

Highlights of Women Commuter's Survey, Safety Audits and Recommendations



Highlights of Railway Survey & Safety Audit Findings and Recommendations

Background and Overview

Mumbai is still considered to be a place where women feel more comfortable and safe to venture out in public places, than many other Indian cities.

However, deeper insights will reveal that even in the city that never sleeps, women participate disproportionately in the Mumbai's public life, be it for work or for leisure activities. Discrimination and deep rooted misogynistic attitude often spills over to blatant sexual harassment of women, and this is coupled with infrastructure which does not support a woman's free and safe access to public places.

Thus, in order to ensure an equal mobility and access of women in places outside their domestic realms, it becomes important to bring a change in both

- The mindsets of the people that discriminate against them, and
- The physical conditions that structure the public places in a manner that is not benefiting to the women.

We at Akshara have tried to address this issue, and over the years have been actively engaging in creating a safer city for its women.

For us, a safe city is the one in which women can access the public places without any fear or restraint, a city where they are not discriminated against and in which their social, economic, political and cultural rights are guaranteed.

Towards this end, Akshara had lobbied for a helpline for women, and in 2008, the Mumbai Police set up the 103 helpline for women (children and elderly). We have also initiated awareness campaigns and collaborated with various governmental and non governmental authorities to address the issue of safety for women in public places.

Safety and Public Transport

We believe that a safe public transportation system is a necessary pre-condition for women to be able to exercise their right to freedom of movement and to use and enjoy the city and its public places. To achieve this, we have worked extensively with BEST bus drivers and conductors, in sensitizing them on the issue of sexual harassment and training them to combat it in the busses. A module on gender awareness is included in the curriculum of training of conductors and drivers. A new rule card has been created by BEST authority expanding the role of conductors to play a role in the BEST buses and efforts are underway to ensure that their good work as preventive partners in sexual harassment gets mentioned in their report card.

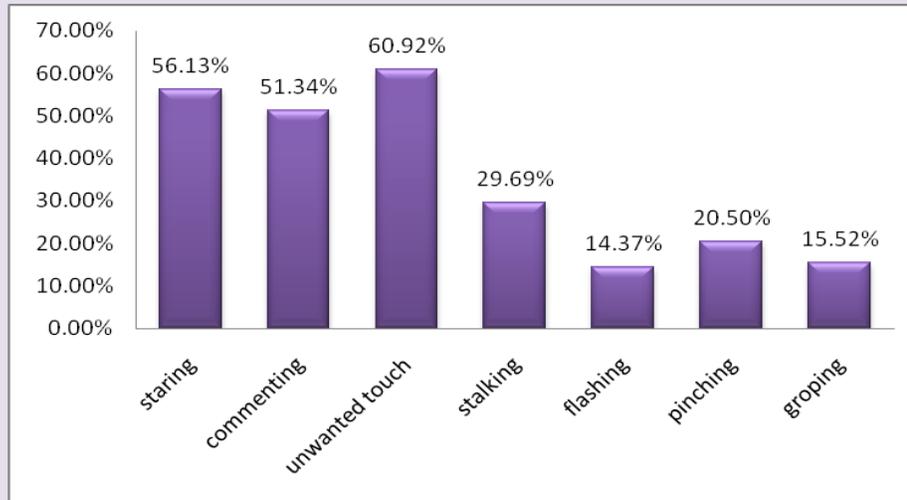
In 2014, we also campaigned to make buses a safe space for women along with NSS volunteers of 18 colleges. In the same year, Akshara along with IIT Tech fest and RTO conducted the ROAR campaign, in which NSS students pasted stickers of 103 helpline in rickshaws and sought the assurance of the rickshaw driver in supporting the initiative of safe city for women.

In the same vein, this year we have decided to concentrate our efforts in making the Mumbai's lifeline- the metropolitan railway transport safer and more comfortable for women.

Review, Assessment and Data Collection on Information

To create a data base, a total of 522 women were interviewed in great details regarding their experience of travelling in Mumbai local trains. Out of the 522 women that young volunteers interviewed, 347 were regular commuters, while 175 said that they commuted only sometimes.

SH women face while traveling



The amount of women who simply preferred to ignore the harassment was quite a lot- 41.15%. It sadly reflects how women have become immune to the harassment meted against them in public places. Many women would also hesitate to take action against the harasser for the fear that their actions might provoke even more harassment.

We also conducted a Focused Group Discussion of 15 female commuters. The survey and FGD raised the following important points that need immediate attention-

- Women have faced sexual harassment in all its forms from staring, commenting, pushing, flashing, groping, etc.
- They have faced harassment on the platform, on the bridge and on the train. Each one has been subject to some or the other kind of harassment in their travelling experience, irrespective of their age, the time of travel or dress that they were wearing.
- Over crowdedness is the major bone of contention for most of the women, as they easily fall prey deliberate pushing, touching during crowded times
- Majority of women were not aware that it is their right to be availed of certain basic facilities like clean and safe public toilets, clean drinking water etc
- The design structure of railway stations, like tapering stairs, narrow and cramped bridge, congested platforms etc also contribute in women feeling uncomfortable and unsafe
- A majority of women prefer to ignore the harassment either out of being accustomed to it, or out of fear of consequences
- Many more prefer to take action on their own, rather than approaching the police for help
- Women have to constraint their use of space, and change their body language while accessing the platform, stairs and bridge during crowded times.
- Different strategies are used by women to travel safely. They always have to be on alert, have to devise strategies, which restricts their mobility and increases dependency.
- Finally, in spite of being aware of the existing security mechanisms, like railway helpline numbers, they are not used by commuters to redress their issues

Safety Walks

The findings of the FGD and the survey prompted us to undertake the task of studying each and every railway station in minute details, by taking into account the specific factors that make them unsafe for women.

