

ARMAR JASHVITHA  
JOHANNA DEEKSHA VICTOR SAUMYA KALIA  
IKHA SHARMA MANSI SARAF JOSHI SHAILAJA  
AKHI BOSE MANVENDRA SINGH SHIVANI GUP  
IKITA JAIN DIVYA GOEL PRATYUSH PRASHAN  
FINA NABI PAROMITA CHATTERJEE SAYANTA  
OLINA MINJ **BOLD BYLINES** SAHIL PRA  
**VOICES OF CHANGE IN MEDIA**  
KUMAR PANDEY SHADAB NAZMI MEENAKSHY  
SHWARYA MOHANTY PREETI AGYAAT PUJA S  
DHUA DAS MENON JYOTI THAKUR HENGAM RI  
DHUA DAS MENON KANA



Laadi

Celebrate Her Life

An Initiative by Population First

EDITED BY  
DR. A. L. SHARADA

2023



United Nations Population Fund



# **BOLD BYLINES**

## **VOICES OF CHANGE IN MEDIA**



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United Nations Population Fund

**EDITED BY**  
**DR. A. L. SHARADA**

**2023**



# PREFACE

I am thrilled to introduce 'Bold Bylines: Voices of Change in Media,' a compilation of selected award-winning entries from the 13th edition of the Laadli Media and Advertising Awards for Gender Sensitivity 2023.

Compiling this was a challenge due to the continuous internal struggle of deciding which entries to include. I wish I didn't have to make this choice, but unfortunately, it wasn't feasible. My sincere regrets to those whose work isn't showcased here. Nevertheless, my earnest effort was to capture a diverse range of topics and regions, emphasising a few regional languages and Hindi award-winners to offer a panoramic view of gender-related issues. All the award-winning entries will be included in the online version of the book.

This compilation comprises 34 articles divided into six sections.

The initial section addresses women's health issues, ranging from the impact of COVID-19 on women's health and access to healthcare services to the repercussions of changes in abortion laws within the prevailing patriarchal context. The section also sheds light on the unique challenges faced by women with mental illnesses and stigmatised sex workers, offering a multidimensional perspective on gender and health.

The second section, titled 'Gender and Justice,' untangles the complex intersectionalities of patriarchy, caste, and class in providing justice to victims of gender discrimination and violence. It delves into the inheritance of property, delayed justice, insensitive courtroom procedures, implementation tardiness of laws, rehabilitation hurdles for trafficking victims, the trials of the half-widows of Kashmir, and the conflict between POCSO and the MTP Act, providing readers with a nuanced understanding of these critical issues.

In the third section, 'Building Inclusive Spaces,' the focus turns to the discourse on transgender rights. It explores how institutions are responding to the needs of trans individuals, featuring voices from campuses, health institutions, prisons, and elite science institutions. A common thread that runs through these diverse narratives is the lack of awareness, insensitivity, and apathy among the duty-bearers, highlighting the challenges of making inclusion a meaningful commitment.

The fourth section, 'Unveiling Harmful Social Practices,' looks at the inherent biases and discriminatory social norms towards single women and menstruating women, the social evil of dowry, gendered allocation of food in families, and the lack of access to education for girls.

The fifth section, 'Breaking Boundaries,' spotlights women from rural areas for whom sports serve as a means to break social taboos, aspire, and empower themselves.

The last section, 'Making Women Count,' scrutinises women's low participation in various sectors, including economic activity, politics, and the impacts of digitalisation, climate change, and government policies on wildlife conservation.

I hope that 'Voices of Change in Media' becomes a reference for journalists, media schools, and consumers to refine their understanding of gender issues and incorporate a gender perspective in media reporting. I extend my gratitude to Pooja Nagdev for her consistent support. Last but not least, I express my thanks to UNFPA for supporting the Laadli Media Advocacy initiative and facilitating the publication of this book.

We are excited about the collaboration with AFAA and SAWM, enabling us to extend the awards to South Asian countries. We are pleased to present profiles of the South Asian winners in the book and hope to launch franchise events in South Asian countries soon.

Dr. A. L. Sharada

CEO, Population First

## **ABOUT POPULATION FIRST**

Population First is a social impact organisation working on health and population issues from a gender and social development perspective. Population First was registered in March 2002 by Bobby Sista, doyen of the Indian advertising Industry, under the Bombay Public Trusts Act (1950) to leverage communication and media influence to address the social and demographic issues in the country.

Population First believes that unequal social development and gendered mindsets are responsible for the poor social demographic indices - be it maternal and child mortality, child marriages, or the falling sex ratios.

Population First focuses on the gendered mindsets which undermine the value of girls and women, promote discrimination against them, and justify gender-based violence. The challenge is to change those mindsets.

## **ABOUT LAADLI MEDIA INITIATIVES**

The *Laadli* Media Advocacy initiatives focus on promoting gender sensitivity in media and communication to build a more gender equitable society by challenging the deep-seated misogyny and patriarchal mindsets in society. Recognising the importance of this section of our socio-economic tapestry, The Laadli Media and Advertising Advocacy initiatives focus on:

1. Capacity building of communicators
2. Creating a supportive ecosystem of industry stalwarts, thought leaders, policymakers and influencers promoting change
3. Institute awards and other reward mechanisms to reinforce positive change

The interventions to achieve these stated goals are:

- Workshops for various stakeholder such as media and film professionals, advertising agencies, industry groups, professional bodies and students of media, film and journalism Fellowships and networking platforms for journalists.
- Awards for excellence in gender sensitive portrayal across the fields of journalism, films, advertising, theatre, television, books and content creation.
- Campaigns and events to raise awareness on various nuances of gender sensitivity
- Reports, research studies publications, films, and innovative and creative content.

Website – [www.populationfirst.org](http://www.populationfirst.org)

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# GENDER AND HEALTH IN INDIA: UNRAVELLING CHALLENGES AND PROGRESS

In the vast and diverse landscape of India's societal fabric, the intricate interplay of gender and health paints a nuanced picture of challenges and progress. The exploration unfolds through four compelling articles by Mansi Saraf Joshi, Puja Sen, Meenakshy Sasikumar, and Shailaja Tiwale, accompanied by insights from Johanna Deeksha Victor. Together, these narratives illuminate the complex issues surrounding women's health, reproductive rights, mental well-being, and the unique challenges faced by sex workers in accessing healthcare.

**Mansi Saraf Joshi** delves into the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on women's health. The pandemic's shift in medical priorities left women vulnerable to neglected health conditions, unwanted pregnancies, and delayed treatments. The surge in domestic violence further exacerbated these challenges, underscoring the need for improved healthcare access and robust support systems during emergencies.

**Puja Sen** continues the narrative by exploring India's evolving reproductive rights landscape. While celebrating the Supreme Court's extension of abortion rights to unmarried women, Sen acknowledges persistent challenges, particularly for rural and economically disadvantaged women. The article calls for a broader public discourse on abortion, addressing societal issues impacting women's reproductive choices.

**Meenakshy Sasikumar** provides yet another dimension to the conversation by highlighting the enduring patriarchal mindsets and societal norms tied to virginity, limiting unmarried women's access to pap smears, pelvic ultrasounds or other interventions, thus denying them essential reproductive health services. The article emphasises the need to dismantle biases and promote respectful healthcare for all, recognising the challenges in overcoming deeply ingrained patriarchal attitudes.

Seamlessly fitting into the narrative, **Shailaja Tiwale** brings attention to the pressing concern of neglecting women's mental health issues in India. Despite increased awareness, women face unique challenges and barriers contributing to the neglect of their mental well-being. Tiwale sheds light on the plight of women with mental illnesses, advocating for the eradication of mental illness stigma to facilitate successful reintegration into society.

Closing the section, **Johanna Deeksha Victor's** focus on healthcare disparities for sex workers links back to the overarching theme of vulnerable populations and the

need for inclusive healthcare. Victor exposes the alarming rates of discrimination, judgmental attitudes, and disrespectful treatment faced by sex workers. The article calls for sustained efforts to improve healthcare access for this vulnerable group, addressing inherent gaps in healthcare networks and outreach efforts.

As we navigate this section, the seamless flow from one article to the next underscores the interconnected nature of gender and health challenges in India. From improving emergency healthcare access to fostering public discourse on reproductive rights and dismantling deeply rooted societal biases, the journey toward gender-inclusive and equitable healthcare emerges as both challenging and essential.

# 1. Women's health takes severe hit amid pandemic

*Mansi Saraf Joshi / Pune Times Mirror / January 4, 2022*

With all eyes on COVID, the gentler gender fails to receive medical care



Members of Masum NGO held health awareness camps for women in Daund taluka after the lockdown

NGO reports about ill effects of lockdown; proliferation of unwanted pregnancies, gynaecological problems due to stress; stuck at home, burdened with responsibilities, illnesses increased; domestic violence and acid attack victims had nowhere to go; fear of virus, unavailability of doctors turned affected to OTC medicines or quacks

As COVID started to spread its tentacles over humans over two years ago, the world's healthcare system staggered under the burden of novel coronavirus patients. In India, at least, most medical conditions were relegated to the background and no other emergency was big enough to garner attention and care.

Women possibly suffered the most and the latest study by NGO Akshara Centre 'Grappling with the Shadow Pandemic: Women's group and domestic violence in India', showed that, besides domestic violence, the health of women was grossly ignored in the period. The data was collected from across Maharashtra.

There are horror stories spilling out of closets of women being forced to deal with unwanted and dangerous pregnancies because authorised termination became a far cry during the epidemic.

The result of this and other delayed conditions that were denied attention, like cataract, has led to many affected women suffering from related problems, including anaemia, and life-long disabilities as well as other health complications.

In one case, a 65-year-old woman, who had cataracts, had to postpone her eye operation. Now, she has lost complete vision in one eye and has only 10 % vision in the other. According to the report, around 10 teenagers faced intermittent menstruation due to fear of forced marriages or being sent to laborious work on farms. One woman was immobilised since she was unable to repair her callipers, or leg braces, because of the closure of shops and lack of transport, while some were forced to single-handedly do all household chores, such as washing and cleaning.

Sunanda Khedkar of Pune-based NGO Masum said, *“We have handled some 500 to 600 cases wherein domestic violence was the main reason behind the poor state of women in the villages. However, besides that, many families reported cases of abortions, unwanted pregnancies and low anaemia levels among its women and young girls or dire need for medical help after being severely hit or have suffered acid attacks.”*

*“Primary healthcare centres were mostly overcrowded with COVID patients. Doctors and other medical staff did not have time for non-COVID patients. Similarly, many were reluctant to go to medical facilities due to the fear of contracting the virus”*, Khedkar added.

The result was that many ailing women began treating themselves with over-the-counter medicines or turning to quacks in desperation. *“Many women also faced several gynaecological problems like white discharge, red discharge, vaginal swelling and urinary tract infections, among other ailments,”* said Khedkar.

The fear of catching COVID was such that a few women did not visit health centres to collect their monthly doses of diabetes or blood pressure pills.

Mangal Magar from Masum who works in Bhor, Daund and Purandar talukas of the district, said, *“We came across cases where women and family members were not willing to go to Sassoon General Hospitals (SGH) for deliveries and abortions, fearing the virus. So, they visited quacks. As a result, heavy bleeding during the delivery was the major issue. This also led to anaemia among them.”*

*“Post easing of restrictions, we realised that many women were facing problems related to their period cycles,”* she added.

Indian women are known to suffer from lower levels of haemoglobin and Vitamin D deficiency. *“Lack of money and inadequate healthy and nutritious food further reduced the haemoglobin levels among girls and women,”* stated Magar.

Cases of domestic violence also rose across the world during this time. Back home, strict curfew and lack of transport deterred women from escaping the clutches of the perpetrators.

Magar further said, *“Many domestic violence cases were reported. Some were so severe that we had to intervene and make arrangements to send police patils of the village to the victim’s house.”*

Talking about the physical as well as the mental effect of the pandemic on teenaged girls and women, Dr Vaishali Lodha said the gentle sex was under a constant watchful eye of male members of the family, and it took a toll on their health.

*“Cases of irregular periods or polycystic ovarian disease (PCOD) saw an incline. This can be attributed to the fear of losing out on education and opportunities, especially among teens. I had patients who came to me with their menses coming within a fortnight or after a gap of two to three months,”* Lodha said.

Co-director of Akshara Centre Nandita Shah said, *“The problem with women facing domestic violence or health issues was that it was not declared as an emergency. There were no contact numbers available for women to get in touch when in need. There was no back-end system, and creating one was a major challenge.”*

Dr Arun Gadre, a health activist working in rural areas, said, *“There was tremendous pressure during the lockdown.”*

Women had stress regarding infections, household chores, work-from-home responsibilities and job loss, among other things. When there is community level stress, the first thing noticed is irregular menses. Many suffer from irregular menses, too much bleeding and white discharge when the vaginal secretion increases. This leads to infections, including irritation while urinating or stomach pain.”

Gadre also said that the lack of facilities for medical termination of pregnancy (MTPs) and inadequate stock of contraceptives lead to unwanted pregnancies. *“All these are psycho-socio effects.”*

However, district health officer Dr Bhagwan Pawar, said, *“The government machinery is unaware of any lack of facilities at government health centres. No one has reported anything to us.”*

### **NGOs' across the country and their observations**

NGO Breakthrough made similar observations. According to them, services such as abortion, regular health treatment or pregnancy check-ups were not available, and mobility was an issue. Cases of women with severe injuries due to domestic violence needed urgent medical attention, but it was a challenge.

Another organisation, North East Network (NEN), pointed out that even if general health services were open, people were scared to visit a hospital. Additionally, many hospitals were asking pregnant women for a COVID test before letting them in. Often, they were advised to postpone their essential health check-up.

With over 20 years of journalism experience, Mansi Saraf Joshi freelances with EduVarta after serving as Pune Mirror's Bureau Chief and contributing to publications like DNA and Sakal Times.

<https://punemirror.com/pune/cover-story/women%E2%80%99s-health-takes-severe-hit-amid-pandemic/cid6166125.htm>



## 2. Birth right

*Puja Sen / The Caravan / October 1, 2022*

In June, the Supreme Court of the United States overturned *Roe vs Wade*, a landmark decision that had made abortion a constitutional right in the country. Given this massive setback to reproductive rights in the world's oldest democracy, many in India took the opportunity to congratulate themselves on having more progressive abortion laws. The next month, however, the Delhi high court refused a 25-year-old woman the right to terminate her pregnancy because she was unmarried. The high court bench was interpreting the main abortion law—the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971—which allowed certain categories of women the right to abortion under very specific conditions. The judges argued that, in her case, aborting the foetus would be equivalent to “killing the child.” On 29 September, the Supreme Court of India stepped in to expand the right to cover “unmarried women,” whom the MTP Act did not until then explicitly include. “Certain constitutional values, such as the right to reproductive autonomy, the right to live a dignified life, the right to equality, and the right to privacy have animated our interpretation of the MTP Act and the MTP Rule,” the judgment states.

While this is a step in the right direction and is remarkable for upholding a comprehensive view of women's rights, it is in stark contrast to how India got its abortion law, which was not exactly created keeping women's reproductive autonomy in mind. Unlike in several other parts of the world, our abortion law did not emerge as a result of feminist interventions that placed women's political, social and sexual autonomy at their centre. Instead, in India, women's reproductive fate has always been tied up with government anxieties about population control. After Independence, family planning became a central plank in India's developmental ambitions and, to that end, the regulation of women's fertility was treated as a national imperative.

But not all women were treated the same. The country's efforts at controlling birth rates, historically, have been influenced by deep structural inequalities. In her recent book *Reproductive Politics and the Making of Modern India*, Mytheli Sreenivas lays this out clearly. She writes that the early years after Independence “were central in bringing middle-class women—as family planners—into the state's development agenda, and in situating poor and working-class women as their targets. This targeting would intensify in the later 1960s, as Western funders and Indian government priorities aligned to make population control a focal point of Indian development, and women's bodies became the ground to enact this developmental agenda.” Dalit, Adivasi and Muslim women have borne the brunt of these measures. The burden of family planning in India has almost always fallen on women, except

during Indira Gandhi's Emergency, when it was working-class men who were subject to coercive measures of population control.

