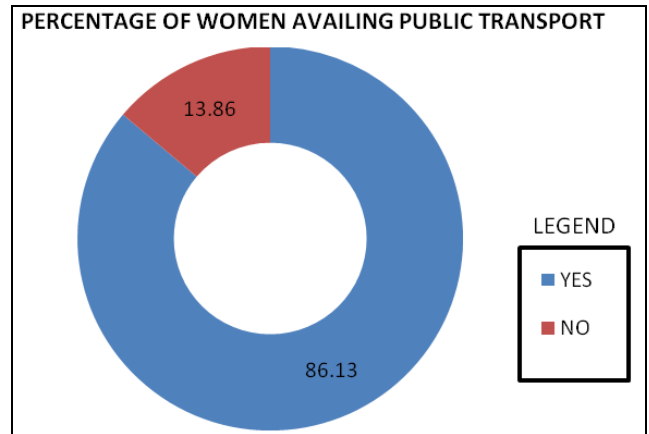


Fig 9

In the primary survey, 236 women were then asked in which form of transport they felt most unsafe. To which 37.28% said they felt most unsafe in public busses and 23.72% said they felt unsafe in local trains, the reason being that these transports are mostly crowded especially during office hours. About 27.96% stated that yellow taxi, ola cabs and uber cabs make them feel unsafe. Most of the women avoid boarding these alone as drivers can mislead them and take them to unknown places. Many such incidents have been previously reported. Only 8.47% women said they felt unsafe in autos and 2.54% felt unsafe in other modes of transport.

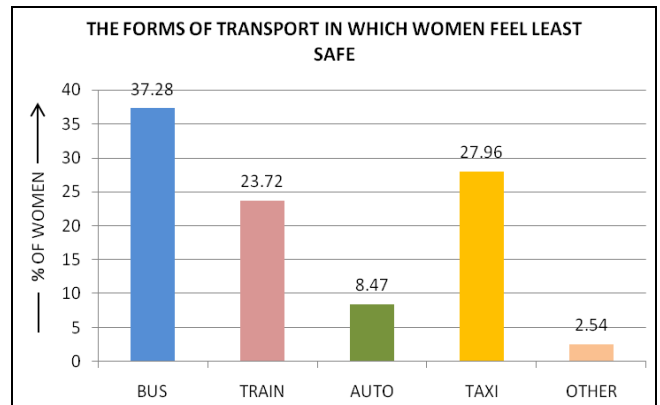


Fig 10

Out of 236, 212 women have faced harassment in public transport. The remaining 24 said that they haven't faced any harassment, these women are mostly aged and use private vehicles and rarely feel the need to avail public transport. Out of the total sampled women 212 women were also asked about the various forms of harassment faced by them. The table shows the different forms of harassment faced by different women in public transport.

**Table 1:** Various forms of harassment faced by women in public transport:

Forms of harassment	Number of women	Percentage of women
Men stand extra close	84	39.6%
Men try to touch physically	86	40.56%
Passing lewd comments	28	13.20%
Others	14	6.60%

**Demographic Factors and Sexual Harassment of Women in Urban Public Spaces**

From the survey, it was observed that there is inverse relationship between the age of the respondents and the rate of harassment faced by them in the public spaces of Kolkata. Women were questioned about whether they faced street harassment or any form of eve teasing in the public spaces of Kolkata during the last 6 months and then a relationship was drawn between the ages of these respondents and the rate of harassment faced by them. Evaluation was done to see what percentage of women in every age group has faced such harassment within the span of 6 months.

From the study it was found that young girls are more vulnerable towards sexual harassment. Half the respondents who belong to 14-19 age group and 20-25 age group reported that they have to face the sexual harassment in the urban public spaces. These are the women who are mostly students or working women who have to travel almost daily for their study or work. The women who belong to these age groups are more exposed for the sexual harassment in the urban areas.

It was also found that as the age of the women increases the rate of sexual harassment faced by the women decreases. But it may not be the conclusion that these women who belong to the higher age groups are safe, this may be because that these women mostly stay at home and do not travel for their daily work thus not exposed to the harassment.

**Type of Clothing and Women Safety**

Women’s clothing is often cited as the cause of sexual crimes. There have been innumerable debates on this issue. Women also have varied opinions when it comes to their view on how clothing instigates harassment in public spaces. During the study the respondents were asked, if they feel that their clothing style affects the sexual harassment. Majority of the respondents feel that the clothing also affects the harassment, while some other women do not feel that type of clothing provokes anyone to harass. It was also found that young girls of the opinion that regardless of what a women is wearing harassment is a common Phenomena in the public places.

