

## **From Public Spaces to Safe Spaces: Strengthening Women's Safety and Gender Parity in Urban India**

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DOI: 10.46609/IJSSER.2025.v10i09.045 URL: <https://doi.org/10.46609/IJSSER.2025.v10i09.045>

Received: 3 September 2025 / Accepted: 18 September 2025 / Published: 30 September 2025

### **ABSTRACT**

*The report examines the state of women's safety in urban public spaces in India. Through secondary research, including policy reports and news articles, the study analyses the challenges in the implementation of government-led initiatives aimed at promoting safety and improving gender parity. The study focuses on understanding the conceptual frameworks and the current status of gender disparity in India. On understanding the gaps in the implementation of initiatives, two recommendations are highlighted, which are to leverage technological solutions and encourage behaviour change through community engagement. The study finds that a blended approach with urban infrastructure built with a gender lens, along with accountability, can help transform cities to be safe and equitable.*

**Keywords:** Women's safety, Gender parity, Urban India

### **Introduction**

Gender is defined as a social and cultural construct which distinguishes the roles and responsibilities of men and women, girls and boys. On the other hand, sex refers to the biological and physiological differences between humans. Gender represents characteristics like femininity and masculinity that vary between societies and can change over time. <sup>1</sup> The systematic examination of differences between the sexes is known as gender analysis, and it examines the influence of gender roles, needs, and opportunities on the lived experiences of individuals in specific situations. This helps in identifying inequalities, designing interventions, and ensuring policies benefit all genders equitably. <sup>1,2</sup>

The World Economic Forum (WEF) Global Gender Gap Index measures gender parity across four dimensions. Gender parity is a measure of representation of women and men across different dimensions, including economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment,

health and survival, and political empowerment. A score of ‘1’ represents full gender parity, that is, complete equality between women and men. In 2025, India, with a gender parity score of 0.641 ranked 131 out of 148 countries. India stands behind its neighbours, including Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh (Figure 1). Although India shows improvement in economic participation, the other dimensions have remained the same since last year.<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 1: The global Gender Gap Index 2025, results by region**

Southern Asia			
Economy	Rank		Score
	Regional	Global	
Bangladesh	1	24	0.775
Bhutan	2	119	0.683
Nepal	3	125	0.648
Sri Lanka	4	130	0.645
India	5	131	0.644
Maldives	6	138	0.626
Pakistan	7	148	0.567

In India, the national averages often hide the urban-rural contrast and the variations between India’s cities. Urban areas often have better women’s mobility, financial independence, and skills due to infrastructure and access to facilities, yet they face challenges such as discrimination and reduced labour force participation rates for women. According to a recent survey, the female labour force participation rate in urban India is 27.2% compared to 47.3% in rural regions. One of the reasons for this contrast between urban and rural areas is a lack of safety and fear of harassment in public spaces and the workplace.<sup>4</sup> Activities ranging from verbal harassment and unwanted touching to sexual assault, rape occur on the streets, in and around public transport, workplaces, schools, parks, and religious sites. This affects the safety, well-being, and freedom of individuals and causes long-term feelings of anxiety and depression. This compromises personal choice, and limits opportunities.<sup>5</sup>

Another survey revealed that 40% of women feel unsafe while traveling alone at night in urban areas. A survey by the National Family Health found that 15% of women aged 15-49 have experienced sexual violence in their lives. There were 31,500 cases of rape registered in India in 2022, as shared by the National Crime Records Bureau. These figures represent human right violations, but still, sexual violence in public spaces remains under-reported. This highlights the severity of the issue faced by women in India. <sup>5</sup>

The issue of sexual violence is rising around the world and in particular in urban areas. Because of such prevalence, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) under Target 5.2 have specified the elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls in public and private spaces. There are initiatives such as the UN Women's Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces, which bring together different stakeholders to develop gender responsive interventions for a safe, inclusive urban environment. Under this UN initiative, New Delhi was among the first cities worldwide to join, driven by high public concern over women's safety. <sup>6</sup>

This study examines gender parity in urban India and examines challenges in the implementation of interventions, and provides recommendations for promoting women's safety in cities.