Until the early 1970s, abortions—or voluntarily “causing miscarriages,” as it was euphemistically called—were illegal and could be criminalised under the Indian penal code. This did not stop large numbers of women from seeking ways to terminate their pregnancies in whichever way they could, prompting the government to set up a committee to look into the merits of liberalising abortion laws. The committee, in its 1967 report, invoked population control as one of the probable outcomes of legalising abortion, among other desirable effects such as a reduction in high maternal mortality. “The decline in birth cannot be considered separately from the number of legal abortions,” the report stated. The “crux of the problem,” the committee said, was that deaths were resulting from abortions “being performed mostly by unqualified people under unhygienic conditions.”

**In India, women's reproductive fate has always been tied up with government anxieties about population control.**

The government finally passed the MTP Act in 1971, allowing for abortions at the discretion of medical practitioners under some circumstances: risk of life to the pregnant woman, possibilities of abnormalities in the infant or in the case of rape. It was not guided by the idea that a woman should be able to access safe abortion on demand, even for non-sentimental or non-tragic reasons. The decision and liability ultimately lay with doctors. As a result, till date, women have often had to rely on the benevolent paternalism of doctors and judges, very often male, to get an abortion. A 2020 study by the Centre for Reproductive Rights, the National Law University in Delhi, and the National Law School of India in Bengaluru found that doctors' discretion is “exercised in a manner that often has little to do with concerns over the woman's health and well-being, her right to make her own decision in this regard, or even with the legal provisions under the MTP Act; and has much to do with the providers' apprehension about consequences for themselves, their views about the morality of abortion, as well as their beliefs about women's role and place in society.” Very often, medical practitioners, fearing prosecution, demand parental consent or some form of judicial permission. The September judgment makes note of this and unequivocally states, “We are of the opinion that significant reliance ought to be placed on each woman's own estimation of whether she is in a position to continue and carry to term her pregnancy.”

Predominant beliefs about women's role and place in society remain bleak in India, with most families seeing female children as an eventual social and economic burden. That families—across class, caste and region—have an abiding preference for sons is no secret. Female infanticide has a long history in the country. So, when technological advances in the early 1970s allowed the detection of foetuses, including identifying its sex, they gave birth to a confounding new reality. Sex-

selective abortions became rampant by the 1990s. For this reason, there has been a complex relationship in India between the women's movement and abortion, with very few voices advocating for an absolute right to abortion.

Many feminists had to campaign against sex determination in the hope of curbing the termination of female foetuses, while also preserving women's right to abortion. In 1994, the Pre-Conception and Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques Act came into force, prohibiting doctors from disclosing the sex of the foetus. But this appears to have had little effect. The sex ratio in India remains terribly skewed—since sex testing got off the ground, an estimated sixty-three million women are said to have gone “missing” from the population. A 2020 study projected that because of the persistence of sex-selective abortions, there would be nearly seven million fewer female births by 2030 than would otherwise have been the case.

Reliable data on the number of abortions that take place every year is hard to come by. According to a study in *The Lancet*, over fifteen million abortions took place in India in 2015. Of these, 73 percent were done outside health facilities. The study looked at data recorded by the ministry of health and family welfare until then and argued that these data “greatly underestimate the incidence of abortion because they exclude abortions by private-sector doctors who are trained in abortion provision but do not work in registered facilities and abortions provided by other formally trained health professionals who do not have specific training in abortion but nonetheless provide the services.”

Access to safe abortion for the majority of women in India continues to be very difficult for various reasons, including high costs at private clinics or lack of qualified doctors. The Act mandates that only obstetricians and gynaecologists can perform abortions. According to rural-health statistics released by the health ministry in May 2021, there is a shortfall of almost seventy percent of doctors with these specialisations in government hospitals. This automatically puts medical abortions out of reach for most poor women living in rural areas, who often only have access to public-health facilities.

The MTP law was amended in 2021 to include seven categories of women who could terminate pregnancies of up to 24 weeks, including minors, “mentally ill women,” women with physical disabilities and women who had a change in marital status during their pregnancy. It said nothing overtly about single or unmarried women, which the Supreme Court has now corrected, stating that these distinctions are “not constitutionally sustainable.”

“The law must remain cognizant of the fact that changes in society have ushered in significant changes in family structure,” the judgment states. “In the evolution of law towards a gender equal society, the interpretation of the MTP Act and MTP rules must consider the social reality of today and not be restricted by societal norms

of an age which has passed into the archives of history.” Women, however, still have to demonstrate “risk of injury to the mental health,” even as the interpretive lens on what constitutes mental health and the “material circumstances” that might warrant the termination of a pregnancy has been widened.

In a recent piece in the *Yale Review*, the author Maggie Doherty writes about the proliferation of certain types of tragic narratives among pro-choice advocates that confer legitimacy on types of women who choose to get an abortion: “good mothers, suffering victims, poor and frightened girls.” She writes that “unlike their predecessors,” many feminists today “present abortion as a welcome privilege, rather than an incontrovertible moral right. When abortion stories are crafted for maximum appeal, we can only assume that the right to an abortion depends on popular approval.”

In the United States, during the second-wave feminist movement, women’s collectives organised “speakouts” in which they talked about their abortions and demanded the repeal rather than just reform of the abortion laws of the time. A radical feminist group called the Redstockings famously barged into the New York State Assembly in 1969 while a group of men and a nun were discussing the state’s abortion law. After *Roe vs Wade* came into effect in 1973—two years after India got its MTP abortion law—there began a massive polarisation between the Christian right, which called itself “pro-life” in the belief that foetuses have personhood, and feminists, who were “pro-choice.”

Most Indian liberals would count themselves in the latter category today, although these categories do not easily map onto the Indian context. It is not difficult to argue that decisions about your own health and body should be your choice. But there is always a larger context that shapes choices. And the context in India is grim, whether one looks at the excessive control families wield over young women’s reproductive lives, their obsession with caste and marriage, their unabashed son-preference, or the widespread assumption that all women are waiting to be mothers.

A bureaucratic desire for controlling birth rates eased the pathway to legalising abortion, and now the recent judgment has expanded the scope of women’s rights and reproductive choices. But it may be too soon for any triumphalism. India has not had a robust public conversation on abortion, unlike many other countries. If an abortion or miscarriage does feature in popular culture, it is usually to imply a form of tragedy that befalls hapless women. What data we have so far on access and safety is sobering. According to a United Nations Population Fund report released this year, approximately eight women die because of unsafe abortions every day. In a recent piece in *The Guardian*, Shreeja Rao, a law student and Dalit woman, draws attention to how women of her community are persistently overlooked when it comes to access to contraception and safe abortion. “Can they afford safe abortion?” she asks. “Are they able to choose birth control measures? Do they have access to

reproductive healthcare at all?” These are extremely important questions. There has been no consistent large-scale study on how women from different communities access abortion, and, therefore, there is no clarity on what public-health measures should be taken going ahead. “While the strength of the women in my community makes me hopeful for an undivided future for reproductive rights, casteism in public life leaves me uncertain of a structural change—which must come from within the women’s movement,” Rao writes.

Women’s freedom is intimately tied up with what control they have over their own reproductive lives. It has a bearing on all things, from our physical and mental health to the choices we can make about motherhood, work, life and love. To that end, the recent judgment on abortion and its emphasis on reproductive justice is a watershed moment. But how this translates on the ground remains to be seen.



Puja Sen is the Senior Associate Editor at The Caravan.

<https://caravanmagazine.in/gender/supreme-court-judgment-finally-acknowledges-abortion-is-about-womens-rights>

### **3. Unmarried women denied basic vaginal Tests: Will SC ruling end discrimination?**

*Meenakshy Sasikumar / www.thequint.com / October 3, 2022*

Even for basic tests, women must hold up their marital status. Often, they're denied services if they're unmarried.

The Supreme Court, on 29 September, ruled that all women, whether married or unmarried, are entitled to safe and legal abortion till 24 weeks of pregnancy. This judgment is historic, for it ultimately ensures that a woman alone has the authority over her body. The ruling has received praise from women's rights activists and health professionals alike, with many pointing out its significance in a post-Roe v Wade world.

The fact, however, remains that the permeation of patriarchy with respect to a woman's body is not limited to pregnancy or abortion. Even for basic tests concerning reproductive health, women must hold up their marital status, and often, they are denied services if they are unmarried.

Why? Because of a little tissue called the hymen in the vagina, which is widely associated with the concept of virginity, but in reality, has nothing to do with it. The myth of virginity, or the misogynist misconception that a woman's worth is defined by whether or not her hymen is intact, is so pervasive that women often face discrimination when they are undergoing vital tests for reproductive health.

It remains to be seen whether the SC ruling will change these ideas that are deeply ingrained in Indian society, but the experiences of several women reveal a mindset that dictates that their bodies don't belong to them but to someone they might marry in the future.

Here are real-life stories of several women who were discriminated against by doctors and health professionals, solely to appease a patriarchal sociocultural context that upholds this myth of virginity.

'Not Married? No Pap Test!'

Kritika, a 30-year-old native of Trichy in Tamil Nadu, was advised to get a pap smear by a gynaecologist in Chennai after she complained of recurring pelvic pain. But when she approached a local hospital, the gynaecologist first asked her if she was married.

When she said no, the doctor asked her why she was not.

“The doctor told me that if my periods are regular, I do not need a pap smear test. She said that unmarried women are not eligible, assuming that I was sexually inactive. I thought I would be shamed by her if I revealed that I was, in fact, sexually active,” she tells The Quint.

“She ended up advising me to get married and gave me a lecture about how, when I get married, everything will be alright. I used to have intense pelvic pain and I needed a medical examination, not a lecture.”

### **Kritika, a 30-year-old native of Trichy**

Kritika says that she was so traumatised by the way the doctor behaved that she had to go to Chennai for a pap smear test, where she was then asked to get a biopsy done. “So, it was a serious medical condition, and had I stayed mum and not sought medical attention, I could have been in grave danger,” she adds.

### **‘Things Changed When I Said I’m Married’**

Thirty-four-year-old Deepti, a PhD scholar at Tata Institute of Social Sciences, has had Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS) for a long time. “Every time I went for an ultrasound, they made me drink so much water and undergo that really uncomfortable process where they press your abdomen (thus bladder),” she tells The Quint.

“I have even tried to quicken the process by going to the hospital early in the morning and drinking loads of water beforehand, so that I didn’t have to wait. But they still didn’t let me go immediately, and by the time my turn came, I was so full I thought I was going to burst. And I couldn’t use the bathroom until the test was over. Sometimes, you have to do it multiple times, too.”

This has been the case for Deepti at several hospitals, across cities like Mumbai, Hyderabad, Trivandrum, and Kochi. But it was only recently that she realised she didn’t necessarily have to undergo this uncomfortable process.

“The last time I went for my PCOS test, the technician asked me if I was married. I randomly said yes. And just like that, I realised I didn’t have to go through this, because they instead performed a transvaginal ultrasound (a type of pelvic ultrasound used by doctors to examine female reproductive organs, which involves inserting a probe into the vagina). Until then, I didn’t know it was possible. I didn’t even know it was an option.”

### **Deepti, a 34-year-old PhD scholar**

Deepti says she has always told healthcare professionals that she was either ‘unmarried’ or ‘living with a partner,’ but using the word ‘married’ made things so

much easier for her. “It’s as though these simple tests are a secret, which only married women have access to,” she quips.

### **Women Speak Up on Social Media**

In a post on Facebook, on 30th September, a day after the Supreme Court judgment, Priya (name changed), a poet from Kerala, wrote: “The doctors and health workers at a private hospital in Pathanamthitta refused to perform a transvaginal sonogram on me, which was required for a diagnosis to remove a lump in my ovary, stating that I was unmarried. Even such educated and knowledgeable doctors continue to preserve the myth of virginity.”

#### **She goes on to add:**

“My body still wasn’t mine. It belonged to some man who might marry me in the future. Those who are supposed to give me medical care are making decisions for me, and for what? To protect some imaginary man’s ego.”

Sharing her experience, Amrutha, a 28-year-old engineer, commented on the post, “A gynaecologist did the same thing to me when my vagina had to be examined. And I was severely anxious at the time because I thought I had vaginal polyps (overgrowth of cells). Even though they knew I was so anxious, they didn’t examine me because I was unmarried.”

But it’s not just unmarried women who face uncomfortable experiences.

Kavya, who has been a sex educator and coach for decades, also took to Facebook to explain how judgements are cast on married women, too. “It’s a problem that goes both ways. As a person with vaginismus, I was forced to undergo a transvaginal scan, with the operator mocking my condition, saying that since I am married, I must be used to forced entry!”

Vaginismus is the body’s automatic and involuntary response to some or all types of vaginal penetrations, which leads to the tightening of muscles.

Meanwhile, Soumya, a 34-year-old cyber security professional, commented, “I needed my husband’s consent to have an epidural during childbirth. Is it the husband who decides whether a woman should endure pain or not?”

### **Will SC Judgment Help Bust Myth of Virginity?**

Speaking to The Quint, Dr Suchitra Dalvie, a gynaecologist, agrees that basic procedures like a transvaginal ultrasound, pap tests, etc are often denied to unmarried women.

She says, “In a patriarchal sociocultural context, virginity is seen as something to be prized. If one gets a transvaginal ultrasound, which means, you put a probe into the

vagina, or a pap smear, in which a speculum is inserted, that will cause some tears in the hymen. And when the woman gets married, there could be serious implications for her, especially if she's married into a conservative family.”

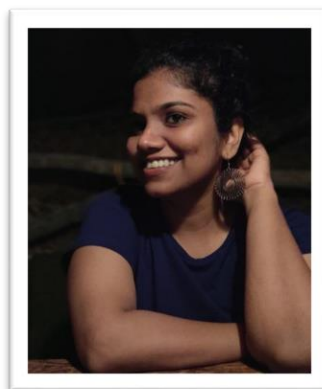
“So, in most cases, it's not so much about denying these tests to unmarried women, it's about protecting their potential position for the sake of a sociocultural norm that sees virginity as important.”

Dr Suchitra Dalvie, a gynaecologist, however, termed the recent Supreme Court judgment a “progressive statement, which essentially gives women the same freedoms and rights as men, because there is no procedure that a man undertakes that requires his wife’s consent.”

“Because we live in a patriarchal sociocultural context, it is always assumed that the woman is somehow secondary to or belongs to some man – she's under the ‘protection’ of either her father, husband, or brother. This judgment is a step in the right direction to dismantle the inherent patriarchy in our country,” she adds.

Meenakshy Sasikumar, a special correspondent at The Quint, focuses on gender and politics in South India, leveraging over five years of journalistic experience.

<https://www.thequint.com/gender/unmarried-women-myth-of-virginity-discrimination-supreme-court-on-abortion#read-more>



## **4. In search of home and hope in life: Treated but abandoned women in mental hospitals (Translated from Marathi)**

*Shailaja Tiwale / Loksatta / May 21, 2022*

When a person with mental illness is admitted to a mental hospital, the family feels their responsibility is over. Therefore, many treated women today live inactive lives of more than 30 years in the hospital, hoping that someone will come from the family to take them home. As the family does not accept them, they have no home. They are abandoned due to mental illness. Conversely, the hospital or government has no plan to rehabilitate these women. So, these women have no option other than to live non-existent life. For these women to become a part of society and stand on their own feet, the community must also erase the stamp of madness on them. There is no definite answer to the question, 'When will I be released home?' It is a picture of their condition and the narrow attitude of the society.

From the day she first set foot in a mental hospital for treatment, all exits were closed. Her husband and family are not ready to take her home even though the hospital has told them often that she has recovered. Even after recovery, she had to stay in the hospital for 12 years.

This matter came to light recently in a family court case. The case also revealed that the State Government sent the persons who recovered from mental illness and were abandoned in mental hospitals to the beggar's home. Many questions arose from this. Do we believe that once a person is labelled as mentally ill, that person remains with mental illness forever? What is the role of their relatives in alienating a family member permanently? Given society's fear and ignorance of severe mental illness, this situation will undoubtedly have to wait to change. So, what is the alternative for those who are admitted to mental hospitals and recovered? What schemes are expected by the government to stand on their feet? I am trying to find the answers to these questions by communicating with experts and experienced persons in this field.

