

Women and Public Safety in Tiruchirappalli: Mobility, Response, and Community Participation

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ABSTRACT

Women's public safety in tier-II Indian cities remains under-researched compared to metropolitan areas. Tiruchirappalli (Trichy), a rapidly urbanizing city in Tamil Nadu, has witnessed growing concerns regarding gender-based harassment and mobility restrictions. This study aims to (1) enhance safe mobility and transit security, (2) strengthen rapid response and legal support systems, and (3) create public awareness and community participation for women's safety in Trichy. A mixed-method design was employed with 400 women (aged 18–60) surveyed using stratified random sampling across high-footfall zones. Thirty in-depth interviews and five focus group discussions were conducted with commuters, police personnel, and auto-rickshaw drivers. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. Women's safety in Trichy is compromised across all three dimensions. Infrastructure deficits, delayed response, low legal awareness, and weak community participation create a fragmented safety net. Integrated interventions improved lighting, rapid response mechanisms, and mandatory awareness programs are urgently needed.

Keywords: Women's safety, public mobility, rapid response, community participation, Tiruchirappalli, gender and urban space

1. Introduction

In India, urban public spaces continue to be enmeshed in broader gender hierarchies, operating not only as geographical locations but as spaces that are socially produced, shaped by issues of power, inclusion, and exclusion. Following Henri Lefebvre's notion of the production of space, urban spaces can be viewed as sites of daily practices that reproduce institutionalised inequalities, such as gender. Here, public spaces might often emerge as sites of contestation

where women's presence is mediated through fear, surveillance and tacit limitations on movement. While cities like Delhi and Mumbai have benefitted from ongoing policy focus and specific safety measures, tier-II cities like Tiruchirappalli are not immune to similar challenges, which are often framed against the backdrop of weak institutional capacity and fractured urban governance. Home to a population of around 1.2 million, Tiruchirappalli is a rapidly urbanising space where old and new gender norms converge with evolving mobility and economic activities.

The feminist analysis of women's mobility in public space is connected to issues of agency and empowerment, as defined by Naila Kabeer, who defines empowerment as the expansion of the capability of people to make strategic life choices. Yet this is often constrained by both material and symbolic factors. The growing engagement of women in education, employment and night-time economy in Tiruchirappalli is a testament to changing patterns of gendered urbanism, but also to the associated vulnerabilities in poorly regulated spaces. Ongoing infrastructural shortfalls (such as inadequate street lighting, security and safe sidewalks), coupled with inadequate institutional responses to women's experiences of insecurity, continue to influence perceptions of insecurity and constrained spatial mobility. Moreover, as Judith Butler writes, a pattern of fear and vulnerability contributes to the creation of cautionary practices, which create self-controlled mobilities that restrict women's public spatial presence, especially in night-time settings. These processes are compounded by wider structures of gendered power as identified by Raewyn Connell, in which public spaces are implicitly masculinised, allowing women only contingent access.

Resolving these complex issues calls for multi-faceted and evidence-informed strategies that go beyond infrastructure-led approaches to focus on structural, institutional and socio-cultural aspects of safety. Following the UN Women Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces framework, this research understands women's safety in public spaces through three interlinked dimensions: safe mobility, which focuses on the impact of spatial and infrastructural arrangements on mobility; rapid response systems, which examines the accessibility and effectiveness of institutional arrangements such as policing and helplines; and community awareness, which assesses the degree of participation, legal sensibility, and collective action in safety programs. These dimensions collectively offer a multifaceted perspective to understanding the intricacies of women's safety in a tier-II city.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The research design for this study is mixed method, which combines quantitative and qualitative methods to produce a rich and holistic understanding of public safety for women. This approach

allows triangulation, leading to more robust and rich interpretations through the integration of quantitative and qualitative data. A cross-sectional design was used to assess women's perceptions, experiences and responses to safety issues at one point in time. This approach is well-adapted to exploring both spatial and temporal dynamics of perceived safety in cities.

2.2 Study Area

This study was conducted in certain high activity nodes within Tiruchirappalli City Corporation based on their significance to women's mobility and participation. These include:

- Central Bus Stand (Chathiram)
- Trichy Junction Railway Station
- Thillai Nagar market
- Bharathidasan University area
- Major public parks

These areas represent a range of urban functions (transportation, commerce, education and recreation); hence they allow us to evaluate safety with regard to a broad spectrum of urban places. These areas represent an effort to understand the complexities of mobility, visibility and vulnerability in the city.