**Women safety in the context of migrant women**

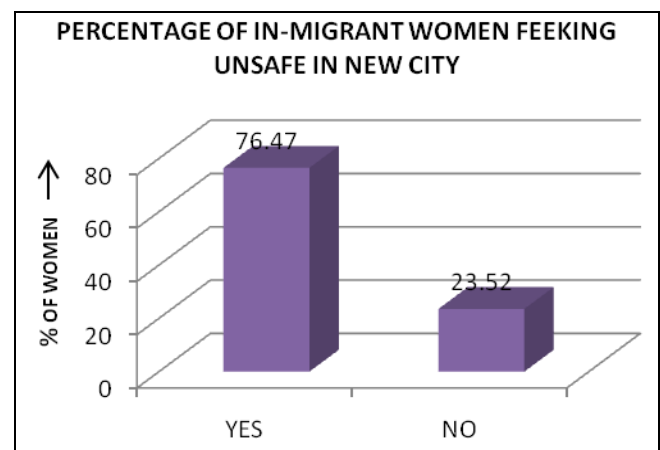
Kolkata being the largest metropolitan city in the eastern India offers important opportunities for economic development and access to basic services like education, healthcare etc. Many people have been migrating to Kolkata from various parts of the country especially from the neighbouring states of Bihar, Orissa, Jharkhand and the North-Eastern part of India. Women are also part of these immigrants who generally come for the education or better employment opportunities.

Unfamiliar surroundings, lack of known people has a profound impact on the safety perception of in-migrant women staying in cities. These women are more vulnerable

in urban public spaces as they can be easily misled and misguided by strangers. Most of these women are staying away from their family which adds on their level of discomfort in a city that is completely new and unknown to them.

It is also seen that women from completely different ethnic background feels more vulnerable in unfamiliar public spaces of Kolkata as they feel that their different dressing sense and different appearance marks them out from other women and makes them more subjected to harassment.

In order to determine their perception of safety in the new city, they were asked questions regarding their perception towards women safety in Kolkata city where they are not accustomed of living and what are the reasons they feel makes them unsafe. Around 76% women said they feel unsafe in the new city and only 23% said that they don’t specifically feel unsafe in Kolkata, these were mostly women who have stayed in Kolkata more than 10 years and hence they are very familiar with the place. In other words the city is no longer new to them.



**Fig 11**

Among all the respondents around 38% said it was lack of known people which make them feel unsafe in the new city, 30% women said it was unfamiliar surroundings, and 23% of respondents said it was lack of guidance which make them feel unsafe in Kolkata.

**Nature of Harassment Experienced by Women in Kolkata**

Street harassment of women is extremely widespread and has been found to negatively impact women’s workplace productivity, emotionality etc. Some behaviour considered as forms of harassment or eve-teasing include making passes obscene gestures, whistling, staring, pinching, fondling and rubbing against women. Street harassment and sexual harassment in case of women are very closely related. However street harassment is unique as it is perpetrated by strangers takes place in public domain.

**Various forms of harassment faced by women in the public spaces**

Among all the respondents, around 92.6% of women feel unsafe and uncomfortable when they utilise the public spaces of Kolkata. On the other hand 82% women state that they face sexual harassment in the public spaces every second day.

They were also asked about the forms of harassment which were categorised as—Visual (Staring, leering), Verbal (comments, whistling), physical (touching, feeling up), stalking and others. Many women have faced all of them; some of them have never faced any harassment at all.

