



**Mobility and Safety of Women:
Interlinkages with Labour Force
Participation**

Introduction

India's significant economic progress in recent decades has not been matched by progress in women's equal economic participation. India's female labour force participation rate (LFPR) was at a historic low of 23.3 per cent in 2017–18. Only nine other countries in the world have reported a lower proportion of working women in their economies (Rukmini S., 2019a).

One of the major factors limiting the participation of women in the labour force is concern for their safety (Chapman and Mishra, 2019). These include fear of sexual violence in streets, in and around public transportation, schools, workplaces and other public and private spaces. This reality

decreases women's and girls' freedom of mobility by impacting their ability to participate in school, work and public life; access to essential services; and enjoyment of cultural and recreational opportunities (UN Women, 2019).

In India, the perception of danger bolsters social norms that restrict women's mobility and freedom. It was found that 80 per cent of Indian women need permission from their husbands or other family members to even visit a health centre (Chapman and Mishra, 2019). In particular, ensuring a safe city and a safe workplace by investing in safe and affordable modes of public transportation, infrastructural additions to make cities more accessible for women, and inclusive legal provisions for safety at work can be important enablers of female LFPR.

Gendering Cities

Women experience cities differently and, unlike men, have to work out safety strategies to negotiate public spaces at all times of day (Jagori and UN Women, 2011). Lack of safe and equitable public spaces and services have a direct impact on women's active participation in the economy.

Mobility and transport concerns of women

Women's daily patterns of activity are more complex than men's owing to roles incorporating domestic chores, childcare, elderly care as well as paid work (Whitzman, 2013). They are often required to change, divert and break journey to pick up children, run errands, shop or take on other family obligations. Therefore, women's

travel is characterised by chaining trips to combine multiple destinations within one trip (Shah et al., 2017).

In India, gendered responsibilities at home translate into women either not having the time to participate in the labour force or travelling shorter or no distances for paid work — 45 per cent women work out of their own houses (Rukmini S., 2019b). Further, men and women also have distinct commuting patterns owing to differential financial positions and asset ownership. Across Delhi, Bengaluru, Kolkata, Mumbai and Chennai, 37 per cent women walk to work compared to 27 per cent men (Goswami, 2017). For men, apart from walking, cycling and riding a scooter or bike to work are the most common modes of commuting. On the contrary, for women, after walking, taking the bus is the most common mode of transport (Rukmini S., 2019b).

Due to greater dependence on means of public transportation, the costs of poor urban transport services are often borne by women. In addition, in a study undertaken by Jagori and UN Women in Delhi,¹ 51 per cent women reported facing harassment inside public transport (Goswami, 2017). Further, lack of reliable and affordable transport limit women's employment opportunities.

Women's safety in urban public transportation became a part of public discourse in India only after the unfortunate and brutal incident of a young girl's rape and murder that took place on a bus in Delhi in December 2012 (Shah et al., 2017). The government of India responded by setting up the Nirbhaya Fund over 2013–16 to implement schemes for improving women's security (ibid.).

Urban planning and infrastructure

The 'Crimes in India - 2019' report shows that crimes against women rose by 7.3 per cent in 2019 compared to 2018 (Ghose, 2020). Lack of safety for women, both perceived and experienced, significantly undermines women's 'right to the city', that is, the right to move freely, access and use public spaces and services, and to make choices about residence, educational opportunities, place of work and even leisure.

Urban planning and design can contribute to creating safer cities by incorporating safer designs. Utilising the Nirbhaya Fund, a pilot

¹ In 2010, Jagori and UN Women surveyed a total of 5,010 people including 3,816 women, 944 men and 250 common witnesses. Respondents belonged to diverse occupational categories spread across public places in all nine districts of Delhi (http://www.jagori.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/Baseline-Survey_layout_for-Print_12_03_2011.pdf).



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Safe City project was launched in 2018 in eight metropolitan cities of India with the objective of ensuring safety and security of women in public places. Major infrastructural provisions under the scheme are: implementing safety measures in buses, including cameras; improving street lighting in identified hotspot areas; setting up pink toilets; and police out-posts exclusively administered by female police. Small infrastructural provisions like shifting a bus stop by few metres to a safer location, installing street lights, and clean and functional public toilets can go a long way in making cities safe for women.

Ensuring more diverse uses of public spaces — cafes, restaurants, sitting spaces, libraries, wider footpaths — will also invite more people to the streets and ensure 'natural surveillance' (Panda, 2019). Public places that are visible tend to make women feel safer, while segregated spaces with high walls and limited visibility lead to a greater feeling of insecurity. In other words, being seen by others is more comforting than not being seen at all (Viswanath et al., 2015). Street vendors, in particular, can be a key element for a safe urban economy — while contributing to building safer cities as 'eyes on the street', they also foster platforms for diverse people to interact actively or passively (Deore and Lathia, 2019). Hence, cities designed with designated spaces for street vendors, especially women vendors, can be safer by creating an informal surveillance system. If cities are designed with women in mind, they will be more likely to feel safe, welcomed and comfortable in using public spaces and, therefore, be able to participate in the labour force.