### **Research Methodology**

This study adopts a secondary research approach to examine women's safety in urban public spaces in India. It focuses on gender parity, sexual violence, and interventions to address them. A literature review was conducted drawing from peer-reviewed research papers, policy reports from national and international organizations, like UN Women, the World Economic Forum, and the Government of India. Also, credible news articles were referred to capture recent developments.

The sources were selected noting their relevance, credibility, and coverage of urban gender issues. The review aimed to introduce key concepts related to gender and women's rights in public spaces. It aims to assess the current state of the issue, followed by identifying policy interventions addressing sexual violence and promoting safer public spaces.

### **Discussion**

The challenges to women's safety in the urban areas are shaped by diverse set of factors. These include gender biased urban infrastructure development, high population density, risk associated with public transportation, the presence of informal settlements, and poor law enforcement. The migration from rural to urban areas creates a diverse socio-economic group which further complicates the application of safety policies. The marginalized communities often face high vulnerability due to their socio-economic conditions and lower power dynamics. <sup>7</sup>

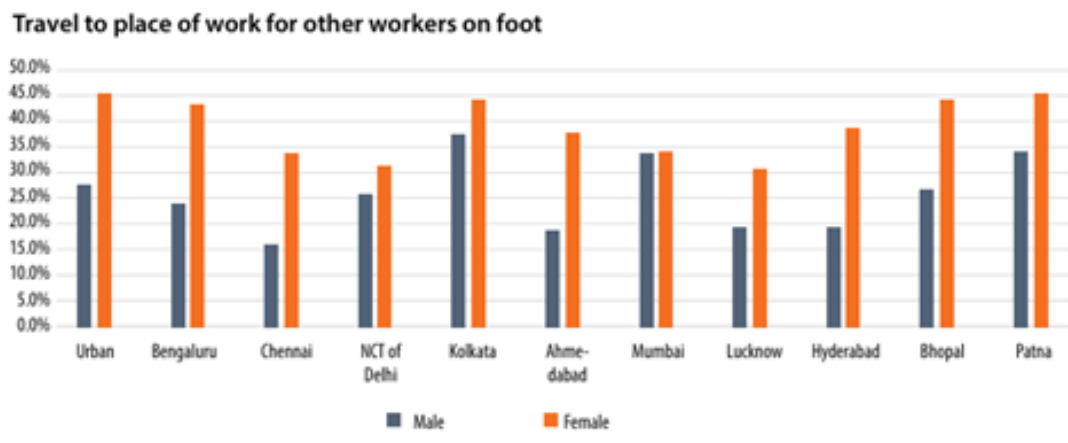
This discussion is organized into three sections: first, an investigation into the challenges to women’s safety, specifically in relation to infrastructure and transportation. Second, an assessment of women safety focussed government-led initiatives, and finally, recommendations for addressing the gaps and strengthening safety measures to create an inclusive urban environment for women.