A mental hospital is a place to shake off the responsibility of one's own person who has a mental illness and get rid of it forever. This attitude towards the hospital has been built for many years, expressed Dr Sandeep Divekar, the Deputy Medical Superintendent of Thane Mental Hospital.

"About 80 % of patients from our hospital recover and can go home. However, more than 50 % of these patients' families are not ready to accept them back into the family by reasoning that now they look fine, but when they go home, they will

behave like before. As a result, some patients have lived in hospitals for 40 years, even though they have recovered,” Divekar said.

While the doctor was talking to me, a relative of a 29-year-old girl came. The girl had schizophrenia and recovered after four months of treatment. So, the hospital called her family to take her back. Relatives did come, but only with a letter from a minister requesting to keep the girl in the hospital for a few more months. The doctor asked the reason. The relative replied that her mother is old at home and her father is also aged. So there is no one to pay attention to her. The doctor asked what would change in this situation after a few months. However, they did not have an answer to this question. They were continually pressured to extend her stay in the hospital. Finally, the doctor ordered extending her stay for a few months.

Explaining the role of institutions, Dr Netaji Mulik, Medical Superintendent at Thane Mental Hospital, said, “When there is a death in the family or marriage, the relatives demand to extend the period of the concerned person in the hospital. In such a situation, we also understand their difficulties. However, instead of trying to rehabilitate her, families are more inclined to keep patients in the hospital.”

About 950 patients are admitted to Thane Regional Mental Hospital, which has the capacity of 1800 beds. Although thirty % of these patients have recovered, they stay in the hospital. Dr Mulik said, “We present such cases before the Visiting Committee of the mental hospital. They meet monthly at the hospital, and the Sessions Court Judge presides over the meeting. The committee takes decision about these patients.”

### **Mental illness recovers, need support**

Chronic mental illness is not a disease that can be cured entirely once treated like a physical illness. If patients with mental illness do not take medication on time or receive proper care from their relatives, the controlled illness is likely to relapse. Hence, even once a mental illness recovers, they need support as needed.

A social service superintendent of the Thane Mental Hospital said that the family or relatives are not ready to understand the requirements of recovered patients. They expect that once the patient has recovered, they should live and behave like other people. Therefore, these patients do not adjust in the family and are again admitted to the mental hospital.

“Even if the recovered patient has to be re-admitted, they should be allowed to stay at home for some time. We often explain to the relatives that they will also get used to mixing in the family due to this. For years, some relatives have been trying to take the patient home for some time, bring him back when their condition worsens, and take them home again if they feel better. Still, these incidences are rare,” said a Social Service superintendent at Thane Mental Hospital.

There is a taboo about mental illness in our society. A sense of stigma is attached to the word 'mental illness'. So, if someone has a mental illness in the house, they tend to hide it at first. Most people try to find remedies by following superstitions suggested by Baba or Buwa. At the same time, some take the patient to their family doctor or private doctor and do as much treatment as possible with the available resources. Sometimes, all families' savings are spent on all these treatments and remedies. Exhausted by everything, the family members finally come to the government mental hospital, and after admitting the patient, the family feels relief. Knowing that the patient has been provided with food and treatment, they become somewhat relieved and feel no need to take the person back home.

Initially, some relatives visit the patients during their treatment in the hospital, but later, they avoid meeting. Patients are used to taking medicine, eating and sleeping at specific times. However, the schedule is often not followed when the person returns home. The patient needs a full-time caretaker to monitor their schedule. If everyone in the family goes to work, the question arises about who will stay home to look after them. Some families can't afford to stay home because they are working on daily wages. Secondly, houses are smaller in cities like Mumbai. Family members face many difficulties while compromising with the patient in a small home. If there is a house in a chawl, the patients often come in contact with the surrounding houses. There is not much positivity in our society to understand their requirements and needs. Then they get teased by them. If the patient was violent before, the other members of the building or the area put pressure on the family to not keep the patient in the home owing to fear they will be violent again. In many households, parents are elderly, and siblings are not ready to look after these patients even after they recover, as they are busy with their schedules.

One thing was clearly noticed in this that if the person recovering or undergoing treatment from a mental hospital is a woman or girl, her condition worsens as if she is a burden to the family. As a woman, there is also the question of her safety.

### **Women await to go home**

To meet these women in person, we stepped into the women's ward of the Regional Mental Hospital of Thane with the social service superintendent. As soon as we entered the ward, women and girls wearing maroon-coloured gowns gathered around us. One of the ladies was asking the social service superintendent, 'Will you let me go home next week?' 'Has anyone from my home come?'

There were women in their 40s and even 25-year-olds. Some women also brought their sewing work to show the superintendent madam. As we passed, every woman asked, 'Are you going to send me home?' They eagerly await to see the world beyond the four walls and return to their family.

One of them asked, 'Have you found my house?' Neeti (name changed) is 30 years old and belongs to Vasai, in Maharashtra's Palghar district. A year ago, she was admitted to Thane Mental Hospital for treatment of schizophrenia. In four months, her condition improved. After that, the hospital started following up to send her home. But none of the phone numbers given by the relatives were working. The hospital administration was worried about how to communicate with her family. When she was taken home by the hospital, the house was locked. On inquiry, it was found that the house was closed for several months. Since Neeti was unable to give details about any other relative, she was brought back to the hospital. A year since, neither has anyone come to meet her, nor has her family been located!

Dr. Purushottam Madvi, Medical Superintendent of Nagpur Regional Mental Hospital, says, "About 5,200 patients have been in our hospital for several years. About 40% of these patients have a severe mental illness, but the other 60% have recovered. Some of them could not give any information about themselves, while some of them have been here for almost 15 years, but their relatives are not ready to take them home."

Dr Lata Pande, Medical Superintendent of Regional Mental Hospital of Pune had a similar response: "When the patient recovers, while following up with relatives, it is often noticed that the phone number is wrong or the phone is switched off. Some relatives give the address of the old house, and some families sell the house and move. The patients then remain in the hospital even after 30-35 years of recovery."

"A man with mental illness, is cared for by his wife or family, who even come to take him home. But if a woman has a mental illness, the family tends to abandon her in the hospital," said Dr. Madvi. He added, "The man is usually the breadwinner. If he recovers, the house could get financial help. Because of this, the family is ready to take him home."

Not so with women. A married woman is sent back to her maternal home while some women are brought here by their in-laws. Most women who come to mental hospitals are housewives. Their mental illness is seen as a disruption in daily chores. Soon everyone gets used to doing housework without her. Once the children are grown up she is seen as unnecessary. So, the family and the husband are not keen to take the woman back home.

In the case of young girls, parents think they are safe in the hospital and hence want to keep them there.

### **Findings of Study Neglected Over the Years**

The scenario of these recovered women was presented by the National Human Rights Commission in 1999. Maharashtra Women's Commission and Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) conducted a research study in 2002 to review the quality

of life of women in four regional mental hospitals of Maharashtra, including Thane, Yerwada (Pune), Ratnagiri and Nagpur.

Many findings of this report are shocking. The majority of women admitted to mental hospitals - about 78 % – aged 19 to 45 years. Most of these women had completed their sixties in the hospital. The report also put forth the issues, including clothing for women, sanitary napkins during menstruation, other personal amenities, hospital hygiene, diseases other than mental health, sexuality and sexual safety, inadequate funding for mental hospitals, insufficient staff and increased workload, and gender discrimination. Though the report was published in 2002, no concrete efforts have been made at the hospital or government level for the personal and educational development of the recovered women or for them to stand on their own feet. Many of them remained in the hospital with the stamp of ‘mentally ill.’

The report suggested some recommendation for the social rehabilitation of these women. It is necessary to start a ‘Day Care Centre’ or ‘Half Way Home’ with the help of social organisations, to set up self-help groups, and to provide counselling as needed. After leaving the mental hospital, the problem of accommodation is big, so recommendations were made to keep some reserved places for these women in government hostels, hostels for working women, to start self-help groups for them in the hospital, to develop their skills, to make them financially capable.

Medical Superintendent of Ratnagiri Regional Mental Hospital Dr. A. B. Gadikar says, “We have almost 25% of patients who have recovered but remain in the hospital. Some of these women have been sent to ‘halfway homes’ set up by the government, but now, this facility is only for women. Therefore, the question of rehabilitation of male patients remains unanswered.”

Prof. Shubhada Maitra, Social Work Department of TISS, said, “Of our recommendations only superficial changes were made at the hospital level, ignoring significant changes. For example, women were given cupboards to store their belongings. However, the recommendations to help women step into the world outside are still on paper even after 20 years.”

Advocate Gaurav Bansal filed a petition in the Supreme Court in 2018 seeking rehabilitation of patients who have stayed in hospitals for many years based on the Mental Health Act 2017. The hearing of this petition is still going on. In the same process, the Supreme Court has ordered Maharashtra to create halfway homes which are replicas of houses for these patients.

Prof Shubhada says, “If halfway homes are a replica of hospitals, there is no difference in whether these recovered patients stayed in mental hospitals or such institutions.” She has raised the following questions: How should these institutions be? Should these patients be kept for the sole purpose of taking care of them, or

should efforts be made to give them a chance to lead a new life in society? Have guidelines for this been prepared?

To rehabilitate the women and make them an inclusive part of society (social integration), TISS has started the initiative Tarasha in collaboration with Thane Mental Hospital. This initiative has been going on since 2011 to employ young recovered women from this mental hospital and provide them with facilities in hostels to live independently.

Through Tarasha, these women not only get an opportunity to re-enter society, but efforts are made to provide all-around support, such as keeping their mental illness under control, counselling them periodically, and helping their families. Prof Shubhada says, “Society likes to label them all as ‘mentally ill’ or ‘psychopaths.’ However, there are many types of mental illness, and society is unaware of that. Not all patients with mental illness are babbling or aggressive. Some people behave normally after the initial treatment. They need support.”

When Tarasha was initiated in the hospital, many women had no identity cards or documents. These women used to say their names like ‘I am Ujjwala- Unknown.’ Initially, there were many challenges in opening a bank account and preparing the necessary documents. We are still fighting. However, this programme has proven that these women can live competently in society.

Dr. Sadhana Tayade, Director of the Health Commissionerate said, “The Mental Health Act of 1987 did not mention any concrete measures for such patients. Therefore, institutions were faced with the question of what to do in the case of these patients. It was not possible to release these patients. But the new law has clarified the measures in this regard. So now a halfway home has been set up for them through the Social Welfare Department, and patients are being sent there.”

It shows clearly that the state government has not made any concrete efforts in the last 20 years, reasoning the lack of recommendations in the previous law. Even in initiatives like 'Tarasha', initially, the government was not ready to release these women from the hospital. It was demanded that institutions like TISS should take their guardianship. Claiming that these women are conscious and have a right to live, TISS refused to take over their guardianship and forced them to stamp their names as having been released from the hospital.

One more thing is to be noted- by following some institutions, the state government has prepared an Aadhar Cards for patients with mental illness admitted to the hospital. But the address is given as ‘Regional Mental Hospital.’ Even if some of these patients leave the hospital, the stamp of Regional Mental Hospital remains on the Adhaar card creating problems with their employability.”

## **Mental Healthcare Act- 2017**

According to the 'Mental Healthcare Act -2017, every patient with mental illness has the right to live in society. He should not be isolated from society. These patients should not be placed in mental hospitals simply because they have no family, the family is unwilling to accept them, or there are no other facilities to house them. The Act clearly states that the government should create social institutions such as Halfway Home', 'Group Home' or similar facilities for such patients.

Although this law came in 2017, the state government sent around 5,200 patients with mental illness to old age homes and beggars' homes in 2019. The Supreme Court slammed the government on this and ordered it to build halfway homes. The government has started six such halfway homes with the help of non-government organisations (NGOs). Three are in Pune and one in Nagpur, Navi Mumbai and Ratnagiri. These halfway homes are inadequate. Therefore, Regional Mental Hospitals face difficulty accommodating the remaining recovered patients to halfway homes. Dr Tayde informs, "The State Government has started to build some more halfway homes."

These institutions are expected to become a bridge to socially reintegrate patients, help them leave the four walls of mental hospital and build capacities to live in society again. However, if this concept is not implemented right, like mental hospitals, halfway homes will only widen the gap between society and these individuals. Halfway homes are just a piecemeal option. If cared for in their homes, these persons will feel included. For that, the stigma about mental illness in society must be removed. Only if we as a society can overcome the fear and hesitancy around mental illness these people who have recovered from mental illness will gradually be accepted openly into their own families.

### **Statistics of patients admitted in four regional mental hospitals of Maharashtra (Source – Regional Mental Hospitals of Maharashtra)**

<b>Regional Mental Hospitals</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Bed Capacity</b>
Thane	345	568	913	1850
Yerwada, Pune	504	619	1123	2540
Nagpur	230	268	498	940
Ratnagiri	79	132	211	365
Total	1158	1587	2745	5659

Shailaja Tiwale, an independent journalist specializing in public health, has received prestigious fellowships, including UNICEF, REACH, SCARF India, and National Foundation for India.



## 5. Why Indian sex workers dread going to a hospital

*Johanna Deeksha Victor / www.scroll.in / December 12, 2022*

Two years ago, Shanthi, a sex worker who lives in Bengaluru, visited a government hospital in the city. She had developed rashes on her body. They were on her hands, her legs and all over her torso. In panic, she decided to consult a doctor.

To her dismay, the doctor was unwilling to diagnose her. “He didn’t even look at my hands or my body,” recounted Shanthi, who is now 45 years old and has been a sex worker for 20. (Shanthi, and other sex workers Scroll.in spoke to for this story asked to be identified by pseudonyms) “In fact, he barely looked up. He scribbled the name of an ointment on the prescription pad and pushed the slip towards me.”

Still, Shanthi, decided to follow the doctor’s recommendations. For the next few days, Shanthi applied the ointment diligently all over her body, praying for the rashes to disappear. But it did not work.

Fearing that she would be treated poorly again, Shanthi decided she did not want to go back to the same doctor. Instead, she went to a private hospital, hoping that if she paid a substantial fee for her treatment, she would receive better care from the doctors. Indeed, this time she was examined properly by a doctor and prescribed different medicines. In a couple of days, there were no signs of rashes left on her body.

She then decided never to visit a government hospital again.

“Even if it means shelling out more money, I’d rather go to a private hospital and be treated with respect and dignity,” said Shanthi, who is a member of the Karnataka Sex Workers’ Union. “I know that private hospitals, as long as they are being given exorbitant amounts of money, are not going to care who the patient is.”

The decision was not a knee-jerk one. It came after noticing over the years that she was simply not getting good care at government hospitals. “As soon as I walked in, I would be met with judgmental looks,” she said. “The doctors don’t really pay attention to what I have to say, or take my complaints seriously.”

That sex workers in India face difficulties in accessing healthcare has been noted in several studies. One 2012 study conducted among 329 sex workers in Maharashtra found that 66% had been discriminated against by health workers because of their profession. Of the respondents, 61.4% said that health workers “often reveal sex workers’ identity to everyone and make fun of that”, while 64.4% said that they were “forced all the time to take STI tests when they fell ill”. Further, 62.3% said

that doctors and other staff at hospitals sometimes refused to admit sex workers to hospitals “without conducting blood tests and specifically HIV tests”.

Another 2017 study on the factors that influence healthcare access for commercial female workers in India found that social stigma often forced workers to hide symptoms of diseases. It noted, “Surveys have revealed that the prevailing social attitude of demarcating commercial sex workers as outcasts is highly prevalent among healthcare workers including physicians.”

While the studies focused on hospitals in general, speaking to 10 sex workers in six districts –Bengaluru Urban, Hyderabad, Chennai and Nagpur, and Ranchi and Dumka in Jharkhand – Scroll.in found that uniformly, sex workers like Shanthi reported particularly stark discrimination in government hospitals. Vijaya Kumari, who is 55, and is also a member of the union, said that when the union conducted awareness drives, they asked women to go for regular check-ups to government hospitals, “but they refuse because they are so scared of how they will be treated there”.