Concerns of women's safety at work

For decades, women's ability to travel has been a result. In 2013, India enacted the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act (POSH Act) to protect workers in both the formal and informal sector (Marathe, 2020). The law builds upon the 1997 Vishakha Guidelines passed by the Supreme Court of India mandating employers to ensure the safety of female employees from sexual harassment at the workplace.

The act was understood as a positive step towards addressing harassment at formal workplaces which employ only a small proportion of female workers in India. Yet, of the 774 companies surveyed in 2018² by Observer Research Foundation (ORF) and World Economic Forum (WEF), 84 per cent reported being unaware of the policy (Chapman and Mishra, 2019). Although more and more women are speaking out against acts of sexual harassment in formal spaces, most women still find it difficult to report cases

² ORF and WEF conducted in-person interviews with the leadership of 774 companies across four industries (textiles, financial services, retail, transport, and logistics) in India, in 14 locations across the country (https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Future-of-Work-in-India_Report.pdf).

because of stigma, fear of retribution, and the trauma of a drawn-out justice system that often lets them down (Marathe, 2020).

Guaranteeing women's right to a safe and equitable working environment in intermediary spaces becomes more critical in India where informal forms of employment are more common — 95 per cent women work in the informal sector (Marathe, 2020). In the survey conducted by Jagori and UN Women it was also found that, across occupations of the respondents, women workers in the unorganised sector (40 per cent) — construction site workers, domestic help — are the most vulnerable to physical harassment, while factory workers (25 per cent) and home makers (20 per cent) are less susceptible to physical harassment (Jagori and UN Women, 2011). Further, there is limited government effort to enforce the law to protect women in the informal sector, including those employed by the government to implement various welfare schemes related to health, nutrition, education and social welfare (Marathe, 2020).

Newer patterns of informality are emerging in India with the increasing size of the gig economy. Freelancers and platform workers who work in co-working or public spaces also need to be protected by safety nets so that even more women can join the workforce without fear of being exploited.

Additionally, Indian women are not even safe in their homes as domestic violence is one of the most widespread crimes against women with one report every five minutes (Sen, 2016). Women workers performing either unpaid care work at their own homes or those who participate in paid work from home are not immune to abuse at home. Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA), 2005, is an important legislation that addresses physical, sexual, verbal, emotional and economic violence against women at home. Although commended for its broad definition of domestic violence, the common understanding of domestic violence as a family's internal affair by the authorities has discouraged women from filing cases (Chachra, 2017).

Conclusion and steps moving ahead

This policy brief attempts to describe the issues underpinning women's safety as a barrier to their participation in the labour force. Concerns around

safety act as a barrier to both physical mobility — moving around — and social mobility — ability to access services that might improve their life prospects (Whitzman, 2013). Tackling concerns of safety, affordability of urban transportation services, designing safer streets and public spaces, and better provisions to ensure women workers' safety at work will play an important role in increasing their active participation in the economy. A few important initiatives towards creating safer environment for women could include:

- A paradigm shift from a male-centric urban planning model to one that is more gender inclusive. It is essential to integrate gender responsive budgeting (GRB) with the planning process for all allocations in all ministries and departments. Even sectors usually excluded from GRB but which can potentially support women to participate in paid work should provide gender friendly infrastructure, both physical (basic amenities at work and travel, water, fuel, sanitation, housing) and social (skill development) (Eapen, 2017). Increasing state investment in infrastructural facilities, especially in public transportation, reducing user fee for public transportation services, relaxation of toll taxes — all these can improve their mobility which, in turn, can positively impact their ability to engage in productive activities (Dewan 2019).
- It is important to ensure an effective utilisation and further extension of the Nirbhaya Fund. Some projects proposed to be instituted under the Fund have not taken off and the money re-mains grossly underutilised. Only half the states utilised the Fund to activate the Emergency Re-sponse Support System; the Cyber Crime Prevention Against Women and Children (CCPWC) scheme never took off because no state proposed projects under the scheme; 15 states have not invested in operationalising the proposed Pan-India helpline number (Porecha, 2019).
- While the provisions under the POSH Act are elaborate, its proper implementation continues to be a challenge. To ensure the safety of a large number of women workers in the informal sector, Internal Committees and Local Committees need to be implemented effectively. Additionally, PWDVA is a practical policy, but its improper implementation leaves women with little choice but to 'settle' the matter (Chachra, 2017).

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This brief has been authored by Hiya Singh Rajput is a Research Associate, IWWAGE–LEAD at Krea University.

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Block M 6, Second Floor, Kharera, Hauz Khas New Delhi, Delhi-110016

+91 11 4909 6529 | www.iwwage.org