2.3 Sample Size

We used stratified random sampling to ensure representation across the study zones. This enabled the representation of participants from diverse socio-spatial backgrounds, thus enhancing the transferability of the findings for the city.

Quantitative component: 400 women respondents were interviewed, with 100 women from each of the study zones.

Qualitative component: 30 in-depth interviews and 5 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with 8-10 participants were conducted.

This approach enabled both breadth and depth, enabling the study to understand the general trends and to explore the subjective experiences, perceptions and coping strategies.

2.4 Inclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria for the study were:

- Women between the ages of 18 to 60 years
- Residents, workers or students of Tiruchirappalli for at least six months
- These criteria ensured that the participants had adequate knowledge of the public spaces and mobility patterns within the city and would be able to provide valid responses.

2.5 Data Collection Instruments

- We employed both structured and semi-structured data collection instruments to gather both quantitative and qualitative data:
- A structured questionnaire was used to gather information on demographics, travel patterns, perceptions of safety and experiences of harassment in public spaces.
- Semi-structured interview guides were developed for in-depth interviews, allowing participants to share experiences, responses and interactions with institutional arrangements.
- FGD guides were used to understand group dynamics, community-level responses, and collective understandings of safety, participation and institutional response.

This approach provided triangulation and added rigour to the analysis.

2.6 Data Analysis

- For quantitative data, IBM SPSS Statistics Version 26 software was used, using descriptive statistical analyses (frequencies, percentages, and cross-tabulation) to understand the patterns of women's safety perceptions and experiences.
- Qualitative Data: Qualitative data from interviews and FGDs were analysed through thematic analysis, using the approach outlined by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke. This process included coding, theme identification and pattern analysis to explore the socio-cultural and institutional underpinnings of women's safety.

Objectives of the Study

The study is guided by the following key objectives:

1. To examine women's mobility patterns in Tiruchirappalli and assess how factors such as infrastructure, time, and location influence their perception of safety in public spaces.

2. To evaluate the effectiveness of institutional mechanisms, including awareness and accessibility of helplines, police response systems, and reporting behaviour in addressing incidents of harassment.
3. To analyse the level of awareness, participation, and willingness of women to engage in safety programs and community-based initiatives aimed at enhancing public safety.

3. The Concepts and Theories of Women's Public Safety

The safety of women in public space cannot be reduced to aspects of crime prevention or the adequacy of infrastructure; it is part of the socio-spatial, cultural and institutional power relations. In this research, women's safety is construed as a complex phenomenon, defined by the interrelation between spatial design, institutional responsiveness and socio-cultural norms that govern women's use of public spaces.

Theoretically, public space is not a neutral but produced space. Lefebvre's theory of the production of space is taken up in this study, in which the city is seen as a place where social relations are spatialised and materialised. From this view, women's restricted access to safe mobility is explained both through physical restrictions and the unequal rights to space. Consequently, the notion of the "right to the city" is important to highlight women's rights to mobility, safety, and freedom in urban spaces.

From a feminist standpoint, women's participation in public space is related to empowerment and agency. Naila Kabeer defines empowerment as the expansion of people's choices. Yet this is not always possible due to structural constraints such as gender roles, socioeconomic positions and institutional factors. In this sense, constraints on women's movement, such as during night-time, in the urban domain are a denial of this agency, and re-enforce gendered public and private spatial divisions.

The role of fear in public spaces can also be explained by gendered socialisation and performativity. Judith Butler's understanding of repetition and anticipation suggests that women's experiences and perceptions of vulnerability result in the internalisation of precautionary measures, such as avoiding certain areas, restricting night-time mobility, or requiring male escort. These self-disciplinary practices are not simply individual preferences, but socially constructed practices that help navigate structurally unsafe public spaces.

Moreover, the gendered nature of public space is supported by structures of power and dominance. Raewyn Connell's understanding of hegemonic masculinity reinforces the way public spaces are implicitly masculinised, where men's presence is taken for granted and

women's presence is seen as contingent and vulnerable. This process helps to normalise harassment, while erasing women's presence in the city.

The institutional context of safety is also crucial. The disparity between the incidence of harassment and reporting rates is symptomatic of a trust and access deficit in the formal justice system. In this respect, the framework proposed by UN Women for the Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces program is helpful in highlighting that "safety for women needs to be addressed through an integrated approach, including urban planning, responsive policing, legal literacy and social participation".