Most of the women Scroll.in spoke to said they felt more comfortable approaching private healthcare providers or clinics where the doctors had been through some kind of sensitisation training.

Shaheeda, a sex worker and activist from Chennai, said that the situation was similar in Chennai. When she and her colleagues urged sex workers to get health check-ups at government hospitals, they would refuse, for the same reasons. “They’d say we don’t want to be treated disrespectfully,” she said. In such situations, typically, Shaheeda and her team refer sex workers to NGOs that focus on healthcare.

The 2012 study also found that among the 329 sex workers interviewed, 97 had reported having had a symptom of a sexually-transmitted infection in the preceding three months, of whom “nearly three-fourths” sought treatment. But only 12% of those who sought treatment went to a government hospital. The largest proportion, or 84%, visited NGO-run clinics or health centres, while others sought treatment from private doctors and other centres.

Meena Seshu, a prominent activist for sex workers’ rights, said that the story Shanthi narrated was a familiar one for sex workers across the board. “Women across the country would have similar stories to tell about the treatment meted out to them at many government hospitals in their states,” she said. She added that she regularly heard stories of how doctors would refuse to do a physical exam of the patient before prescribing medication. “The doctors refuse to examine patients and simply say – tell me what is wrong and I’ll give you medicines,” she said.

A 2021 study based on sex workers in Chicago, was revealing of the effects that such treatment could have on the community. Sixteen out of the 21 sex workers who

were interviewed reported that they had had experiences of stigmatisation while accessing healthcare. “As a result, some chose not to share their background in sex work, limiting their ability to meaningfully engage with providers and receive comprehensive care,” the study found. Consequently, patients were not provided with information about prevention of diseases, as well as services and treatments that they might need. According to the study, “Some were explicitly ‘discouraged from returning’ for future care.”

Among the primary situations in which sex workers said they needed healthcare, but found it hard to access, was when they got pregnant. They struggled both in cases where they sought abortions, as well as when they wanted to carry their pregnancies to term.

In some cases, sex workers said, health professionals in government hospitals did not respect their ability and right to make their own decisions. Priya K, also a member of the Karnataka Sex Workers Union, said that when her pregnant sister, who is also a sex worker, visited a government hospital for an abortion, she was not allowed to consent to the procedure on her own, and was instead asked to return with her husband in order to obtain approval. “Adult women should have the right to consent to an abortion without involving anybody else,” said Sylvia Karpagam, a public health doctor and researcher. “It is not the protocol to ask for approval from the husband, but there is a level of moral policing that happens within hospitals.”

Women also frequently face financial obstacles in accessing abortions, as well as other procedures and services. This despite the fact that at government hospitals, patients have to only pay a nominal fee, while for those below the poverty line, treatment is completely free.

“The doctors quote a different rate depending on how far along the patient is,” Priya K said of those who seek abortions. “Most of us don’t have the means to pay.” Priya’s sister was asked to pay about Rs 10,000 for her abortion. She added, “We are barely making any money, how can we afford such high fees?”

Vijaya Kumari said that she had often taken young women who needed abortions to hospitals. “Once a very young woman asked me for help,” she said. When Kumari took her to a government hospital, the woman was asked to undergo an HIV test. “But they asked her to pay for it,” she said. The woman immediately responded that she would come back later. “A few weeks later, I went to see her and she said she had taken some medicines on her own and bled out,” Kumari recounted.

Kumari said she was shocked and urged the young woman to get medical help, but she refused. Indeed, many of the sex workers that Scroll.in spoke to said that because of the financial hurdles they encountered, and the un-empathetic attitudes of doctors in government hospitals, women often chose to buy over-the-counter abortion pills. However, as Seshu noted, women who used them “without a proper prescription,

and instructions, risk excessive bleeding, and other long-lasting impacts on their reproductive health.”

Sex workers’ access to treatment in government hospitals is also hampered by the difficulties they face in procuring identification documents.

In many states, government hospitals demand Aadhaar cards to perform pregnancy scans for them – but since sex workers often live unstable lives, and shift frequently, they have trouble producing proof of address documents, and are thus unable to apply for documents like the Aadhaar card.

They also often struggle to access government health schemes, like the Central government’s Ayushman Bharat, which aims to provide an annual health cover of up to Rs 5 lakh to vulnerable families. In order to avail of this benefit, individual must produce the scheme’s card at government hospitals. But sex workers’ lack of basic documents hampers their ability to apply for these Ayushman Bharat cards too. “We are required to produce the Aadhaar card and the health card to get treatment at a concession,” Shaheeda said.

In December 2021, the Supreme Court directed states to issue ration cards, Aadhaar cards and other identification documents to sex workers without demanding proof of residence. The order was issued in response to a petition filed by an NGO, which had brought to the limelight problems faced by the sex workers during the Covid pandemic because they did not have identification cards. Shaheeda said that after the verdict, things had changed on the ground. “Before, it was almost impossible to get an ID card because sex workers are often constantly moving houses,” she said. “But now, they don’t ask us for proof of residence, so it is much easier to get Aadhaar cards.”

But other problems remain. For instance, sex workers said they were often left in the hands of untrained staff. Kumari said she had also noticed that at government hospitals, it was sometimes not even the doctors who conducted abortions, when it came to sex workers. “The services are so poor that sometimes the ward boys will come and do the abortion,” she said.

In the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu, Radha G said that she had witnessed the same problems in a government hospital in Chennai. “The nurses and ward boys do the abortions and nobody asks any questions,” she said.

Such practices have serious implications: according to a 2022 report by the United Nations Population Fund, unsafe abortions are the third-leading cause of maternal mortality in India. Close to eight women in the country die from causes related to unsafe abortions every single day. “There was a disproportionately higher risk of unsafe abortion among the vulnerable and disadvantaged populations including young women in India,” the report stated.

“Nobody has the money to go to a private hospital for abortions,” said Kumari. “So women either try to get these over-the-counter pills or they resort to local remedies that may not yield a proper result or they visit quacks.”

This, too, puts them at great risk. In September 2021, a 27-year-old woman in Hosur bled to death after an abortion by a quack. Another 27-year-old woman in died after a botched abortion by a quack in May 2022 in Dharmapuri.

In some cases, she added, sex workers seek treatment at private medical colleges – since most are teaching hospitals, the students need patients to treat and are therefore less reluctant to treat sex workers. “Medical students conduct camps which are accessible to patients, but the treatment that they receive is not very good,” said Seshu.

Even when sex workers want to carry their pregnancies to term, they can find it hard to access care. Lalitha Kumari, a social worker based in Jharkhand, who works with sex workers, recalled that in one instance, she had to force the doctors of a government hospital to provide care to a sex worker who was in labour.

The sex worker, a 28-year-old woman in Dumka district, who has been in the profession for 10 years, said that when she realised that she was pregnant, she decided that she wanted to keep the baby. When she went to the local government hospital, the authorities admitted her, but refused her free treatment.

“They said I needed to have an operation and that it would not be a normal delivery, so I told them to go ahead with it,” she said. “But they demanded Rs 14,000 for the treatment.” She recounted that when she told them she could not afford the amount, the doctors told her to go to Ranchi, the capital city, and seek treatment there. “I had no family except my grandmother who was very old and could not have travelled with me,” she said.

The woman took a stand and refused to leave the hospital without treatment. She then got in touch with local NGOs that worked for the welfare of sex workers to seek their help. “The social workers argued with the doctors and said they did not have the right to force me to leave,” she said. “They finally gave in, and at about 2 am the next day, I gave birth to my baby there.”

Kumari said that it was only under considerable pressure from them that the hospital agreed to keep the woman admitted at the hospital. “Only after we threatened them with serious action did they finally give in and conduct the surgery,” she said.

“Thankfully since that time, I have had no need to visit a hospital again,” said the 28-year-old sex worker.

Transgender sex workers often face even greater discrimination when they seek healthcare, both at government and private hospitals. Neethu, a 34-year-old

transwoman and sex worker based in Hyderabad said that she had been in the profession for 12 years. “Doctors don’t know anything about transwomen’s bodies,” she said. As a result, she added, doctors have little idea about the health issues that affect them.

“Doctors don’t know how our bodies change after we transition, or while we are in the process of it,” she said. She said the discrimination against transwomen starts right from the time they enter the hospital. “At the outpatient department, there are only two lines – one for women and the other for men,” she said. “So right there, we are made to feel like we don’t deserve equal treatment.”

A 2022 study noted, “Stigma, whether real or perceived, and institutional inequalities within the healthcare system serve as barriers to transgender sex workers’ healthcare-seeking behavior.” It added that there was also a “dearth of healthcare clinicians with experience, cultural competence, and sensitisation to transgender health issues”.

The study noted that transgender sex workers are a high-risk group when it comes to HIV and sexually transmitted diseases in India. “The health needs of transgender sex workers are similar to that of cisgender female sex workers and include regular testing and screening services for STIs and other preventive care,” it stated.

Neethu, who is herself HIV-positive, said that transgender people face discrimination from the moment they seek diagnosis and treatment for HIV, particularly at government hospitals. For example, she said, when a person goes to a government hospital, they are typically first directed to a general physician who examines them, and then directs them to a specific department; in cases where the doctor believes the patient might be HIV-positive, they are sent to an Integrated Counselling and Testing Centre. These centres, found in some government hospitals, were established beginning in the late 1990s, to conduct HIV diagnostic tests, provide basic information on the modes of HIV transmission and promote changes in behaviour to reduce the risk of transmission, as well as to guide people towards other HIV prevention, care and treatment services.

“But transperson sex workers are not allowed to meet a doctor. They are directly sent to the testing centre,” Neethu said. “And then just made to wait in line without any information of what awaits them.”

Further, she said, the doctors at these centres are usually hostile, and rush through processes, rarely providing counselling to transgender patients. “They simply administer the test and don’t care about how the whole process is impacting our mental health,” she said.

She added that transgender patients faced similar problems whenever they sought any kind of treatment. “Even if it’s a fever or high blood pressure, the attitude is the

same,” she said. As with female sex workers, Neethu said, doctors don’t examine transgender patients properly either. “They don’t touch us or listen to what our problems are,” Neethu said. “They don’t want to give us enough time to explain what the symptoms are.”

In some cities, sex workers have mobilised and formed solidarity networks to effect improvements in healthcare services. They have done so primarily by organising sensitisation programmes for doctors and other healthcare officials.

Shaheeda noted that over the years, such efforts had led to some improvement in Chennai. She recounted that she was only 13 years old when her parents were “brainwashed” into sending her to Goa to work as a domestic worker. When she reached the state, she realised that she had been brought there to become a sex worker. She spent about three years in Goa before returning to Chennai, where she has lived since.

She recalled that in both places, she did not have positive experiences at the government hospitals that she visited. “In Goa, they would not even allow you to enter the room. They would just ask us to leave as soon as we entered,” she said. She remembered being asked “vulgar” questions like “how many clients I’d entertain in a day.”

“It was actually very heartbreaking,” she added.

When she moved to Chennai, she had similar experiences in hospitals. “Same vulgar questions and asking us to maintain a distance from the doctors,” she said. She added that it was only over the last three or four years, after regular counselling by the Indian Community Welfare Organisation, that some doctors in the city developed a different attitude toward sex workers.

Radha G, who works along with Shaheeda, said that at government hospitals, she has also felt like sex workers’ privacy is not respected. “Since it is a teaching hospital, students surround the beds,” said Radha. “When we have some problems with our genitals, the doctors usually ask patients if they are comfortable. But for sex workers, they never ask. They just assume because of the nature of our jobs that we are okay to allow anybody to look at our private parts.”

Today, Shaheeda works towards empowering other sex workers like her to claim their fundamental rights. “At least in the cities, things have changed a little,” she said. “But in rural areas, things have remained mostly the same.”

Meena Seshu, the activist, recounted that there was a time when government doctors paid closer attention to the medical needs of sex workers. For a period in the late 1990s, she said, when the HIV epidemic became a major health concern in India, sex workers were treated with respect at government hospitals.

At this point, “the government began to care about the health of sex workers. Until then, nobody was bothered about them,” she said. This, she added, was because the government realised that sex workers would have to play an essential role in the fight against the disease. Thus, it ensured that various departments “like the police and the health department were instructed to work with sex workers. All over India, there was an effort taken to reach out to health workers and encourage them to treat sex workers well,” the activist said. She explained that the government feared that if sex workers didn’t “take up the fight against HIV”, there would be a great risk of the virus spreading to the general population through the “bridge population”, that is, men who frequented them.

“When we initially started working with sex workers, they would refuse to go to the government hospitals because of the stigma. They would instead insist on going to quacks,” Seshu said. “It was an uphill task to make them go to government hospitals, but we worked hard to make that possible.”

She said that sex workers also participated in India’s targeted interventions, referring to programmes aimed at increasing prevention in high-risk populations.

Activists recounted that during the late 1990s, the government recognised that sex workers were crucial in the fight against HIV and accorded them greater respect. Photo: Reuters/Rupak De Chowdhuri

However, by the late 2000s, medication for HIV, such as antiretroviral drugs, became easily available, making cases more manageable. Simultaneously, infections also saw a decline around the country. As funding for programmes reduced, the government also placed less emphasis on controlling the spread of the disease.

“When the government realised that the medication was being pushed successfully and they did not need to work with sex workers anymore, they pulled back from many of the programmes,” Seshu said. Soon after, she observed that the raids and violence against sex workers began to go up again across the country. “The violence had decreased for a bit during the HIV programmes and then the earlier days of stigma and discrimination returned,” she said.

She explained that now there was no political will to ensure that healthcare providers treated sex workers with dignity. “We are back to square one,” she lamented.

She added, “Now with a dip in the HIV numbers, all of these issues, the violence and the raids are rebounding again. There was no acknowledgement of the realisation that government-targeted programmes worked because the sex workers responded positively.”

The neglect of sex-workers meant a decline of an efficacious healthcare network, she noted. “Sex workers were educated on all the aspects of HIV and taught how to encourage members of the community to adhere to medication and seek treatment,” she said. “They were trained on how to communicate this information and encourage people to access healthcare. The same workers could have worked towards doing outreach work, spreading knowledge and awareness for a disease like tuberculosis, especially because tuberculosis is a comorbidity of HIV too.”

Instead, Seshu noted, India has squandered an opportunity to strengthen healthcare networks. “This was a very short-sighted way of going about the programme,” she said.

This reporting is made possible with support from Report for the World, an initiative of The GroundTruth Project.

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<https://scroll.in/article/1039611/why-indian-sex-workers-dread-going-to-a-hospital>



## GENDER AND JUSTICE: UNTANGLING THE COMPLEX WEB

In the intricate tapestry of India's socio-legal landscape, the inseparable connection between gender and justice becomes evident, echoing the ongoing struggle for equal rights, opportunities, and fair treatment within the legal system. At the forefront of this struggle is the concept of gender justice, tirelessly addressing historical biases and discriminatory practices to level the playing field for all genders. However, this noble pursuit often encounters hurdles in the form of entrenched patriarchal mindsets, leading to unequal access to justice.

The section unfolds through the insightful analyses of several authors, each peeling back layers of the complex intersection of gender and justice in India. **Saumya Kalia's** exploration of a recent Supreme Court ruling protecting the identity of adolescent girls seeking abortion services exemplifies the intricate dynamics at play. While the decision intends to protect the identity of adolescent girls, it simultaneously brings to light the persisting criminalization of consensual sex among under-18s and the misuse of the POCSO Act to victimise boys and men engaged in consensual sex, thus adding another layer of complexity, demanding comprehensive legal reform and societal change.

Despite legislative changes following Mary Roy's landmark case in 1986, formidable barriers persist in women exercising their right to property. **Rakhi Bose** delves into the challenges faced by women, mainly from marginalized communities, in asserting their rights to ancestral property owing to social stigma, legal gaps, and technical complexities that continue to impede women.