The safety audit of 18 railway stations of central line were done in the joint collaboration of Akshara and NSS.

At the onset, the 3 training sessions were conducted with different batches of students on how to conduct a safety audit. We focused on building the perspective of the students on what constitutes sexual harassment and in which different forms it is experienced by women. Then we distinguished between the physical and the social factors that would make an area unsafe for women, and asked each student to review their own area from the point of view of its safety for women. The students were also asked to come with recommendations, as well as the process through which they would implement these recommendations in making their respective area safer.

This exercise helped the students in understanding the dynamics of gender in public spaces and all various factors that they needed to keep into consideration while auditing their respective stations. We also fortified them with a detailed checklist and an interview format that they would have to fill during their safety audits.

Prepared with the resources, the students of 19 colleges organized and conducted safety audits of 18 railway stations and reported the recommendations that will improve the station from the point of view of safety of women.

Recommendations that emerged from the Safety Audits:

- Almost all public toilets on the 18 stations audited were very unsafe due to no lights or very dim lights, broken doors/ windows and occupancy of men loitering, gambling, and boozing near the toilet area or at the door. Secondly all these toilets are unclean with no basic facilities like water, dustbins, no attendant, no signage etc.... It was also observed that many of these toilets were kept locked.
- Need of visible policing at local railway stations esp. outside women compartments and post 8.00 pm to 07.00 am in women compartments of all local suburban trains.
- Visible policing is a major concern especially at the smaller stations where there are no police throughout the day.
- Increase and spread out women compartments within the existing suburban local trains especially during peak hours of the day.
- Visible Help Desks around station area with presence of police personnel.
- Visible, clear and well-lit tube lights to be installed across station areas. (Platforms, foot-over bridges, below the staircases, toilets, on connected sky-walks and subways and below staircase)
- Benches to be put-up and reserved for women outside women compartments.
- Clear and Visible Signage board to be put-up on all over station area, for ex: signs of staircase, help desks, ticket counter, free urinals, display of emergency helpline numbers, etc...

Common Findings of Audited Stations

- Public toilets to be constructed at Nahur station
- The staircase of Parel foot over bridge which is towards curry road side is narrow. Overcrowding of commuters observed especially during peak hours of the day. In spite of police deployed to manage the crowd, women commuters still fear of sexual harassment esp. in form of groping, brushing, touching.
- Secondly due to more work sector, corporate offices, tertiary municipal hospitals, maternity hospitals in the area around parel/elphinstone, one observes increase in number of workforce which includes both men and women in more numbers and in such situation women commuters struggle with fear of harassment while accessing this FOB.
- More lights should be installed on platform no. 3 and 4 of Matunga station as it becomes dark in the evening
- A group of boys sit under Vidyavihar station FOB after 10 pm at night and pass comments at girls/women. At the same station, women commuters are charged with money for using public urinals. This trend of charging money from women commuters who access public toilet urinals is observed at many other stations namely, CST, Sion, Matunga, Thane, Curry road and others.
- Overall observation of public toilets at all 18 stations are in pathetic state and women fear using these toilets as they are unlit, with broken doors, broken windows, no basic infrastructure.
- Connected public FoB of Dadar station from western line to central line is dimly lit, this bridge during peak hours and festive season is overcrowded too.
- Men beggars, sometimes drunkards enter the ladies coach during travel from Byculla to Sandhurst road and they obstruct your way by their hands as you try to alight from the train
- After 9 pm Sandhurst road station, even aged women are stared at some men also make lewd remarks, like asking the women to come with them etc.
- Wall on platform no. 1 of Byculla station towards Kurla should be constructed to block hiding spots
- Z Bridge is problematic due to the covering on both sides. It needs to be open up atleast on one side and it needs to be lit.



Conclusion

Women are disadvantaged in their use of railway services due to constant threat of sexual harassment and danger to their safety, which is aggravated by lack of proper infrastructure and indifferent attitude of fellow commuters and police. Their right to freedom of movement and to enjoy use of public spaces without fear is affected. Women are forced to be 'confined to home' and not step out during certain timings for their own safety, which affects their mobility and also the right to live with dignity.

Our request to the concerned authorities is to pay attention and improve the conditions of stations by equipping them with clean public toilets, lighting and changing the design of platforms and bridges. There must be increased patrolling by police personnel who have been sensitized to difficulties of women and who have been trained to tackle cases of sexual harassment, chain snatching etc. Women must access helplines and not worry about complaining. Women must help their fellow commuters and not be asympathetic to their concerns. It is only when the authorities make adequate measures for the safety of women that they can realize their full potential. This will in turn contribute to the development and progress of the city and take us towards the Smart City that Mumbai is becoming.

Colleges that participated in the Safety Audit

Trainings and Audits

Name of College	Name of Railway station
Siddharat College	Masjid Bandar
IFSC	Sandurst Road
Keshavchand Chellaram.College	Byculla
Dr. Ambedkar College	ChichPokali
Tope College	Curry Road
Mahrishi Dayanand College	Parel
Valia College	Dadar
Chetana College	Matunga
SIES Old College	Sion
Mahrishi Dayanand College & RamanandArya D.A.V College	Kurla
Sree Narayana Guru College	Vidyavihar
Bhavans (Andheri) College	Ghatkopar
Ismail Yusuf College	Vikhroli
S.P.D.T College	Kanjurmarg
RamanandArya D.A.V College	Bhandup
Dahanukar College	Nahur
Sathye College	Mulund
L. S. Raheja College, RamanandArya D.A.V College & Bhavans (Chaupaty) College	Thane