Informed by these views, this research employs an integrated conceptual framework with three dimensions: safe mobility, institutional response, and community awareness. Safe mobility refers to the spatial and infrastructural aspects that facilitate or hinder women's mobility; institutional response relates to the effectiveness, accessibility and legitimacy of institutions such as police and helplines; and community awareness relates to the social participation, legal awareness and collective engagement that contribute to safer public spaces.

Crucially, these are not separate but interlinked. Low mobility jeopardises access to institutional response; lack of institutional response deter reporting and fuels fear; and lack of awareness limits collective action for safety. They constitute a gendered urban safety ecology, in which structural, institutional and socio-cultural factors intersect to influence women's public space experiences.

4. Results

4.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 2: Sample Characteristics (N=400)

| Characteristic | Category | Frequency (n) | Percentage (%) |
|----------------|-------------|---------------|----------------|
| Age group | 18–25 years | 180 | 45.0 |
| | 26–35 years | 120 | 30.0 |
| | 36–60 years | 100 | 25.0 |

| Characteristic | Category | Frequency (n) | Percentage (%) |
|---------------------|----------------------|---------------|----------------|
| Occupation | Student | 200 | 50.0 |
| | Working professional | 140 | 35.0 |
| | Homemaker | 60 | 15.0 |
| Primary travel mode | Bus | 220 | 55.0 |
| | Walking | 90 | 22.5 |
| | Two-wheeler | 70 | 17.5 |
| | Auto/taxi | 20 | 5.0 |

Table 2 shows the socio-demographic profile of respondents (N=400), which provides a valuable context for understanding patterns of safety and mobility.

The age categories reveal a skew towards younger ages, with 45% of the sample in the 18-25 age range, 30% in the 26-35 range and 25% in the 36-60 range. This age distribution implies that the results are influenced by the perspectives of younger women who are more likely to be involved in education, work or regular mobility. This is significant from a gendered urban point of view as younger women are more likely to be present in public spaces and, therefore, likely to face opportunities and challenges in urban life.

When it comes to employment, students are the largest group (50%), followed by working women (35%) and housewives (15%). This composition suggests a sample that is highly involved in public life, particularly in education and work. The prevalence of students and working women points to the role of mobility in their everyday lives, and the need for safe public

transport and infrastructure. Yet the under-representation of homemakers might suggest variations in mobility practices, which can be more localised and time-bound.

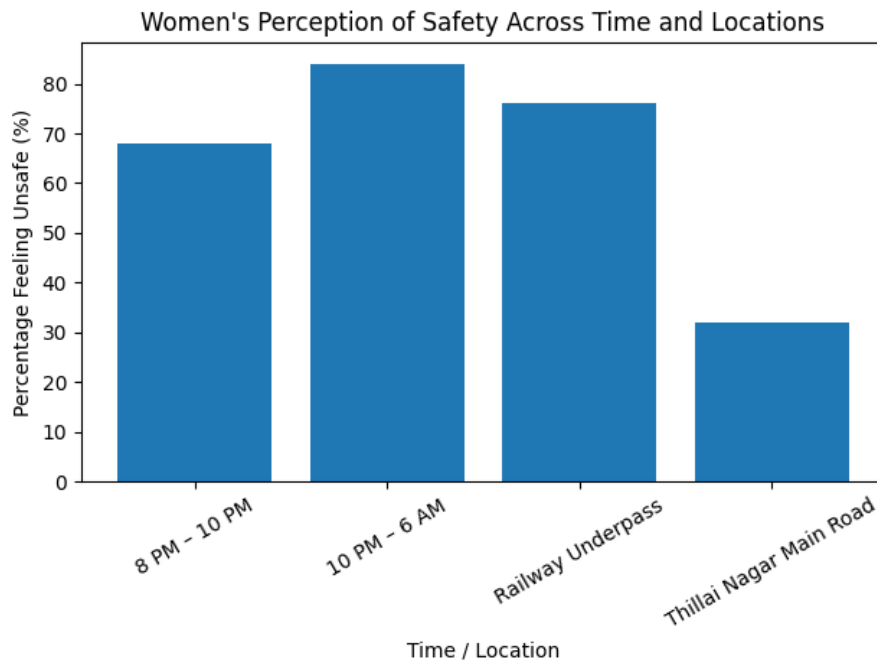
The examination of the primary mode of travel also highlights the importance of mobility in safety concerns. The majority of respondents (55%) identify buses as their primary mode of travel, suggesting a reliance on public transport networks. This positions women in public spaces, often in crowded conditions, where visibility, harassment and accessibility are key concerns. Moreover, 22.5% of respondents use walking as their primary mode of transportation, revealing significant street-level vulnerabilities to poor lighting conditions, pedestrian-friendly infrastructure, and lack of security. The 17.5% who use two-wheelers may indicate a level of independent mobility, albeit constrained by larger infrastructure and security issues. By comparison, only 5% report travelling by auto or taxi, which could be due to economic factors or lack of access to "safer" private modes of transport.

