kNOw Fear: understanding sexual violence faced by women and girls in rural public spaces

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Sexual Violence against women and girls (SVAWG) in public spaces can be a major barrier to equitable development. It restricts mobility and prevents access to opportunities offered by development programs. Largely seen as an issue of concern of urban cities.

In rural areas, the governance structures at the local level are the Gram Panchayats (GPs), though constitutionally mandated to undertake equitable development, address issues of social justice have reneged on this responsibility.

In rural settings, where 68 percent of India’s population resides, there is little systematic evidence of the nature or extent of SVAWG in public spaces or efforts to address it.
Aims to develop and evaluate a model of rural public space safety, kNOw Fear, in selected Gram Panchayats of Gujarat, one of the more developed states in India, offering opportunities for employability, and perceived as safe for women and girls.
Understanding the issue: formative research
Objectives of Formative Research

1. Generate evidence
   to understand the nature of sexual violence (forms, responses, consequences) experienced by women and girls in rural public spaces areas and the impact of sexual violence on their lives;
   to understand the perceptions of young men and elected local leaders

2. To inform the design of the intervention and the research tools

Data collection included:

1. Participatory Workshops with young men aged 18-22 years (4)
2. Workshop with young girls aged 15-19 years (4)
3. FGDs with women (4)
4. KII with elected members and Sarpach (8)
Key Findings
Several places are considered 'male only' spaces, and are not perceived as accessible to women and girls
village chowk, play ground, hotel/tea stall, pan shops, hostels
Desert, jungle, lake

“Actually most places are unsafe if the women needs to go alone”
Gender norms mediate access

**Women**

Women and girls are not allowed to go out of the house after dark—those who are going out at night are considered as “bad”

“It is difficult to control boys/men as they will always roam around, that is why one need to control the girls and women”

“people say - those women who are going out at night want to be harassed”

**women and girls are responsible for keeping the honor of the family intact**
Gender norms mediate access

**Girls**: “We are afraid of being labelled ‘rakhdeli’ (one who roams around)”

- If an unmarried girl looks a boy it means she loves him and that compromises the honour of the girl’s parent.
- Boys can go and roam all around and go for movies and restaurants, but girls are not allowed to go to even garden.
- It is only after marriage girls are allowed to move around the village.
- After marriage, the girls are given mobile phone to speak to their fiancé.

**Boys**: Well... there are good girls and those who roam around.

*If a girl roams around, then she should know that she will get raped or molested. It is her fault.*

*What is the need for girls to roam around in the village till late in the evening?*  

*Girls should be engaged in household work- anyway they will get married.*
Commonly reported forms of SV

“Line marna” whistling, winking, passing comments, call the women/girls as “mal”, grabbing hand, obscene gesture, trying to touch (molest)

throwing mobile numbers, clicking photos, playing songs on mobile

pushing girls in the bus, sitting beside the girls, lying down to occupy the seat, writing girl’s name on the wall, following (toilet, market and school)

48.5% adolescent girls and 40% of women reported experiencing sexual violence in public spaces in their life time.

37% adolescent girls and 26% women report one form of sexual violence in the last one year.
The local representatives

“Panchayats meetings are places for men- women don’t go there”

Things like this don’t happen here
......parents do not send girls to school because it is not safe

“If she has to go alone, no place in my GP is safe”
High rate of drop out among girls: few girls is the GPs were attending school after completion of grade 7 (20% baseline figures for secondary education)

Transport is a big hindrance: buses empty, not conducive to school timings, boys take advantage. Competition is with shared tempos-jhakra – not perceived as safe transport.

Alcoholism is rampant and contributes to fear of being in public spaces.

Skilling institutes and employment opportunities remain inaccessible to girls.

Consequences and barriers

Confining girls within the home is the way to ensure their safety.
Response and help seeking

Girls prefer reaching out to friends, and teacher – fear that parents would limit their mobility further and blame them.

The girl’s family is responsible. But if they want, they can approach the Sarpanch for help.

If there are safe buses, our girls will go to school- they want to progress in life.

Necessary action should be taken to speak to the boys –

Our village should not get a bad name.

Women have to get together and demand that things change!
Possible solutions – who ? what?

“women have to solve their own problems. Men do what they want to do - Because they are men.”

• GP – not seen as a body to lodge individual complaints but has power to provide amenities and services, including safe transport

• Elected members see their role as shaping public opinion/social thought processes, but lament the lack of decision making and untied funds to undertake ‘unscheduled’ tasks

Key strategies:

mobilizing women’s citizenship
Youth participation
Sensitizing and catalyzing the Gram Panchayat