The urgency for an efficient justice system becomes evident in **Manvendra Singh's** exploration of the tragic poisoning of three Dalit teenage girls in rural Uttar Pradesh. Two years after the incident, minimal progress in legal proceedings raises crucial questions about the safety and rights of women and girls in India. This case underscores the persistent need for swift and effective justice, particularly in rural areas grappling with ongoing violence against women.

**Preeti Agyaat** takes a macro view and delves into the lack of progress in ensuring women's safety in the aftermath of the 10th anniversary of the Nirbhaya case. Highlighting recent heinous crimes against women, Agyaat critiques society's desensitization to such atrocities. She condemns the apathetic stance of political parties and the media, emphasizing the imperative for a collective change in mindset, prioritizing women's safety above political agendas.

The trauma of the courtroom procedures is exposed by **Remya Harikumar**. She sheds light on the additional challenges faced by survivors of sexual assault within the legal system. Detailing the traumatic cross-examination process, the article emphasizes the urgent need for survivor-friendly courtrooms and expedited trials to ensure a more compassionate and efficient legal process.

**Mohua Das Menon** highlights that the survivors of human trafficking grapple with similar challenges after their rescue. Stories like Kamla and Rina's illuminate the harsh realities, from abuse in shelter homes to societal rejection. Legal loopholes and a lack of awareness about their rights complicate their quest for justice. The alarmingly low conviction rate in trafficking cases underscores the necessity for comprehensive support systems, streamlined access to essential services, and sustained NGO assistance for survivors' dignified reintegration into society.

The "Twice Cursed" series by **Shivani Gupta and Abhishek Verma** explores the struggles faced by rape victims' families, laying bare gaps in the implementation of the Protection of Children From Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act. The 2014 Budaun case exemplifies the challenges, including delays in trials and insensitive handling of cases. It underscores the urgent need for efficient implementation, addressing legal loopholes, and timely justice for victims and their families.

**Safina Nabi** sheds light on the plight of Kashmiri women known as "half-widows," left vulnerable after their husbands disappeared during the conflict in Kashmir. The absence of their husbands denies them access to government support and inheritance rights, adding layers of complexity to their struggles. Nabi's narrative underscores the urgent need for legal reforms and robust social support systems to empower these women and alleviate their suffering.

In presenting these narratives, the authors collectively underscore the multifaceted challenges within India's legal system concerning gender and justice. The path forward requires a collective effort to dismantle entrenched patriarchal mindsets, bridge legal gaps, and implement reforms that promote equality and justice for all.

## 6. Why India's laws make abortion traumatic & dangerous for minors

*Saumya Kalia | [www.article-14.com](http://www.article-14.com) | November 21, 2022*

*The Supreme Court ruling allowing the identity of a pregnant minor to be concealed may pave the way for safe abortions and blunt the pursuit of punitive action against her male partner, but how this plays out, in reality, is uncertain. Any long-term success, experts said, boils down to changing the criminalisation of consensual sex between under-18s. Many teenagers seeking abortion in India today must contend with judgment and shaming by caregivers and pressure to make false rape complaints against their partners.*

Mumbai: A\* recalled staring at the diagram of a uterus masking the paint peeling off the grey wall in the waiting room of a private abortion clinic 22 km from Gurugram city in Haryana.

Her eyes rested on the big, bulky chairs in the rundown yet expensive facility where she went when she was 17. Five years on, A remembers the coldness not just of the room but of the caregivers.

The hostility she saw in the eyes of her guardian, a family friend whom her father had asked to accompany her, A felt, was echoed by the nurse who took down her name and the doctor who asked her if she had “many” boyfriends.

Later, A, who was five weeks pregnant and paid Rs 22,000 for the abortion, recalled the doctor telling her guardian, “She seems to be as sexually active as a married woman.”

Abortion is legal for women in India seeking to terminate their pregnancy up to 24 weeks under the Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) Amendment Act, 2021.

But for minors like A, any request for abortion also triggers a police enquiry, irrespective of whether the pregnancy was of a consensual or non-consensual relationship, under the Protection of Children From Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012.

A three-judge bench of the Supreme Court, comprising justices D Y Chandrachud, AS Bopanna and J B Pardiwala, in a judgement on 29 September, extended the right to abort a pregnancy up to 24 weeks (earlier confined to married women under the MTP Act) to all women and minors.

Reading the MTP Act in harmony with the POCSO Act, the court exempted regional medical practitioners from disclosing the identity of the minor in legal proceedings under the POCSO, noting that it would ease the tension between the legal obligation of reporting a “crime,” and the rights of privacy and autonomy of the minor.

“It could not possibly be the legislature’s intent to deprive minors of safe abortions,” the Supreme Court said.

### **A Confusing, Legal Labyrinth**

The POCSO Act not only dismisses the sexual autonomy and privacy of the individual under 18 but also mandates that the route to getting sexual and reproductive health services is through a punishing criminal justice system.

This is a confusing labyrinth involving paperwork, judicial permissions, and interaction with police authorities, which many families choose to avoid due to the fear of violence and exploitation. Minors and their families are likely to pay more for the promise of confidentiality, making abortion care exploitative and costly. People with limited social and economic resources are forced to rely on unsafe, botched abortion services.

*The legal framework, used to criminalise consensual relationships between individuals under 18, has become an instrument of preventing interfaith or inter-caste relationships.*

One of the challenges of the Supreme Court’s harmonious reading of the POCSO and MTP Acts is the abundant room for ambiguity and misinterpretation. While the recent ruling objects to the current use of the POCSO Act to criminalise consensual relationships, the question of meaningful implementation still lingers.

Much of how this plays out will still depend on the practitioner’s discretion, if they choose to report to the police, and what information they disclose.

Experts say the law still expects the doctor to “draw these fine lines”, which they may not be willing to make due to the fear of violating either the MTP Act or the POCSO Act and opening themselves up to criminal liability.

“Ultimately, what the law is doing is asking the RMP on the ground to make these determinations,” said Aparna Chandra, associate professor of law teaching at the National Law School of India, Bengaluru, specialising in reproductive justice.

“The chances that doctors, who are going to open themselves up to criminal liability if they violate either the MTP Act or the POCSO Act, will draw these fine lines is highly unlikely,” said Chandra, who is also a member of the editorial board of Article 14.

## The Data Gaps

There is no separate record of minor abortions in India as most data surveys, including the National Family Health Survey by the ministry of health and family welfare, club minors and women in the 15-49 age bracket and report abortions as a whole.

There is no comprehensive, systemic way to keep track of the numbers because medical abortions have moved outside clinics and are often done by ordering pills online.

According to data sourced from right to information (RTI) applications made to the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), the number of abortion cases at registered centres in Mumbai fell 95% between 2014 and 2019, with experts noting this could indicate a rise in unsafe and illegal abortions.

***“This mandatory reporting requirement has created a huge constraint on minor’s ability to access abortion services,” said Chandra. “When you go to a doctor, and the doctor says they can’t do the abortion without informing the police, there are chances that most people disappear and resort to shady practitioners.”***

“[The judgment] is a legal nicety which I don’t know will translate on the ground. And ultimately, we have to see what is on-the-ground impact,” Chandra said.

As families run from pillar to post trying to gather additional documentation and consent requirements to comply with the law, the child’s pregnancy could probably cross the 24 weeks of termination as mandated by law, said Kushi Kushalappa, a social worker with Enfold Trust, a Bengaluru-based NGO working on child rights.

“The family is then in a tricky situation. The effect and impact are huge,” Kushalappa said. “Parents of 13, 14, 15, 16 year-olds are not at all ready to understand that their children engage in sex, much less get pregnant, so they are willing to spend money to ‘sort out the problem.’”

The families and minors go through “trauma” through the process, but “there is no time or no bandwidth to look into their trauma or the child’s”, said Kushalappa. “It just becomes a mechanical process.”

Before and after the procedure, A faced many taunts at home. Over time, the insults from her father, like ‘tum nanga naach karke aayee ho’ (you have done a naked dance and come), morphed into silence; abortion, sex, or sexual autonomy were never brought up again.

## **'The Cops Landed Up at His Door'**

In May 2021, B was 16 when she had sex with a senior in her school in Bangalore, who was a little over 18 years, said Kushalappa, the social worker.

Her mother and sister took her to a government hospital for a check-up and ultrasound. When they found out she was pregnant for more than 20 weeks and they would have to approach the Karnataka High Court for legal permission to undertake the abortion as per the MTP Act (it was changed to 24 weeks through the 2020 Amendment), they decided to raise the baby by themselves.

Still, the medical practitioners had already alerted the police who registered a first information report (FIR), booking her male partner for “penetrative sexual assault” under Section 3 of the POCSO Act.

***B was harangued for her partner’s name; if she didn’t tell them, the police told her they would have to investigate and speak with everyone in her circle—a breach of her privacy.***

Once she did, the police arrested the boy, who spent two months in judicial custody.

“The cops land up at his door, tell him ‘you had sex in December, the girl is pregnant and going to have a baby in a couple of months,’” Kushalappa said. “Can you imagine what happens in that family? They fell apart.”

The male partner was convicted of rape by the Sessions Court but he was acquitted on appeal to the Karnataka High Court where he argued it was a consensual relationship. After he was released, their parents married them.

## **“I Only Remember a Lot Of Crying’**

Five years on, C\*, pregnant at age 17, struggled to remember most things about the day she got her abortion and everything that followed because of how traumatising and intimidating it was.

***“I only remember a lot of crying,” she said. “I got on birth control immediately after everything was over.”***

C took one tablet (mifepristone) prescribed by a doctor at an abortion clinic in Mumbai and the second set of pills (misoprostol)—four pills orally and four vaginally—the next day, after which she remembers patches of bleeding.

It took a day and a half for the embryo to pass.

Her sister, 27 at the time, was working as a gynaecologist in the United Kingdom, had acted as her legal guardian, taking her to a private abortion clinic in Mumbai,

and paid close to Rs 50,000 for a private, undisclosed sonography, wherein after the procedure they deleted all her records in front of them to protect privacy, apart from the cost of an abortion.

“She and I both knew that abortion the legal way was not an option. We didn’t even talk about informing the police,” said C. “From the moment I told her, she was figuring out a way to go about this in a hush-hush manner.”

“I wasn’t equipped to do any of it alone. If I didn’t have my sister, I would have been forced to look for unqualified doctors at the risk of personal safety,” she said.

### **‘They Take Down Your Dignity as Well’**

The first two times D\* wanted an abortion, she visited the local dai who lived some 500 meters from her chawl (tenement) in north Delhi.

D’s mother is a daily wage labourer, supporting a family of six people. Her stepfather’s physical disabilities keep him at home.

In 2017, when she was 17, the dai gave her a set of pills. D knew it was dangerous but preferred the dai to facing judgmental doctors at a government hospital.

“Mere bas kapde nahi utare the, but nazron se voh bhi utaar dete hain,” she said. (They didn’t just take off my clothes, they stripped me of my dignity too.)

Both times D paid less than Rs 200 to the dai for the pills. To date, she doesn’t know what they were. Her Muslim family had disowned her because she was in an interfaith relationship with a Hindu who was a few months older than her.

***In slums and small cities, access to abortion is determined by the physical access to healthcare infrastructure, finding a practitioner who is non-judgmental, and finding someone who won't exploit the person in need of care because they know there is a disparity in the power equation.***

“Abortion is a privilege because in most cases it all comes down to money for accessing basic healthcare,” said Sonal Kapoor, co-founder of Protsahan India Foundation, a Delhi-based NGO that supports and empowers adolescent girls vulnerable to abuse and marginalisation in urban slums.

The laws that dictate abortion access for minors in India—the MTP Act and POCSO Act—impact the poor and the underprivileged the most, said child rights activist Bharti Ali who works with HAQ: Center for Child Rights.

“If I have the money, I can go to a private facility for an MTP and also ensure that it does not get reported. But if I don’t have those resources, then the law will take its

course, and some will bear the brunt of it more than others,” said Ali. “We need to look at laws in the context of who are these people who are ultimately going to pay the price of the law.”

### **‘A Weaponised Mechanism’**

G\* and H\* were in a consensual relationship—G was a 14-year-old Muslim woman and H was Hindu, just a few weeks short of turning 18.

When G got pregnant, her family coerced her into saying that she was raped.

Both families were from economically poor backgrounds. G’s father worked as a gardener and her mother as a cleaner at a hospital. H’s father was a daily wage labourer.

Her testimony led to the court sentencing H to life imprisonment for raping a minor girl under the POCSO Act.

A 2017 study by HAQ: Center for Child Rights and the Forum Against Sexual Exploitation of Children found that 25% of POCSO cases applied to “romantic relationships.”

One of the judicial officers in Delhi interviewed for the report said: “...There are many cases of elopement, which are falsely framed under the POCSO Act. The elopement cases mainly consist of children in the age bracket of 15-18 years. In such cases, the victim and the accused don’t want to frame each other, but the families force them to do so.”

***Minors are reluctant to reveal the name of the person they had sex with; either they are vague, or they name someone else to protect the partner, the report said, noting that “false cases could be 1 or 2 out of 10, but cases of consensual sex could be 5 out of 10.”***

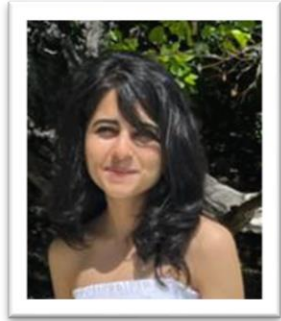
Mandatory reporting to the police was meant to aid victims and survivors of sexual abuse. In instances of abuse within the family, the reporting clause is beneficial for it mandates the doctor to inform the police when the minor may not be equipped to.

But the reality is POSCO has become a “tool” to “abuse the process of law” and criminalise romantic relationships, the Madras High Court said in January 2021.”

"POCSO, though largely robust in its framework, has also been used sometimes as a weaponised mechanism to put young boys behind bars by girls’ families for consensual relationships,” said Kapoor from Protsahan, “because a young woman’s body and sexuality is to be somehow 'saved' by the patriarchy."

Saumya Kalia, a staff writer at The Hindu, is a Mumbai-based journalist specializing in health, gender, urban issues, and social equity.

<https://article-14.com/post/why-india-s-laws-make-abortion-traumatic-dangerous-for-minors-637ae38587df5>



## 7. Inheritance of inequality: Tribal women, farmers struggle to access India's succession laws

*Rakhi Bose / Outlook India / September 27, 2022*

Due to the social stigma attached to Dalits, tribals, widows and even the unmarried, women from these groups largely have no rights to property, as successive SC judgments and legislations have failed to truly address these problems

In 1983, a divorced, single mother from a wealthy and influential family in Kerala, sued her brother for a fair share in the ancestral property of her father, a former Imperial Entomologist at the British court, who had died intestate. At the time, women of the deeply-conservative and close-knit Syrian Malabar Nasrani community were not entitled to inherit their fathers' property, under the Travancore Christian Succession Act of 1916. In 1986, however, Mary Roy won the lawsuit against her brother George, marking a landmark shift towards gender justice, not only for Christians but for all Indian women. Years later in 2006, Roy, who had by then become an educationist, women's rights activist and 'Ammu', the protagonist of her daughter Arundhati Roy's Booker-winning *The God of Small Things*, told a researcher that she did not do it for "public good." She did it because she was just "so angry."

Much has happened since 1986 when it comes to women's land rights. The Hindu Succession Act 1956 and its 2005 amendment, gave daughters the right to own and inherit ancestral property. In later verdicts, the Supreme Court (SC) upheld that the Act was applicable to women born before 2005 and also to those whose fathers died before 2005. Inheritance rights of widows have also been strengthened since 1937 when it was first introduced.

But much like Roy, women in India remain angry.

While Roy was an upper-caste woman born into a wealthy family with a lot of ancestral property (her share amounted to Rs 2 crore, which she later donated to charity), land rights in India mostly affect women from lower social and economic strata. When it comes to the most marginalised sections, successive SC judgments and legislation have failed to truly address the real problems.