Overall, the study's sample profile suggests that the sample is broadly representative of women actively engaged in public life. This has implications for how we read these findings: the safety perceptions we capture in this study are inextricably linked to exposure to urban environments through transit and street-level mobility. As a result, the data offer important insights into the role of structural conditions of mobility in shaping gendered experiences of safety and insecurity in public spaces.

3.2 Objective 1: Safe Mobility and Transit Security

Figure 1: 3.2 Women’s Perception of Safety Across Time and Space (Suggested figure: Bar chart showing % feeling unsafe)

| Category | Time/Location | Percentage Feeling Unsafe (%) |
|------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Time | 8 PM – 10 PM | 68% |
| Time | 10 PM – 6 AM | 84% |
| Location (Most Unsafe) | Railway Underpass | 76% |
| Location (Safest) | Thillai Nagar Main Road | 32% |



In figure 1, we can see the temporal and spatial differences in women's feelings of safety and vulnerability, which point to increased feelings of insecurity during the night-time hours and in certain places.

Our findings reveal a strong temporal aspect of perceived insecurity. Over half (68%) of the sample feel unsafe between 8 PM and 10 PM, with a strong intensification of this feeling (84%) between 10 PM and 6 AM. This trend echoes what urban feminist scholars refer to as the "temporal restriction" of women's mobility, as opportunities to inhabit the city at night are curtailed. Through Judith Butler's concept of performativity, past experiences and expectations of danger contribute to the internalisation of precautionary practices, prompting women to regulate their own mobility by steering clear of night-time mobility. So, the night-time city becomes symbolically and materially exclusionary, enforcing gendered limits to the temporal and spatial occupations of women in public.

Our findings also highlight the spatiality of risk. The train underpass is the most unsafe site (76% feel unsafe). These environments are often poorly lit, difficult to see, physically isolated and lack surveillance, creating what Henri Lefebvre describes as uneven spatial production. These spaces not only signify infrastructural neglect but also secondary status of women in urban priorities. By contrast, the Thillai Nagar Main Road is considered safer; but that 32% of participants report feeling unsafe suggests that even the well-developed and active areas do not completely secure women's safety.

Crucially, these insights indicate that perceptions of safety are not solely a function of the presence or absence of infrastructure but rather the dynamic interplay between environmental, social and institutional factors. In terms of Naila Kabeer's agency framework, these temporal and spatial constraints on women's mobility directly affect their capacity to exercise mobility rights and engage in the city. This time-space geography of safety therefore reflects the presence of structural inequalities that limit women's "right to the city."

In this sense, the data shows a gendered time-space geography of fear, in which both temporal (night-time) and spatial (isolated or poorly serviced areas) considerations intersect to create a sense of insecurity among women. This has important policy implications for the city, suggesting that safety measures must take into account not just infrastructural and structural factors but also experiential factors.

3.3 Perceived Infrastructure Gaps and Their Impact on Women's Safety

| Infrastructure element | % women rating as "inadequate" |
|------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Street lighting | 78% |
| CCTV cameras | 82% |
| Police patrolling | 71% |
| Emergency call boxes | 89% |
| Footpaths/pavements | 65% |

Table 3 showcases major urban infrastructure gaps that influence women's experience of safety in public spaces. The results demonstrate a significant number of respondents perceive critical safety-focused infrastructure as inadequate, suggesting deficiencies in urban infrastructure provision.