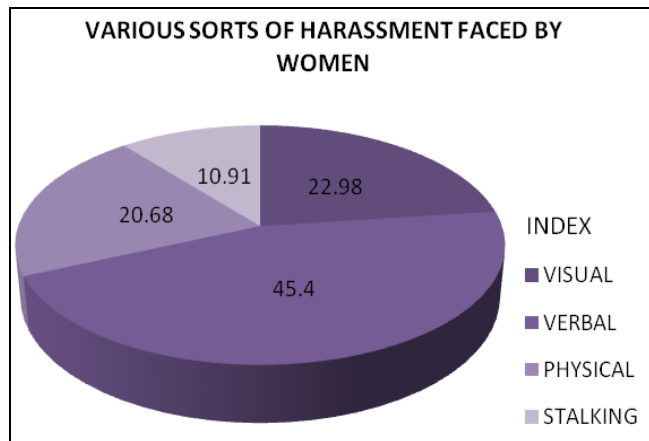


Fig 12

**Digital tools in improving women’s safety**

Technology has reduced the complexities of life and has given immense power to people by allowing everything within the reach of their hand. There are various safety apps present in the mobile phones, designed for the protection and security of women. The basics of most apps are similar—a user decides to list of emergency contacts to alert, and transmission of GPS determined location. Some of these apps are safetipin, Raksha, Himmat, Shake2Safety etc. Needless to say that in spite the presence of so many safety apps in mobile phones, many women are either not aware of them or are not willing to get into the complication of using them. Many just simply assume from beforehand that it’s of no use. From the survey it was found that 162 out of 274 women are aware of safety apps in their mobiles, but only 24 women have happened to use them when in need. It was also found that 112 women are not even aware of their existence.

**Women Helpline numbers**

Alarmed by the increasing instances of crime against women, the Kolkata police have launched two helpline numbers. The helpline numbers are active 24×7 enabling victims to call in with complaints which would be acted upon without delay.

Similar to the use of women safety based apps, women are also unaware and reluctant in using helpline numbers. Although designed to provide protection to women, these helpline numbers fail to do so. Out of 274 women 196 are aware about helpline numbers which is quite a majority yet when it comes to their usage none have used them while facing harassment in the public spaces of Kolkata.

**Underreporting of harassment Cases**

Other than women’s reluctance in using safety apps and helpline numbers they also don’t prefer lodging complaint in police station. Only 26 out of 274 women have in their life lodged complaint regarding sexual harassment in public spaces of Kolkata. That is indeed a small number. The rest decided never to visit the police station even though a vast majority faces such harassments on a day to day basis. A lot of factors are behind this. When asked, the women had varied opinions as to why they don’t prefer going to the police station to lodge complains.

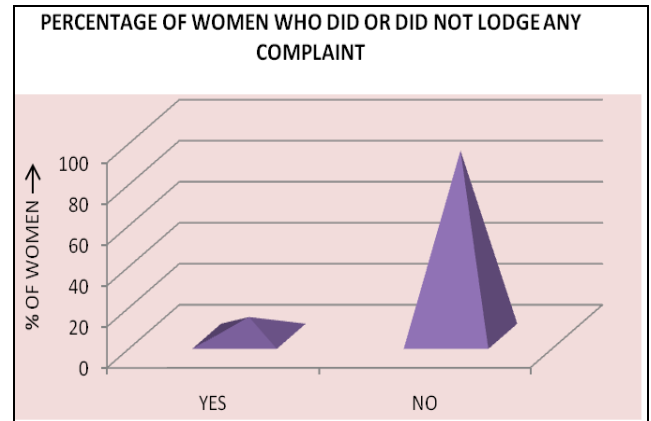


Fig 13

**Conclusion**

Feeling safe in public spaces is a relatively well known subject among urban researchers. From the study it was found that young girls are more vulnerable towards sexual harassment. Women’s clothing is often cited as the cause of sexual crimes as majority of the respondents feel that the clothing also affects the harassment. It was also found that young girls of the opinion that regardless of what a women is wearing harassment is a common phenomena in the urban public places.

From the field survey it was found that women appeared to have an increased sense of feeling unsafe during night time. The fear of becoming victim of such crimes deters women from moving out of their homes, more so after the nightfall than during the day.

Urban infrastructure refers to the human-made structures that provide space for human activities, interactions and community life. It ranges from buildings, community gardens and green spaces, water supply and drainage, transportation system and so on. Women feel unsafe when there are flaws in the design of infrastructure in the urban public places.

Public transport is the most common form of transport in India especially in metropolitan cities like Kolkata. There have been frequent cases of eve teasing, passing sexual comments, doing indecent gesture, groping, flashing and molestation on public transport. Unfamiliar surroundings, lack of known people has a profound impact on the safety perception of in-migrant women staying in the city. These women are more vulnerable in urban public spaces as they can be easily mislead and misguided by strangers.

There are various safety apps available for mobile phone users, designed for the protection and security of women. Needless to say that in spite the presence of so many safety

apps in mobile phones, many women are either not aware of them or are not willing to get into the complication of using them.

The experiences of women together have indicated the need of making public spaces safer and gender sensitive and gender inclusive. For the purpose urban places should be well lit during night times, should have well maintained spaces which are women friendly, gender sensitive transport system and urban planning, surveillance and security for the women.

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