### **Legal and technical gaps**

Since succession, inheritance laws and the processes vary from state to state and community to community. Let us take the case of one state, Gujarat, where, despite the Hindu Succession Act, women in both urban and rural areas find it harder to inherit ancestral land.

One of the first problems is the lack of legal and digital literacy regarding succession/inheritance rights and laws. Neelam Patel, a lawyer who works with the Working Group for Women and Land Ownership (WGWLO), a consortium of groups working for land rights of women farmers in Gujarat, says awareness about land rights and about the various documents and processes required to even get their names registered in the property mutation papers, remains largely absent. WGWLO is a network of CBOs, NGOs and individual members working on awareness, action (paralegal cadre training and process support), research and advocacy-oriented holistic work to strengthen the women's land rights movement work from grassroots to policy level.

“We have been working in Gujarat since 2002, to build identities and rights of women engaged in agrarian work. We find large gaps in awareness and implementation of succession laws and processes,” Patel, land rights advocate working with WGWLO, tells *Outlook*.

The process of filing for succession is tedious, and requires a woman to not only prove that her father/husband/brother is dead (meaning a death certificate that women often don't possess), but also to procure two witnesses who know her and can vouch for her as related to the deceased. These witnesses, Patel states, are usually susceptible to pressures and bribes from the woman's male family members or in-laws who might be trying to edge her out of the inheritance.

Even after a woman manages to collect all necessary documents and reaches a *patwari* (junior revenue official) with the witnesses to get her name registered for the mutation and succession papers, in-laws or relatives of the woman often get it removed in subsequent documents through bribery, forgery or deceit.

“In cases of dispute, the onus to prove ownership of the property is usually on the woman. If there are others staking claim to the property, it becomes the woman's job to collect each of their signatures and Aadhaar details and submit them to the patwari. Many wilfully refuse to give their details to delay or hinder the succession application,” says Ashwinbhai Gamit, a community-level para-legal worker (PLW) trained by the consortium to help women facing property dispute cases in rural Gujarat.

Ashwinbhai, who is part of a network of PLWs working on ground to increase technical and legal literacy among women, states that lack of steady internet services or smartphone access in remote rural regions, also hinders the online application process. He adds that in villages, *patwaris* illegally charge anywhere between Rs 5,000-30,000 just to get these simple documents made or approved.

## Lifelong stigma

Social stigma related to widows and unmarried women also percolates down to the implementation of succession laws. “After a husband’s death, a widow’s in-laws use various tactics to remove her from the property, from fear of her remarrying and leaving with her share of it,” says Parulben Harhadbhai Kolipatel, another PLW from Ahmedabad district. She adds that these acts find overall support from the community.

### **Even After a Woman Gets Her Name Registered f,or Mutation And Succession Papers, Her Relatives Often Get It Removed Using Bribery, Forgery Or Deceit.**

Such stigma can even take the shape of violence. In tribal areas, the work of paralegals includes campaigning against social ills like the *dayan pratha* (witchcraft), which continues to be prevalent in Gujarat and states like Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh. Adivasi Jan Adhikar Manch activist Aloka Kujur from Ranchi had previously spoken to *Outlook* about how the *dayan pratha* was frequently used as an excuse in Jharkhand to threaten or kill landed single or elderly women and usurp their property.

Community workers like Parulben who work with widows or socially sensitive cases like inter-caste marriage leading to property disputes, may themselves face threats from families of the women they represent. “I have faced such threats from disgruntled in-laws, asking me to stay away from a case. It’s a problem women paralegals commonly face. We try to help out other women as much as we can. But ultimately, it’s the State’s job to provide safety and support. We can only do so much at the community level,” she adds.

## Generational inequalities

Polygamy among some tribal groups like the Gamits, who are also governed by the Hindu Succession Act and form a sizeable chunk of Gujarat’s population, is another interesting example of the many complexities that land rights activists face when implementing SC orders on succession and inheritance.

Radhaben, who belongs to the Gamit community in Gujarat and has been fighting for rights to her ancestral agricultural land since 2020, brings up an interesting question. Her great-grandfather had two wives. Her grandfather, son of the first wife, also had two wives. Her father was the son of the second.

Now, after the death of the great-grandfather in 2018 and her father in 2020, who had no male heirs and died intestate, Radhaben and her two sisters are being asked to vacate their great-grandfather’s land. In such cases, the claimant has to first prove the family tree, which requires Radhaben to procure documents that date back three generations. She also has to seek consent and submit documents for each of the 48

family members who are contesting claims to the land, just to get her name on the papers. Radhaben and her sisters are not literate and depend on the farm for survival.

“Back in those days, land was bequeathed by elders orally. My mother and my sisters’ names were not there in the property or *varsai* (inheritance) papers. We have no brothers, so other relatives have all joined hands against us as we are women and they think we’ll give up soon,” she tells *Outlook*.

### **If Upper-Caste Women Get the Raw End Of A Property Deal Vis-A-Vis Their Brothers, Those From The Oppressed Castes Have No Rights To Property At All.**

Since the Hindu Marriage Act rules out polygamy, laws related to the property rights of the first and second wives and their progeny are highly nuanced, and require the judge to invoke multiple Acts in order to arrive at a justifiable verdict.

In India, laws governing property ownership, succession and inheritance are rooted in inequality and an oppressive caste system. If upper-caste women get the raw end of a property deal vis-a-vis their brothers, those from the oppressed castes have no rights to property at all. The *Manusmriti* and other ancient Hindu legal treatises, which laid down these retrogressive rules for property ownership, mentioned that the property of upper-caste women who marry outside caste or to lower-caste men, would not be passed on to the lower-caste family, but to her own paternal bloodline, thus keeping the property within the caste group.

Incidentally, the *Manusmriti* continues to echo today. Some 400 castes across Gujarat have recently demanded that the government lawfully deem that if any daughter marries outside her caste according to her wish, she should not legally inherit any parental property.

Among Dalit families, the question of succession and inheritance rights on private property is almost immaterial, as a majority of Scheduled Castes in rural India continue to be landless, with barely any private property to fight over. And when they do, surveys show that Dalit women find it harder to access legal or social resources due to lack of financial stability, social standing and caste discrimination. Critics of India’s “progressive” gender justice movement have noted that reforms in land laws, much like other gender-related reforms, have failed to truly account for women from the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

The work done by NGOs and advocacy groups like WGWLO has led to a positive change in Gujarat, where the practice of adding a woman’s name to land records and documents while the father/husband/brother is still alive, and not after their death, has been implemented. “The ultimate goal is to make land and property ownership more accessible to women, and to strengthen the identity of women farmers. Why wait for the male relative’s death to give women some agency?”

Transferring land rights to women while the male relative is still alive, helps build financial agency and independence among women right from the beginning,” says WGWLO communications officer Megha. However, change has been slow. The process requires consent from the girls’ in-laws and families. Megha says most husbands and in-laws refuse immediately.

Rakhi Bose, a multimedia journalist and Assistant Editor (Digital) at Outlook India since May 2020, has a diverse reporting background spanning CNN News18, BBC Media, and Scoopwhoop (News), specializing in gender, minority rights, and intersectionality.

<https://www.outlookindia.com/national/how-indian-laws-on-property-ownership-succession-and-inheritance-are-rooted-in-inequality-magazine-221677>



## 8. 2 हत्याएं, 22 महीने, 1 अदालती कार्यवाही- उन्नाव में मृत दलित चचेरी बहनों के परिवार को अभी भी है न्याय का इंतजार

*Manvendra Singh / www.gaonconnection.com / December 11, 2022*

17 फरवरी, 2021 को उत्तर प्रदेश के उन्नाव में तीन नाबालिग दलित लड़कियों को कथित तौर पर ज़हर दे दिया गया था। इनमें से दो की मौत हो गई, जबकि एक बच गई। लगभग दो साल हो गए हैं और अब तक केवल एक अदालती कार्यवाही हुई है। तब से आरोपी भी गिरफ्त में हैं और मामले में कोई प्रगति नहीं हुई है।

बबुरहा (उन्नाव), उत्तर प्रदेश। 17 फरवरी, 2021 के दिन को वो जिंदगी भर नहीं भुला पाएंगे, 16 वर्षीय बेटी के पिता पड़ोस के गाँव से मजदूरी करने के लौटे थे। "हम सुबह सात बजे ही मजदूरी करने दूसरे गाँव निकल गए थे। शाम को 5 या 5:30 वापस आए तो देखा कि गाँव वाले हमारी 17 साल की बेटी और उसकी 13 साल की चचेरी बहन को दूढ़ रहे थे। मैं भी उनके साथ शामिल हो गया, "उन्नाव जिले के बबुरहा गाँव के रहने वाले पिता ने गाँव कनेक्शन को बताया। "मुझे पता चला की बरसीम काटने गई थीं, बस हम भी पाठकपुरा गाँव के उसी खेत में उन्हें बुलाने लगे, पास जाकर देखा तो खेत में तीनों बच्चियां बेहोश मिली सभी के हाथ दुपट्टे से बंधे थे। फिर वहां से उठा के चौराहे लाए, फिर वहां से उन्हें सरकारी अस्पताल ले गए वहां पता चला की हमारी बिटियां खत्म हो चुकी थी, "इतना कहकर 16 वर्षीय के पिता रो पड़ते हैं। वह दलित समुदाय से ताल्लुक रखते हैं। फरवरी 2021 में, उत्तर प्रदेश की राजधानी लखनऊ से लगभग 65 किलोमीटर दूर, बबुरहा गाँव, तीन नाबालिग दलित लड़कियों के रूप में हिल गया था, जो 13, 16 और 17 साल की चचेरी बहनें थीं, सभी एक खेत में बेहोश पाई गईं।

उनमें से दो - 13 वर्षीय और 16 वर्षीय - की अस्पताल में ही मौत हो गई, जबकि सबसे बड़ी बच गई। उन्हें कथित तौर पर उसी गाँव के 25 वर्षीय आरोपी विनय उर्फ लंबू और एक अन्य नाबालिग साथी द्वारा कीटनाशकों के साथ जहर दिया गया था।

लड़कियों के परिजनों की शिकायत है कि लगभग दो साल हो गए हैं और अदालती कार्यवाही कछुए की चाल से चल रही है। पिछले 22 महीनों में केवल एक अदालती कार्यवाही हुई है। आरोपियों के खिलाफ कानूनी कार्रवाई की धीमी गति से बच्चियों के परिजन नाराज हैं। इस बीच, मुख्य आरोपी विनय फिलहाल न्यायिक हिरासत में है, जबकि नाबालिग आरोपी तभी से बाल सुधार केंद्र में है। "अभी तक इस मामले में PW1 (प्राथमिक गवाही) का बयान हुआ है, जिस समय पीड़िता का बयान दर्ज किया जाना था, उस समय अदालत में हड़ताल थी, इसलिए

हम आगे की कार्यवाही की प्रतीक्षा कर रहे हैं, "पीड़ित लड़कियों के तरफ के वकील मुकेश वर्मा ने गाँव कनेक्शन को बताया।

नई दिल्ली स्थित अखिल भारतीय दलित महिला अधिकार मंच के लिए काम करने वाली एक कार्यकर्ता शोभना स्मृति ने कहा कि पिछले लगभग दो वर्षों में मामले को फैसले की दिशा में प्रगति करनी चाहिए थी, लेकिन ऐसा नहीं हुआ। उनके अनुसार, देरी देश में न्यायाधीशों और अदालतों की कमी के कारण हुई। "इस देश में न्याय वितरण प्रणाली को बीमार करने वाली बहुत सी चीजें हैं। और, दलित ग्रामीण क्षेत्रों में समाज के सबसे शोषित वर्गों में से हैं। ऐसे मामलों से तेजी से निपटा जाना चाहिए," स्मृति ने गाँव कनेक्शन को बताया। Also Read:Unnao Case : खरपतवार नाशक रसायन बना दलित लड़कियों की मौत का कारण, खेतों में काम के दौरान 78% महिला किसानों को करना पड़ता है यौन दुर्व्यवहार का सामना।

काम करने का ढंग पुलिस महानिरीक्षक (आईजीपी) लक्ष्मी सिंह ने 19 फरवरी, 2021 को एक प्रेस कॉन्फ्रेंस में कहा कि आरोपी विनय ने लॉकडाउन के दौरान लड़कियों में से एक (17 वर्षीय जो हमले में बच गई) से दोस्ती की थी और वे अक्सर मिलते थे। पुलिस अधिकारी के हवाले से कहा गया है, "जब लड़की ने उसके प्रस्ताव को अस्वीकार कर दिया और उसे अपना फोन नंबर देने से इनकार कर दिया, तो उसने उसे मारने का फैसला किया।" "अन्य दो लड़कियों ने भी उसी पानी की बोतल से पी लिया जिसमें कीटनाशक मिला हुआ था। विनय ने कहा कि उसने अन्य दो को पानी पीने से रोकने की कोशिश की, लेकिन ऐसा नहीं कर सका। जब लड़कियां बेहोश हो गईं, तो वह घबरा गया और मौके से अपने साथी के साथ भाग गया, "पुलिस अधिकारी ने कहा।

"हसिया-खुरपा, उनके सिर के पास पड़ा था। मेरे 16 साल के बच्ची के मुंह से झाग निकल रहा था। हम लड़कियों को प्रधान जी की कार में डॉक्टर के पास ले गए, लेकिन कुछ ही देर में उनकी मौत हो गई, "मां ने गाँव कनेक्शन को बताया। इस बीच, मृतक 13 वर्षीय लड़की की दादी ने कहा कि लड़की ने बचपन से ही मुश्किलों का सामना किया था। जब 11 दिन की थी तभी उसकी माँ मौत हो गई थी, कुछ सालों बाद इनके पिता ने दूसरी शादी कर ली, उनके दो बच्चे हैं। वो अपने बुजुर्ग बाबा-दादी के साथ रहती थी।

पोती का जिक्र होते ही 13 साल की बच्ची की दादी एक अंधेरी कोठी में भूसे के बीच रखे अपनी पोती के स्कूल बैग को उठा लाती हैं, और उसमें रखी किताबों के पन्ने पलते हुए रोते हुए वो बस इतना ही कहती हैं, "11 दिन की थी जब उसकी माँ की मौत हो गई थी, जैसे हमारी लड़की गयी वैसे वो भी जाए, हमसे क्या मतलब उसको फांसी मिलनी चाहिए।" धीमी कानूनी कार्यवाही से कार्यकर्ता नाराज राष्ट्रीय अपराध रिकॉर्ड ब्यूरो ने क्राइम इन इंडिया 2021 शीर्षक वाली अपनी रिपोर्ट में कहा कि महिलाओं के खिलाफ अपराधों के कुल 428,278 मामले दर्ज किए गए। वहीं रिपोर्ट के मुताबिक कुल 171,730 ऐसे मामले लंबित हैं। साथ ही, दलित महिलाओं के साथ बलात्कार (3,870) बलात्कार के कुल मामलों (31,677) का 12 प्रतिशत पाया गया। अनुसूचित जाति के बच्चों के बलात्कार के 1,285 मामले भी दर्ज किए गए थे। उन्नाव में दोहरे हत्याकांड के बारे में गाँव कनेक्शन से बात करते हुए, 2012 की दिल्ली गैंगरेप

पीड़िता की पैरवी करने वाली वकील सीमा कुशवाहा ने कहा कि अगर लैंगिक हिंसा के शिकार लोगों को न्याय मिलना है तो न्यायिक प्रणाली में निश्चित रूप से सुधार की जरूरत है।

कुशवाहा ने कहा, "इस मामले में, अपराधी हिरासत में हैं, लेकिन ज्यादातर, अदालतें आरोपियों को जमानत देती हैं और सजा की दर बहुत कम है।" "अपराधिक मानसिकता वाले अपराधियों को समाज में खुलेआम घूमने के लिए छोड़ दिया जाता है जो बड़े पैमाने पर नागरिकों की सुरक्षा को खतरे में डालता है। न्यायपालिका में इस तरह से सुधार किए जाने की जरूरत है कि अदालती कार्यवाही समय पर सुनिश्चित हो।"