Of the elements examined, emergency call boxes are the most inadequate, with 89% of respondents unsatisfied. This suggests a lack of readily accessible support services in times of

distress, thereby exacerbating feelings of helplessness and reducing women's ability to access timely support. Likewise, 82% of respondents identify inadequate CCTV, raising concerns about a lack of surveillance and monitoring of public spaces. Lack of effective and visible surveillance not only lessens the possibility of deterrence but also erodes trust in post-incident accountability.

Insufficient street lighting is also cited as a concern, with 78% of women deeming it inadequate. Insufficient lighting has far-reaching implications for visibility, especially in the evenings, and so contributes to elevating feelings of danger and avoidance. In terms of spatial production, such infrastructural shortcomings help to create "unsafe places" where darkness and isolation combine to create spaces of fear. As discussed by Henri Lefebvre, these observations reflect uneven production of space, wherein the safety of women is not sufficiently taken into account.

Respondents (71%) view policing as insufficient, suggesting a deficit in institutional presence in public space. This contributes to perceptions of less security and increased perceptions of under-regulation in public spaces. Perceived inefficiency or invisibility of policing also overlaps with trust and access issues, affecting women's reporting or help-seeking behaviours.

Furthermore, 65% of respondents cite the poor condition of footpaths and pavements, which reflects the challenges of mobility in the urban environment. Inadequate footpaths limit women's ability to travel and force them to take risks by walking on roads, exposing them to traffic dangers and potential harassment. Naila Kabeer's notion of agency suggests that these restrictions affect women's capacity for self-determined and safe movement through the city.

Overall, these results show that infrastructural shortcomings are not merely technical deficiencies but are inextricably linked to gendered spatial experiences. Insufficient lighting, CCTV, policing and footpaths all contribute to an overall sense of insecurity that creates a "geography of fear" limiting women's mobility and engagement in public spaces. These findings highlight the need for gender-sensitive urban planning that emphasises safety as a critical aspect of inclusive urban development.

3.4 Objective 2: Swift Response and Legal Services

Table 4: Awareness and Reporting Patterns

| Indicator | % (n/N) |
|--------------------------------------|---------------|
| Aware of women's helpline (1091/181) | 26% (104/400) |

| Indicator | % (n/N) |
|---|--|
| Aware of all-women police station location | 18% (72/400) |
| Experienced harassment in public space (past 12 months) | 41% (164/400) |
| Of those, formally reported to police | 12% (20/164) |
| Reasons for not reporting (top 3) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fear of shame (58%) - Police will not act (52%) - Process too long (44%) |

Table 4 offers valuable insights into awareness, reporting and institutional participation with regard to women's safety. The results highlight a significant gap between the rate of harassment and the use of institutional support systems, suggesting more systemic and sociocultural fault lines.

Knowledge of institutional support is low. A mere 26% of the sample knows about women's helplines (1091/181), and 18% know where the all-women police stations are located. This lack of awareness restricts women's access to timely support and points to the need for greater promotion of information about these security measures. In other words, the formal mechanisms are not easily accessible.

Conversely, the survey suggests the rate of harassment is high, with 41% of survey participants reporting they had experienced harassment in public places in the past year. But only 12% of the victims reported such incidents to the police. This gap between occurrence and reporting points to a systematic underreporting of harassment, which contributes to an underestimation of the prevalence of gender-based harassment, and constrains the impact of legal and policy responses.

The reasons provided for underreporting also point to the structural nature of this discrepancy. The strongest deterrent is fear of shame (58%), which highlights the continued social stigma and victim-blaming that inhibit women from reporting incidents. Moreover, 52% of respondents

perceive that the police will not do anything, suggesting a breakdown in trust in policing. Administrative impediments are also crucial, with 44% reporting that the process is too time-consuming and complicated, thus discouraging formal reporting.

These insights can be explained by gendered power dynamics and institutional access. As noted by Naila Kabeer, empowerment is not just about access to resources, but also the ability to act in institutional environments that facilitate agency. In this particular instance, lack of awareness, social stigma and institutional ineffectiveness limit women's agency to report and seek justice. Moreover, distrust in institutional response is symptomatic of problems with responsiveness and accountability in bureaucratic systems.

From an institutional viewpoint, the results align with UN Women's approach, which recognises that to effectively respond to gender-based violence, it is not enough to have legal frameworks but it is also important to have responsive, accessible and victim-centered mechanisms. The mismatch between availability and use in the current situation indicates the institutional mechanisms in Tiruchirappalli are more formal than effective in responding to women's needs.