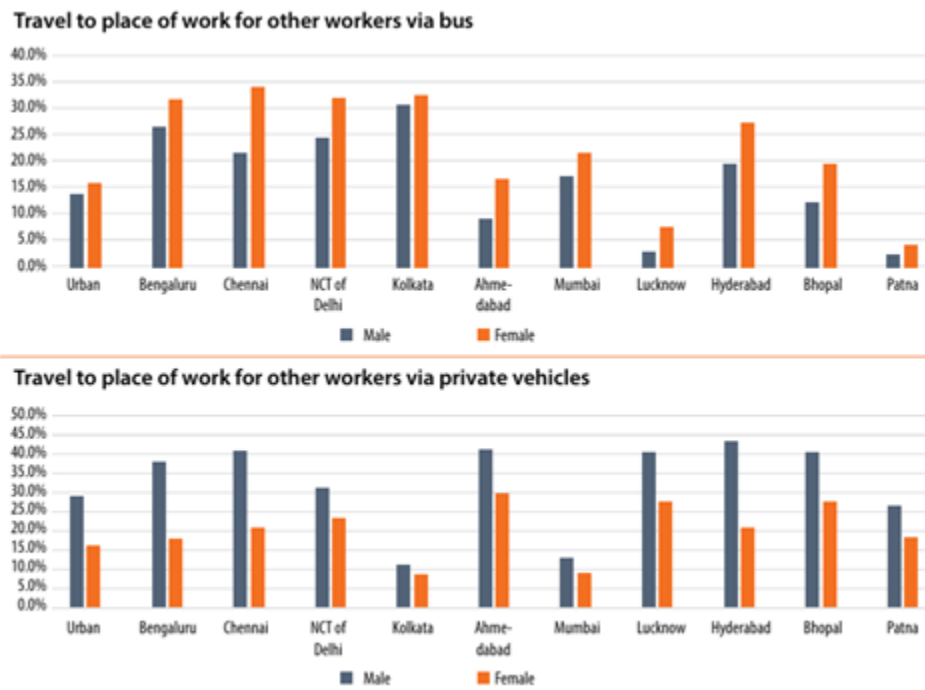
1. Challenges of Women’s Safety in Urban India

The citizen’s quality of life is impacted by the built environment developed as a part of urban planning and infrastructure. Still, urban planning in cities often overlooks the gender perspective and needs of women are ignored leading to non-inclusive development. The design and planning failed to recognize women’s specific needs and demands that negatively impact women socio-economic status relative to men. This has led to women facing issues in accessing urban public spaces. Like unsafe or poorly designed pedestrian pathways, often cause restrictive mobility. Similarly, for safety concerns women avoid walking or cycling due to lack of supportive infrastructure, congested areas, and walking facilities. This highlights the importance of a gender lens to ensure liveability and inclusivity in the cities.<sup>8</sup>

The commuting pattern in the major Indian cities shows that women and girls predominantly walk to work with an average of 45.4 % compared to 27.4 % of men. Also, 22 % women opt for public transport (buses) compared to 13.7 % men. Meanwhile, there is also a stark difference in usage of private vehicles, where men dominate over women. It is to be noted that this data is from 2011, yet recent studies confirm the findings from Figure 2. It thus underlines that women’s and girls’ safety is tied to mobility and access.<sup>9</sup>

**Figure 2: Trend in travel to place of work by workers across major Indian cities <sup>9</sup>**





The urban design limits gender equality and fuels safety concerns, and increases crimes and sexual violence. Sexual harassment refers to unwanted sexual advances or favors, unwelcome and invited physical or non-physical action that makes a woman uncomfortable because of her gender. Such actions can create an atmosphere of fear and intimidation, often leading to anxiety and depression or other psychological distress. Such remarks can be verbal or non-verbal, in the form of singing offensive songs, and stalking, winking, or offensive gestures. Physical harassment includes touching inappropriately, groping, molesting, or rape. <sup>5</sup>

## 2. Evaluating Government Initiatives on Urban Women’s Safety

Recognizing the multi-dimensional nature of these issues and the grave impact of such violence, the government has launched several initiatives and developed legal frameworks to address the issues. These initiatives mainly target prevention, protection, legal recourse, and rehabilitation.