अभियुक्तों का प्रतिनिधित्व करने वाले वकील अवधेश सिंह ने कहा कि मामले की कार्यवाही के पीछे COVID-19 महामारी एक निर्णायक कारक थी। "अदालतें लॉकडाउन के दौरान मुश्किल से काम कर रही थीं। मेरा मुवक्किल विनय जेल में है और उस पर NSA [राष्ट्रीय सुरक्षा अधिनियम, 1980] का आरोप लगाया गया था जिसे अदालत ने खारिज कर दिया। उन पर एनएसए के तहत किस आधार पर आरोप लगाया गया? दो लड़कियों की हत्या कैसे राष्ट्रीय सुरक्षा का मामला है? प्रशासन को अपनी मर्जी से ऐसे कानूनों का इस्तेमाल नहीं करना चाहिए, "उन्होंने गाँव कनेक्शन को बताया।

'कृषि परिवेश में महिलाओं को यौन हिंसा का सामना करना पड़ता है' 17 फरवरी 2021 की शाम जहर खाने वाली लड़कियां घर में पशुओं के लिए चारा लेने निकली थीं। 2018 में अमेरिकी बहुराष्ट्रीय कंपनी ड्यूपॉन्ट की कृषि शाखा, कोर्टेवा एग्रीसाइंस द्वारा किए गए एक अध्ययन के अनुसार, दुनिया भर में 78 प्रतिशत महिलाएं जो कृषि और संबद्ध गतिविधियों में लगी हुई हैं, उन्हें यौन हिंसा का सामना करना पड़ता है। 16 साल की मृतका की बहन समय 9वीं कक्षा में पढ़ती है, उसकी माँ बताती हैं, "छोटी बिटिया स्कूल जाती है, एक दो बार बिटियां के स्कूल जो की पाठकपुर में है वहां कुछ लोग आये और पूछने लगे कि यहां पढ़ने आती है तो साथ की लड़कियों ने मना कर दिया लेकिन उसके बाद डर की वजह से हमने लड़की को उस स्कूल नहीं भेजा उसका स्कूल बदल दिया अब मेरा लड़का स्कूल छोड़ने जाता है और लेने जाता है अकेले नहीं भेजते है।" उनका डर जायज है। गैर-सरकारी संगठन, चाइल्ड राइट एंड यू द्वारा प्रकाशित एजुकेटिंग द गर्ल चाइल्ड नामक एक रिपोर्ट के अनुसार, भारत में 25.2 प्रतिशत लड़कियां स्कूल छोड़ देती हैं क्योंकि उनके माता-पिता उन्हें घर से बहुत दूर भेजने से डरते हैं।

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<https://www.gaonconnection.com/gaon-connection-tvVideos/unnao-girl-dies-pesticide-poisoning-dalit-girl-crime-against-women-women-farmers-ncrb-data-ground-report-51483>



## 9. 10 years after Nirbhaya, how fearless are women? (Translated from Hindi)

*Preeti Agyaat / www.hastaksher.com / December 1, 2022*

I am rewriting an incident of December 16, 2021, in which a person says “There is a saying that if you can’t stop rape, just lie down and enjoy!” Hearing this, the so-called ‘respectable’ person sitting on the chair begins to laugh and then countless obscene voices join in this laughter. This was not the script of a C-grade film but an actual telecast of the living picture of shamelessness straight from the Karnataka Legislative Assembly. Yes, we women were once again humiliated by this disgusting laughter, which keeps haunting our ears every now and then. What is the difference between these men and would-be rapists, it's up to you to decide! I would just like to tell you that it all occurred on the 10th anniversary of the horrifying Nirbhaya incident! But what could these inhumane dead souls possibly have to do with it?

The Nirbhaya incident (16 December 2012) was the most gruesome and cruel incident which had shook the entire nation. In response, countless protests and mass movements took place across the country. Due to this outrage, changes were made in many sections of the law related to rape. Molestation and other types of sexual exploitation were also included in these sections. The need was felt for a fast-track court in which the decision takes relatively less time. In the same year itself, the POCSO Act 2012 came into existence for the protection of children from sexual harassment. The Juvenile Justice Bill was also passed.

As we know the culprits of Nirbhaya got a death sentence on March 20, 2020, but now the question still remains the same, that even after 10 years of that inhuman incident of Nirbhaya, how many more Nirbhayas will we have? How safe are women?

Superficially the scenario looks better but the following facts also must be known—

### **What do the statistics say?**

The report released this year (2022) by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) states that the rate of crime against women, which was 56.5% in 2020, has increased to 64.5% in 2021. This rate is calculated on the basis of the number of incidents per 1 lakh population.

According to this, 3,71,503 cases of crime against women were reported in the year 2020 while 4,28,278 cases were registered in 2021. There has been a 13% increase in registered incidents of rape. In the year 2020, this number was 28,046 which has increased to 31,677 in the year 2021.

Of these recorded figures of crimes against women, 7.40% are rape cases, 17.66% kidnapping, 20.8% assault, and 31.8% are abuse by husbands or relatives.

The list of registered crimes includes domestic violence, kidnapping, assault, murder, rape etc.

You might remember that in 2020 it was said that domestic violence had also increased due to Covid. But the increased figures clearly show that even after the pandemic, the situation remains disappointing.

### **Are criminals at all affected after the change in law?**

Absolutely not! Looking at the way new incidents are coming to light every day, it does not seem that criminals have any fear of being caught or punished. Rather, they would have strong faith in the laxity and slow-paced nature of the law, which aids the quick release of rapists in recent times. It is amazing that a crime has been committed but there is no one guilty! This is such a weak aspect of the justice system that even if the criminal accepts his crime, the case drags on in the courts for years. Many times, even a heinous criminal escapes because of a lack of sufficient evidence and witnesses.

Forget about professional criminals, unfortunately at this time we are also witnessing such brutal, abhorrent, and barbaric behavior that has crossed all limits of inhumanity. What is even more surprising is that these are ordinary-looking people whose acts of violence we cannot even imagine!

- If we take recent incidents, a piece of very shameful news has come out from the Kaimur district of Bihar. In this, some boys raped a minor girl student. Seeing the school principal passing by, the student pleaded for protection but he too raped her.
- In Delhi, a woman, along with her son, killed her husband, and then both of them kept throwing his pieces at different places every day. This was an incident similar to the Shraddha murder case but did not make headlines because there was no opportunity to create sensation here on religious grounds.
- In Azamgarh, a young man named Prince Yadav strangled his girlfriend Aradhana Prajapati to death. After that, the dead body was cut into five pieces and thrown into the well. The reason was that after Prince went abroad, the girl got married somewhere else. Now he was pressuring her to end the marriage.
- Ram Kishore Patel, a resident of Karondiya village of Shahdol district, murdered his wife Saraswati Patel with an axe. After that, her head and

torso were buried in different places. The reason given was suspicion of an illicit relationship.

- The body of a girl Ayushi Choudhary was found in a suitcase on the Yamuna Expressway near Mathura, who was killed and thrown away by her own father. The case was of honour killing.
- In the month of November itself, another such incident took place in which a young man Abhijeet Patidar murdered his girlfriend Shilpa Jharia in Mekhla Resort, Jabalpur. Later, using her social media account, he made a video and posted it. In this, he accused the girl of blackmailing.

This is just a glimpse of the events of the month of November, the list is endless. Think why only one story attracted the attention of the media. Is there any hope of justice for the rest? How scared the criminals should be, we have the answer.

### **How much has the attitude of society changed?**

Due to dissatisfaction with the judicial system, many such incidents have come to light in the last few years, where the public itself decided to punish the criminal, and the deadly term 'mob lynching' emerged. Politicians did not waste any time in taking advantage of this primitive behavior and mentality and started using crimes for their own benefit by Hindu-Muslimizing them. Which issue should be raised to what extent and how much should be suppressed, whose names should be hidden and whose should be exposed and shoved into public limelight, and which incidents should be put to rest and moved on ahead; For that, some media groups and I.T. cell remained ready to support with full dedication. An example of this has been given above with the events of November.

- In many incidents, marrying the rapist itself is put in the category of justice. To live a lifetime with a rapist is to relive the moment she was raped every day. But a section of the society feels that marriage has improved the life of the girl whereas it is clearly an undertaking related to the legal process to save a rapist. In which the so-called 'honor and prestige' of the family is also saved.
- Most often an attempt is made to hush up the matter by paying a huge amount of money and sometimes if a complaint is filed, the entire family is threatened to be killed. In some places, the family also accepts the offer in the name of 'respect in society or self-protection.' They also fear that if the news spreads, they will not be worthy of showing their face in society. Isn't it crystal clear? Here, it is not the criminal but the victim who is afraid that someone might find out.

- You may also remember the recent example in which about a dozen rapists were set free because of their 'good behaviour'. They were welcomed and aarti was also performed. So as long as the society has this perspective, the thought of reduction in crime is futile.

Perhaps this is the reason why we have stopped being surprised as to why rapists are not punished despite all the laws in a country where rapes happen every day! Death sentence seems to be a very distant thought. This insensitivity towards crimes is giving birth to a society that is no longer concerned with anyone except itself! The person will become aware only when he himself is affected or the world is speaking on that subject. This also increases the morale of criminals. Therefore, we can only pray that women remain safe.

### **Behaviour of political parties and media**

- Once in a while, listen to TV news carefully. There, among a hundred news stories, stories related to about fifty crimes are read emotionlessly like a list of household items. These are the same famous anchors who go around blaring political news, yet chanting praises of their beloved leaders and actors! Here even the habitual spectators, while gulping down their delicious meals, easily absorb all the happenings.
- Even in the newspapers, the news of crime against women is mentioned somewhere in the corner on the fifth-sixth page, suggesting “It is okay if you read it, otherwise there is no big deal in it!” What this means is that apart from a few high-profile/highlighted cases, others are not even considered worthy of discussion! Nor do they become part of any channel's debate. Now without being in discussion, justice will be in vain!

It is understandable for heads of state to be happy that crime rates have declined under their rule, but in the midst of discussions, when spokespersons smile and applaud their opponents by telling them, “Look! There have been so many murders and rapes in your place whereas in our place there have been fewer.’ Then the heart fills with sadness and anger. It is clear from such insensitive statements of the leaders that for them crime is just a statistic and the victim is an inanimate object.

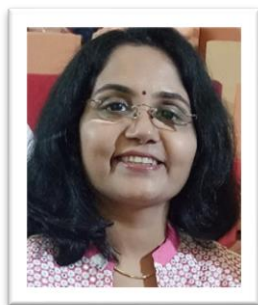
We also remember the faces of those smiling, roaming criminal leaders who, after raping, do not hesitate to destroy the entire family of that girl. Sometimes they try to hush up the matter by calling them small mistakes made by the boys and sometimes they point fingers at the victim's character by blaming her ‘revealing’ clothes. Regarding the character of women leaders, the views of the so-called Swamis also came to the fore many times. Do you recall these ‘religious’ leaders/politicians facing any penalty in any such matter?

Why would their reputation be spoiled? When almost everyone's thinking is so shallow and rotten! All such incidents are a golden opportunity for all the parties to level allegations and counter-accusations against each other and nothing else! When the Congress leader spoke, the BJP felt happy, when BJP spoke, a wave of happiness arose in the Congress camp.

Demand for punishment is always made for the opponent and efforts are made to save one's own side. This is the character of politics and the compulsion of the media, in which we all have to keep suffering.

In any case, when the focus is more on the pursuit of the criminal's religion and state than on the crime, then understand that giving justice is not their priority. Case file opens, closes. Amidst all this, the story of so many Nirbhayas gets buried without any trace. The day the criminal will be punished irrespective of religion, caste, and politics, only then will you understand that there is some hope left. Otherwise, most of the people who talk a lot about giving women their rights, respect and pretend to be faithful devotees of worshipping women are selfish hypocrites.

Well, the matter is about the data released by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), which should have been discussed in detail everywhere. Unfortunately, those incidents are yet to be brought into the limelight which were captured within the four walls of the house and were never recorded.



Preeti Agyaat is an award-winning author, editor, and founder of 'Hastakshar,' known for outspoken writing on women's issues and societal scenarios, honored by National Laadli Media and Gujarat Sahitya Academy.

<https://hastaksher.com/after-10-years-of-nirbhaya-incident-are-women-fearless-now-what-do-ncrb-figures-say/>

## 10. Isn't it high time our courtrooms became survivor-friendly? (Translated from Malayalam)

*Remya Harikumar / The Mathrubhumi Printing and Publication Co. Ltd  
/ July 16, 2022*

**Blurb - All facets of life are undergoing timely restructuring; we are witnessing a social transformation to the new-normal. But our judicial system remains outdated, our courtrooms archaic. Do we want this to continue? Isn't it high time we made courtrooms survivor-friendly?**

*"15 days. I had to stay in the courtroom from morning till evening, for 15 days, facing seven lawyers. Their questions, cross examination, physical assessment...I felt so alone. Totally alone. I was forced to go through that traumatic incident again and again. There, every second, I had to prove that I am innocent, that I had not done anything wrong, repeatedly. And, in those days, I realised that this was my battle, I alone had to fight it in that court for myself...sometimes it felt like I was waging a war against the world."*

### **2017 sexual assault case**

*"I was called for the trial years after the case was filed. My mind was whirling. I felt brave, I felt strong, and I was hopeful of getting justice for everything that happened to me. I was shaking as I entered the courtroom. Police, court.... everything was new to me. Still, I went to trial, determined to face those people who mercilessly hurt me physically and mentally. I was prepared to reveal everything, tell everyone what really happened. When I tell the truth to his face, he will finally understand the depth of his cruelty and my words will really pierce his mind- that was what I thought. But what really happened was this – I felt like running away. All those questions from the defending lawyers do that to you; you will just want to flee from that courtroom and never come back. Initially I answered their questioning boldly. Then their attempt was to weaken me mentally, to force to me to keep silent. They even asked me the colour of the discharge after intercourse. My whole body still trembles thinking of that harrowing time. It made me hate courtrooms."* - **A survivor who is now identified through the name of her native place. These words still haunt Kerala...**

How they travail in pain! From a complaint to a long-drawn-out trial, and finally to the verdict of justice... from a hapless victim to a gritty survivor...it is a crawl from one point to the other, the distance is endless, the journey hard. So proves their experience during different timelines.

In a way a survivor of rape is assaulted again inside the courtroom. She is subjected to a verbal rape! All through her life, she has to keep proving, *“I did not do any crime, this was done to me without my consent.”* Victim shaming accompanies her, so does mental trauma.

**She loses her face, her identity, and shrinks to the label of her gender, prefixed by a place’s name.**

Each step forward is a difficult task. All those girls and women who walked along this path, and those who are now following them, tell us the same thing- this journey is not easy. And the big question arises. What should be corrected?

*“We really should salute these survivors. When a woman decides to file a complaint, she has to go through hell before it reaches the trial stage. If she manages to be there, it is only because of her willpower and determination. It must have hurt her so deeply that she took that bold decision. And, women like her stand strong on that single decision never to back away, and they wage a war,”* says Adv Sapna Parameswarath, prosecutor and founder member of Punarjani Lady Lawyers Initiative.

For survivors, the period from the day the complaint is filed to the trial in court is one filled to the brim with challenges. Pressure mounts from the society as well as from the accused. Severe victim shaming follows. Very often, by the time the trial starts, the woman would have somehow managed to survive that phase and returned to a seemingly-normal life.

Unlike POCSO cases, rape cases involving adults as survivors are not fast-tracked and completed at high-speed. The court procedures force the survivor to relive those incidents which happened three or four years ago. That is the most traumatic phase each and every survivor faces.

So, the first thing we could do for them is to speed up the process so that the trial starts without further delay once the FIR is registered. As POCSO cases have been shifted to Fast-track courts, cases related to child survivors are now getting the verdict delivered quite fast. In fact, such courts were set up to ensure a speedier sentence and justice for crimes against women and children, but an expeditious trial still remains beyond the reach of women survivors.