More generally, the findings suggest that women's safety is not only dependent on infrastructure or law but significantly influenced by the interplay of awareness, trust, and responsiveness. Underreporting persists due to the failure to translate formal rights into accessible opportunities, thus perpetuating silence and invisibility around gender-based harassment. To overcome these issues, a multifaceted strategy that includes awareness raising, institutional reform, simplifying reporting processes, and trust building through responsive and gender-sensitive policing is needed.

3.4 Objective 3: Public Awareness and Community Participation

3.5 Objective 3: Participation in Safety-Related Activities and Community Engagement
(Suggested pie chart)

| Indicator | % (n/N) |
|--------------------------------|---------|
| Never attended any workshop | 81% |
| Attended self-defense workshop | 12% |
| Attended legal awareness camp | 7% |

| | |
|---|----|
| Participated in neighborhood safety meeting | 5% |
|---|----|

The level of women's engagement in safety-related programs is shown in Figure 2, which demonstrates a stark disparity between the presence of safety programs and the level of women's engagement with them. This research shows a clear gap in outreach, access and ongoing efforts to engage women, as the majority (81%) of respondents have never participated in any safety-related workshop.

Engagement in specific programs is low. A mere 12% of respondents have attended self-defense workshops and a very small percentage (7%) has attended legal awareness camps. Community participation is especially low, with only 5% of women having attended community safety meetings. This data indicates that safety programs are failing to include and engage women, and therefore have limited impact in raising awareness, self-esteem and mobilising collective effort.

Analytically, this level of participation reflects not just a lack of opportunity but also informational and structural constraints on participation. According to Naila Kabeer, empowerment is a process that encompasses access to resources, agency, and outcomes. In this sense, low levels of involvement in safety programs point to limited access to informational and capacity-building resources, restricting women's capacity to make decisions about their safety and rights.

Similarly, the low level of participation in community-based programs suggests a lack of community participation. This is especially relevant given the UN Women Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces agenda that highlights the need for community engagement as a key strategy to promote urban safety. This in turn limits women's voice, impact on local safety strategies, and the development of social networks that can positively affect both perceived and actual safety.

The research also hints at a participation deficit, where women are not actively engaged in processes designed to empower them. This not only undermines individual empowerment but also collective efforts to address safety issues. Lack of participation means safety programs risk continuing to be implemented in a top-down, disconnected manner.

In summary, the evidence reveals a significant gap between the need for safety awareness and engagement. To overcome this deficit, more programs are needed but also those which are accessible, relevant and visible. Improving community-based participation, improving legal awareness and embedding safety training in public institutional settings (such as colleges and workplaces) are crucial to the development of an inclusive safety system.

Table 5: Willingness to Participate in Future Programs

| Program type | % willing |
|--|-----------|
| Self-defense workshop at college/workplace | 89% |
| Community safety audit | 72% |
| Neighborhood watch group | 68% |
| Mobile app-based complaint system | 85% |

Table 5 presents a striking contrast to the low levels of current participation, revealing a strong willingness among women to engage in safety-related programs when accessible and relevant opportunities are available. This divergence between existing participation and expressed willingness highlights a critical engagement gap, suggesting that the issue lies less in women’s motivation and more in structural and institutional limitations.

A substantial majority of respondents (89%) expressed willingness to attend self-defence workshops at their college or workplace, indicating a high demand for practical, skill-based interventions that enhance personal safety and confidence. Similarly, 85% of respondents are willing to use a mobile app-based complaint system, reflecting a clear preference for accessible, efficient, and technology-driven reporting mechanisms. This points to the growing importance of digital platforms in bridging gaps between women and institutional support systems.

Interest in community-based initiatives is also notably high, with 72% of respondents willing to participate in community safety audits and 68% open to joining neighbourhood watch groups. These findings suggest that women are not only concerned about individual safety but are also prepared to engage in collective efforts to improve safety conditions in their communities. Such willingness indicates the potential for strengthening localized, participatory models of urban safety governance.

The qualitative evidence further reinforces these findings. As one respondent noted, “We don't know whom to call if something happens near the bus stand. There is no number displayed

anywhere. We just rush home quickly.” This narrative illustrates the disconnect between the presence of safety mechanisms and their visibility or accessibility in everyday contexts. It highlights how gaps in information dissemination and public communication translate into behavioural responses characterized by avoidance rather than engagement.