**Table 1 summarizes key initiatives and their focus areas.** <sup>10, 11</sup>

**Table 1: Government initiatives addressing women’s safety**

Initiative	Focus areas
Nirbhaya Fund	Launched in 2013. It focuses on infrastructure and capacity building for women’s safety. It has components like CCTV in

	public spaces, women-only transport, and helplines.
One Stop Centres (OSC)	Launched in 2015. It provides immediate support services for survivors of violence by providing medical aid, legal assistance, counselling, and mental health care.
Women's Helpline	Launched in 2015 as a crisis response helpline through the number 181. Offers immediate support and referrals to police hospitals, OSC. Support through helpline number 181.
Emergency Response Support System	Launched in 2013. Single helpline for different emergencies, has location-based SOS alerts, real-time tracking of rescue vehicles.
SHe-Box Portal	Launched in 2024. Workplace sexual harassment redressal. Allows women to file complaints online and receive immediate action.
Women Help Desks in Police Stations	Launched in 2013. Makes police stations approachable and responsive to women's safety concerns.
Safe City Project	Launched in 2018, it focuses on urban safety infrastructure. Some of its components include smart lighting, CCTV, and women's help desks.
Other State-level programs	Specific context-specific interventions like in Delhi 'Himmat' app which has features for women's safety in a mobile application. Maharashtra's 'Damini marshals' are all-women squad of city police for maintaining safety on the streets.

Also, there are several legal provisions put in place for women's safety, like the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita 2023 which has introduced stringent penalties for sexual offences and created fast-track special courts. Also, the 2013 Act of Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal), which casts a legal obligation upon employers of public and private workplaces to provide a safe and secure working environment.<sup>12</sup>

These initiatives and programs are a step towards enhancing women's safety and security through legal measures, financial allocations, and support services. There are still shortcomings in their implementation, planning, and design, which have hampered the full potential of the schemes. According to the National Crime Records Bureau, a total of 4,45,426 cases of crime against women were registered across India in 2022.<sup>13</sup>

Challenges like ground-level implementation of schemes like One Stop Centres and Women helpline suffer due to uneven infrastructure across states and a dedicated personnel shortage. Also, the issue of trained staff and digital access limits awareness. Secondly, there are challenges

in monitoring and data transparency. Issues of outdated data and discrepancies are commonly seen. Furthermore, the scheme's effectiveness is restrained due to societal shame and patriarchal mindset among the citizens. It is found that women, especially from the marginalized communities, are unwilling to approach the legal or institutional system mainly due to fear of revenge and social isolation.

### 3. Recommendations for Strengthening Women's Safety in Urban India

A collaborative effort between all the stakeholders including the citizens is vital for improving women's safety in urban areas. Moreover, it is important to develop a robust mechanism backed by innovation and data, combined with behavioural change, to unleash the full potential of the initiatives.

There are two specific themes of recommendations that can have a huge impact. These include technological solutions and behavioural change. Technological solutions can enhance safety for women at individual and broader levels. Solutions like surveillance tools such, as CCTV cameras in public spaces and transport hubs, can deter offenders and also help in the investigation of crimes. Implementation of solutions powered by Internet of Things (IoT) to improve the infrastructure, including smart streetlights, real-time emergency alert systems, will support rapid response and visibility in vulnerable areas. GPS-enabled monitoring tools have the power to increase accountability especially during off-peak hours like late-night commutes. Also, mobile safety applications can be effective to target interventions effectively.

A behaviour change mindset and a culture of respect and accountability can lead to long-term changes. Inclusive urban planning that integrates technology and transforms societal attitudes can create long-term change. It is important to create an environment of collective responsibility, promoting 'bystander intervention' to address the issue of public harassment. Also, adopting principles like 'Eyes on the Street' empowers local communities to maintain a visible and engaged presence in public areas. Such behaviour shifts through capacity building, public awareness programs, school curriculum, and community engagement can develop empathy, and shared responsibility.<sup>5</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Women's safety in urban areas of India is a result of gender-biased development, social norms, and policy implementation challenges. Initiatives like UN Women's Safe Cities programme and government policies have made progress over time, yet gaps remain in enforcement, urban design, and public awareness. In order to address these issues, it requires combining inclusive infrastructure, technological tools, and efforts to shift attitudes and build community responsibility. The bottom line is that the strengthening of women's safety in public spaces is

essential for achieving gender parity, and ensuring all citizens can access and enjoy urban life without fear.

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