From a theoretical perspective, this gap between willingness and participation can be understood through Naila Kabeer’s framework of empowerment, which emphasizes that agency is contingent upon access to enabling resources and institutional support. While women demonstrate a clear readiness to engage, the absence of accessible platforms, awareness, and supportive institutional structures constrains the translation of this willingness into actual participation. In this sense, the findings reflect a condition of latent agency, where the potential for engagement exists but remains unrealized due to systemic barriers.

Furthermore, the strong inclination toward both individual (self-defence, mobile apps) and collective (safety audits, neighbourhood groups) interventions aligns with the participatory approach advocated by UN Women under the Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces framework. It underscores the importance of integrating bottom-up, community-driven strategies with institutional mechanisms to create more inclusive and responsive safety systems.

Overall, the findings reveal a significant opportunity for policy intervention. The high levels of willingness suggest that, with improved awareness, accessibility, and institutional facilitation, safety initiatives could achieve substantial engagement and impact. Bridging this gap between intent and action is essential for transforming women from passive recipients of safety measures into active agents in shaping safer urban environments.

5. Findings and Analytical Synthesis

5.1 Safe Mobility: A Gendered Geography of Fear

The finding that 68% of women feel unsafe after 8 PM reflects a clear temporal-spatial restriction on women’s mobility, indicating that access to public space is not uniformly available across time. This pattern points to the emergence of a “gendered geography of fear,” where night-time urban environments become exclusionary for women. Infrastructural deficits particularly inadequate street lighting (78%) and insufficient CCTV coverage (82%) further exacerbate this condition by reducing visibility and perceived security, thereby reinforcing avoidance behaviour.

These findings resonate with existing scholarship, including the work of Kalpana Viswanath and Indu Basu, who document similar patterns in Indian metropolitan contexts such as Delhi and Mumbai. The persistence of such patterns in a tier-II city like Tiruchirappalli suggests that

gendered insecurity in public spaces is not confined to large metropolitan areas but is structurally embedded across urban contexts.

5.2 Rapid Response Systems: Institutional Gaps and Crisis of Trust

The analysis of awareness and reporting patterns reveals a significant institutional deficit in both visibility and trust. With only 26% awareness of women's helplines and a mere 12% reporting rate among those who experienced harassment, the data indicates a systemic disconnect between the availability of formal mechanisms and their actual utilization.

This gap reflects not only informational barriers but also a deeper crisis of institutional trust. The reported average police response time (25–35 minutes in peripheral zones) exceeds the critical window for effective intervention, thereby reducing the perceived reliability of formal support systems. Additionally, low conviction rates such as the approximately 31% conviction rate for public harassment cases reported by National Crime Records Bureau further discourage reporting by reinforcing perceptions of inefficiency and lack of accountability.

Taken together, these factors contribute to a cycle of underreporting, where women are disincentivized from engaging with formal systems due to anticipated delays, social stigma, and institutional inadequacies. This reflects a broader failure in translating legal provisions into accessible and effective mechanisms of justice.

5.3 Awareness and Participation: The Paradox of Unmet Demand

The findings reveal a striking paradox between low current participation (5–12%) and high willingness to engage (68–89%) in safety-related initiatives. This divergence represents a significant engagement gap, indicating that women's lack of participation is not due to disinterest but rather to limited access, awareness, and institutional facilitation.

High willingness to participate in self-defense training, digital reporting systems, and community-based initiatives suggests the presence of latent demand for safety-enhancing interventions. Community-led models, such as safety audits and participatory mapping initiatives (e.g., Safetipin), have demonstrated effectiveness in other urban contexts. However, the absence of such initiatives in Tiruchirappalli reflects a missed opportunity to harness community participation as a tool for enhancing safety.

From an analytical perspective, this gap underscores the need to move beyond top-down approaches toward more inclusive, participatory frameworks that actively involve women in shaping safety interventions.

5.4 Cross-Objective Synthesis: Toward an Integrated Safety Framework

A key insight emerging from this study is that the three dimensions safe mobility, institutional response, and community awareness are deeply interconnected and cannot be addressed in isolation. Women's ability to access legal support is contingent upon safe and reliable mobility; similarly, participation in awareness programs depends on both physical accessibility and institutional outreach.

The current approach to women's safety in Tiruchirappalli appears fragmented, with interventions operating in silos rather than as part of a coordinated system. This fragmentation limits the overall effectiveness of safety measures and fails to address the multidimensional nature of women's experiences in public spaces.

The findings therefore point to the need for a holistic, woman-centric framework that integrates infrastructure development, responsive institutional mechanisms, and community participation. Such an approach would not only address immediate safety concerns but also contribute to the broader goal of ensuring women's equitable access to urban spaces.

1. Enhancing Safe Mobility and Public Infrastructure

- **Improve street lighting** in high-risk zones such as railway underpasses, bus stops, and interior roads to reduce fear during night hours.
- **Install and maintain CCTV cameras** in vulnerable locations, ensuring real-time monitoring and accountability.
- **Develop safe transit corridors** with visible security presence, especially between 8 PM and 6 AM.
- **Upgrade pedestrian infrastructure** (footpaths, pavements) to ensure safe and accessible movement for women.
- **Introduce women-friendly public transport measures**, such as reserved spaces, panic buttons, and GPS tracking in buses.

2. Strengthening Institutional Response and Trust

- **Increase awareness campaigns** on women's helplines (1091/181) and all-women police stations through colleges, workplaces, and public media.
- **Reduce police response time** by deploying more patrol units in peripheral and high-risk areas.

- **Simplify reporting mechanisms**, including fast-track complaint registration and user-friendly digital platforms.
- **Build trust in law enforcement** through gender-sensitization training for police personnel and regular community-police interactions.
- **Ensure accountability and transparency** in handling cases to improve reporting confidence.

3. Expanding Awareness and Capacity-Building Programs

- **Organize regular self-defence workshops** in colleges, workplaces, and community centers, given the high willingness (89%).
- **Conduct legal awareness camps** to educate women about their rights and available support systems.
- **Promote community safety audits** involving local women to identify and address unsafe spaces.
- **Encourage neighbourhood watch groups** to strengthen collective responsibility and surveillance.
- **Leverage mobile app-based systems** for reporting and safety alerts, aligning with high user willingness.

4. Promoting Integrated and Women-Centric Planning

- **Adopt a multi-stakeholder approach** involving municipal authorities, police, NGOs, and community members.
- **Implement area-specific safety plans** based on local risk patterns rather than a one-size-fits-all strategy.
- **Link mobility, safety, and awareness initiatives**, ensuring that improvements in one area support the others.
- **Institutionalize regular monitoring and evaluation** of safety measures to ensure effectiveness and sustainability.

5. Addressing Social Barriers to Reporting

- **Launch anti-stigma campaigns** to reduce fear of shame associated with reporting harassment.
- **Promote confidential and victim-friendly reporting channels.**
- **Encourage peer support systems** to empower women to speak up and seek help.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that women's public safety in Tiruchirappalli is shaped by a complex interplay of mobility constraints, institutional limitations, and gaps in awareness and participation. Rather than existing as isolated concerns, these dimensions collectively constitute a systemic condition of insecurity that permeates women's everyday interactions with urban public spaces. The findings reveal that women's experiences of safety are deeply embedded within broader socio-spatial and institutional structures that regulate access, visibility, and participation.

From a conceptual standpoint, the study underscores that urban safety must be understood as a multidimensional and relational phenomenon, where infrastructural deficits, weak institutional responsiveness, and limited community engagement reinforce one another. The persistence of a gendered "geography of fear," the prevalence of underreporting driven by low institutional trust, and the paradoxical gap between low participation and high willingness collectively point to the inadequacy of fragmented and sector-specific interventions.

The analysis therefore calls for a fundamental shift in approach from piecemeal measures toward an integrated, woman-centric framework that recognizes women not merely as beneficiaries of safety policies but as active agents in shaping urban spaces. Strengthening physical infrastructure, improving the accessibility and accountability of institutional response systems, and expanding awareness and participatory initiatives must be pursued in a coordinated manner. Such an approach aligns with the principles advanced by UN Women, which emphasize the need for inclusive, participatory, and context-specific strategies in addressing gendered urban insecurity.

Ultimately, ensuring women's safety in Tiruchirappalli requires moving beyond reactive and fragmented interventions toward a holistic model of urban governance that integrates planning, policing, and community engagement. By bridging the gap between policy intent and lived experience, such a model can contribute to creating safer, more equitable, and inclusive urban environments where women can exercise their right to mobility and public participation without fear.

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