**Cross examination or verbal rape?**

In a rape or sexual assault case, the key evidence is circumstantial. The report of medical examination is another crucial evidence. A rape accused can be convicted solely on the basis of the survivor’s testimony. But the court has to find her credible and trustworthy. And, that is where the survivor’s consent becomes important; she has to establish that the sexual activity was not consensual while the defence

lawyers try everything to refute it. So, the survivor has to face questions probing to prove her wrong. She will be asked to reveal if she resisted the assault, if yes how, whether she was injured doing so....

And each survivor responds to such loaded questions differently. Some of them breaks down in court, some would be really shattered, a few reacts violently. What the defence targets is to make the questioning so traumatic that the only thing the survivor wants is to quickly do some answering and flee from there.

The judge can forbid any questions or inquiries when they cross the limit of decency, but the defending lawyers would interpret this interference as an encroachment into their cross-examination. Prosecutor can also object to scandalous quizzing by the defence team; even if this attempt might not succeed in withdrawing a question, such a timely response helps restore the survivor's courage. And that is exactly what it is meant to do.

On the other hand, there are many courts that just refuse to interfere in such situations. But can anyone ever hold the court guilty of allowing a question? As per Sections 151 and 152 of Evidence Act, the court has the authority to control damaging questioning, but fixing the limit of decency is a task that courts find rather difficult.

In fact, Supreme Court has issued a set of guidelines related to this in the Nipun Saxena vs Union of India (2018) case. While delivering the verdict, the Supreme Court opined that "In courts, the victim is subjected to a harsh cross-examination wherein a lot of questions are raised about the victim's morals and character.

The presiding judges sometimes sit like mute spectators and normally do not prevent the defence from asking such defamatory and unnecessary questions. We want to make it clear that we do not, in any manner, want to curtail the right of the defence to cross-examine the prosecutrix, but the same should be done with a certain level of decency and respect to women at large."

### **That winding road... from complaint to trial (Box)**

When a sexually-assaulted woman goes to police, she first needs to lodge a complaint, detailing everything that happened to her. She has to sign this first statement after it is read to her. Police then register the FIR. The survivor gives her first statement while still in the shock of that traumatic incident. Her mental state at that time is likely to affect the statement too as she might miss out many facts. This could be rectified by giving a second statement (161).

The place where she was raped, the clothes she was wearing, whether her nude pictures were shot on mobile camera... all such details are recorded in 161. This does not need the survivor's signature. Within 24 hours she has to go for a medical

examination, and she should reveal to the doctor everything that happened. This medical report is crucial as evidence. Then, the statement is recorded by a magistrate (164).

In many cases when the complaint is filed months or even years after the incident of rape, there could be mistakes in the dates or years mentioned by the survivor. In such situations too, an additional statement is recorded.

It is after all these processes that the case finally reaches the court for hearing. Here, the first step is Examination-in-Chief where she has to repeat everything that she told the police. Then comes the cross-examination.

If the case has more than one accused, all their lawyers will quiz her. And the survivor has to face this volley of questions during their cross-examination.

Remya Harikumar serves as Content Writer & Assistant Content Manager at [www.mathrubhumi.com](http://www.mathrubhumi.com)'s Premium Desk since July 2014, known for award-winning series like 'Neetidevate Kanthurakoo,' recipient of various accolades such as the Press Council of India Award 2020.



## 11. Abused in shelters, spurned by kin: Why trafficking survivors need more than 'rescue'

*Mohua Das Menon / The Times of India / August 4, 2022*

*They may have escaped the clutches of their captors but the road to getting justice and getting accepted in society is full of challenges*

- In January, a 16-year-old girl who went missing from West Bengal's South 24 Parganas was rescued from the Malappuram district in Kerala where she had been confined as "wife" to the father of a three-year-old, whose wife had eloped.
- In March, 22 teenagers from Bihar were rescued from a brothel in West Bengal's Asansol.
- In June, ten trafficked children from Jharkhand, lured with promises of a better life, were rescued from Delhi.
- In July, Northeast Frontier Railway declared that their personnel had rescued 189 trafficked minors and women from trains and railway stations in the last three months.

One could keep going but you get the drift. There are endless stories of human trafficking rescues — of women, girls and a handful of minor boys from far flung corners of the country sold into brothels, construction sites and even middle class homes — flooding our news feed every day.

The world now knows about those caught in the trap of what is often referred to as modern day slavery but the stories of struggle after they manage to escape the clutches of their traffickers, remains largely untold.

Take the case of Kamla\* in Bengal — that with its porous international borders and several red light areas to meet with the demand and supply — tops the country as a trafficking hotbed according to NCRB's 2016 report. A week into the nightmare of being forced into flesh trade, Kamla found her way to a shelter home after being rescued. But her trauma did not end there. Kamla described suffering physical and mental abuse at the hands of senior residents — mostly women stuck in the home due to procedural issues or those seeking repatriation.

“I’d have to follow all their orders, wash their clothes and their utensils or else they’d beat me up. They would also abuse me sexually.” Support services to address her issues, too, were wholly inadequate. “When I tried to tell the shelter staff, they gave me sedatives in the name of vitamins to stop me from getting aggressive. I felt powerless and slit my wrist,” she says. Several months after Kamla escaped her captors, she still felt like a prisoner until the Child Welfare Committee’s (CWC) order for release came through, nine months too late. With a handful of CWC offices tackling all the cases during the pandemic, several survivors like Kamla have been trapped in shelter homes for months as opposed to a few weeks in which they would usually return home.

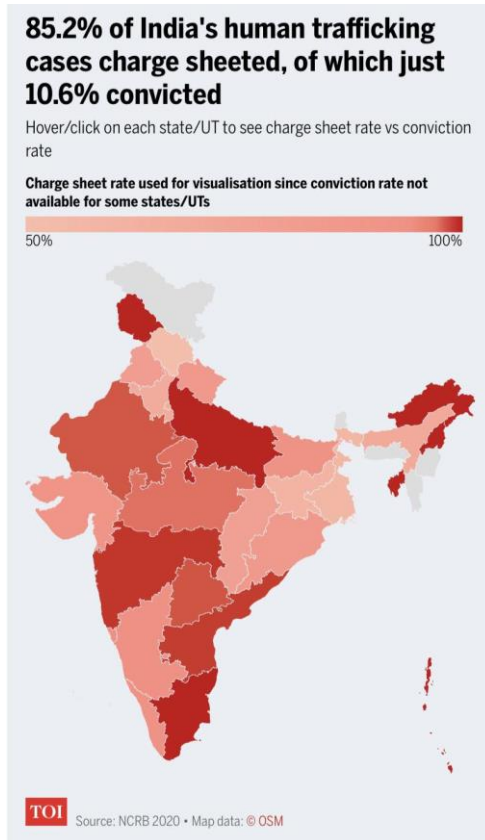
The story of Rina\* too, is not a tale of her trafficking, but what happened to her after rescue. A 14-year-old Rina who fled home trying to escape a violent step dad, was trafficked to a brothel in Meerut by a woman she met at the railway station. In six months, she was rescued and returned to her home in the South 24-Parganas. “Because I had come back from a red light area, my step father turned me away,” says Rina, who found refuge in a neighbourhood ‘aunty’ who took her in and promised her a job. “Instead, I was sold once again to a brothel, just a few kilometres from my village. There I was sexually abused and videotaped by the brothel owner to keep me from running away,” recalls Rina who was rescued after a year and moved to a shelter.

When three years went by and no charge sheet had been filed, Rina sought help from a special public prosecutor. “But he, too, took advantage of my situation and tried to molest me. The local police station refused to file my complaint because the person was an influential member of the bar council,” she said. Determined to not let it pass, Rina approached the women’s grievance cell who finally lodged a formal complaint. Now 19, Rina says: “This happened last year when I had just turned 18 so it became a bailable offence for the prosecutor who is now absconding. As for the two times I was trafficked, there’s still no charge sheet.”

Rina and Kamla’s plight is not unusual. The road to recovery for survivors of human trafficking is fraught with several challenges. Madhumita Halder, state consultant for prevention of trafficking, says that the CWC follows up on survivors but for only a year. “With an average of 700 children being rescued every month, it’s not possible for government officials to follow-up on each of them but CWCs have the power to direct other agencies to monitor.”

Until that happens, survivors find themselves languishing in shelter homes; others who manage to return home are most often spurned by their own family and neighbours. While schools are often reluctant to admit a trafficking survivor fearing their “loss of reputation”, for survivors living in the midst of their perpetrators, the terror continues.

Diya\*, 16 from Ramchandrapur was barred by her neighbours from fetching water from the common tubewell or entering the local temple after she was rescued from a dance bar in Bihar two years ago. “My tuition mates were warned by their parents to not sit beside me,” she says. For Taslima\*, 15 who was rescued from a brothel in Surat, it took several appeals to the school headmaster and an intervention by the District Child Protection Unit for her to be allowed back into her school.



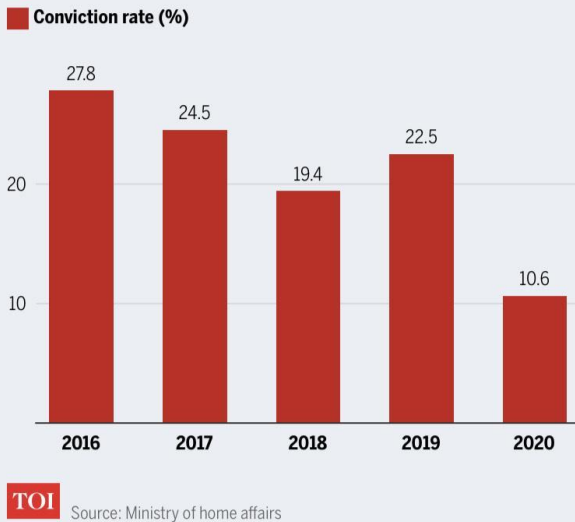
It’s been four years since Hafiza\* was trafficked and rescued from a brothel in Pune but the 27-year-old has still not had a court trial while her trafficker continues to roam the streets and threaten her with acid attack for refusing to withdraw her police complaint. “I helped the police nab four traffickers in the Pune brothel but my own trafficker is out on bail. I’ve been living in another village for the past two years out of fear,” she says.

The main reason perpetrators get easy bail and cases collapse is due to flimsy FIRs and because many survivors forgo medical examination or recording their statement under Section 164 of CrPC out of fear, insecurity and associated stigma, says Sulagna Sarkar who works with the nonprofit World Vision on reintegrating survivors from Bengal’s South 24 Parganas — an area prone to cyclonic disasters and a hunting ground for traffickers

who trick families and young girls with false promises of a job, marriage or better life. “Also, court trials can only begin based on the charge sheet. A lot of times the police and public prosecutors are hand-in-glove with traffickers who bribe them to purposely delay the chargesheet. Beyond 90 days, the accused is entitled to bail.”

Most survivors are also unaware of the protocols and entitlements following rescue. “It’s the duty of the first responders to inform them. But most survivors had never

## India's conviction rate in human trafficking cases is falling



heard of victim compensation until we took them under our care and we've come across several instances where it was the police who had actively discouraged the girls from recording their statement or taking the medical examination on the pretext of lifelong stigma. Later when the survivor is called for trial, there's no proof of the offence and her claims are dismissed," explained Sarkar.

While the fight for victim compensation can be arduous, court trials stretch for years before falling through the cracks of insubstantial evidence. Statistics shared by the Ministry of Home Affairs this year reveals that the conviction rate in human trafficking cases had consistently declined — from 27.8% in 2016 to 10.6% in 2020 — a trend that activists feel underscores the absence of robust evidence. And although trafficking cases span different states, the investigation is rarely interstate, thus leading to easy acquittal of traffickers.

“What needs to be advocated for is a comprehensive case management process for survivors of sex trafficking. If the government can assign NGOs to monitor survivors for at least two years till they're fully reintegrated within their community and a single window option for all services they're entitled to — health, psychosocial, legal, education, job placement and safety — these girls can get back on their feet with dignity,” says Joseph Wesley, who heads the anti-child trafficking project for World Vision India.

*\*Names changed to protect identity*

Mohua Das Menon, a Senior Assistant Editor at The Times of India, Mumbai, has dedicated 17 years to journalism, concentrating on gender, human trafficking, social development, education reforms, marginalized communities, arts, and cybersecurity.

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/they-escaped-their-traffickers-but-their-struggle-is-far-from-over/articleshow/93266010.cms>



## **12. Accused out on bail for 8 years; Tareekh-pe-tareekh for the minor victims' family in Budaun gangrape-murder case**

*Shivani Gupta and Abhishek Verma | [www.gaonconnection.com](http://www.gaonconnection.com) | October 7, 2022*

*What happens after the last reporter goes away? In a series titled 'Twice Cursed', Gaon Connection revisits the families of the victims of rape, now forgotten. Despite the 'stringent' POCSO Act, the family of two minor girls, who were allegedly gangraped and murdered in 2014 in Budaun, Uttar Pradesh, are still awaiting justice.*

### **Katra Sadatganj (Budaun) and Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh**

The lone wooden window in the doorless room is tightly shut. Barely any daylight can penetrate the gloom. And, Sohan Lal doesn't enter this room if he can help it.

Because this was his daughter's room who eight years ago was found hanging from a mango tree barely 600 metres away from his home in Katra Sadatganj village in Budaun district. Her cousin was also found hanging with her. It is alleged that they were gangraped and killed.

Every morning when Sohan Lal walks past that tree on his way to his four-bigha farm land (1 bigha = 0.25 hectare), he averts his eyes but the pain in his heart starts afresh.

His 12-year-old daughter and 14-year-old niece (brother's daughter) were found strung up on the tree with their dupattas, on May 28, 2014. They had left home the previous evening to relieve themselves in the open as they didn't have a toilet at home, and never returned.

"When I saw their hanging bodies, I collapsed," Sohan Lal recalled.

Sohan Lal and his younger brother Jeevan Lal, are fighting a legal case against the three accused in the Budaun gangrape and murder case. The trial is on under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012. They have been fighting for eight years.

This 'stringent' Act, meant to protect children from sexual offences, has a provision for speedy trial and stiff punishment. It was enacted after the 2012 Delhi gangrape and murder, the Nirbhaya case. An offence under the POCSO Act is non-bailable. And the trial should ideally conclude within a year of the offence.

But for the tens of thousands of families, like that of Sohan Lal, the reality is very different. As part of a new series – Twice Cursed – *Gaon Connection* goes back to the homes of forgotten rape victims. The story of the 2014 Budaun case is the second in the series.

“The (Budaun) court is over forty kilometres from our home. It costs us five hundred rupees every time we have to go there. We have a hearing every month, and invariably, on that day we are given another date – *tareekh pe tareekh*,” Jeevan Lal, father of the 14-year-old victim, told *Gaon Connection*. “And this has been going on for the past eight years,” he said, frustration all over his face.

Not very far from Sohan Lal and Jeevan Lal's home is where Urvesh Yadav, one of the accused lives.

On September 20, when *Gaon Connection* visited him at four in the evening, he was sitting on the verandah with friends. The air was thick with the smell of alcohol.

“I was in jail for three months. But I came clean in the lie detector test,” Yadav said. “I did not know anything about the incident. I was sleeping in my house at that time,” he told *Gaon Connection*.

Since the incident, Yadav got married and has fathered a child. “*Koi tension nahi humko* (I am not worried),” he smiled.

But a look at the official data under the POCSO Act is anything but assuring. In July this year, the central government informed the Lok Sabha that as many as 47,221 cases were registered in the year 2020 under the POCSO with a conviction rate of 39.6 %. That same year, Uttar Pradesh (where Budaun is located) topped the list with 6,898 registered cases, followed by Maharashtra (5,687) and Madhya Pradesh (5,648).

While the conviction rate is about 40 %, cases under POCSO Act with pending trials are on the rise. By the end of 2020, there were 170,000 cases pending trial, which was 57.4 % more than those in 2018 (108,129), Union minister for women and child development Smriti Irani informed the Lok Sabha.

“The Act [POCSO] provides for the establishment of special courts for the purpose of speedy trial, wherein the matters are to be disposed of within one year,” Delhi-based Pragya Parijat, a POCSO lawyer practising at the Supreme Court of India, told *Gaon Connection*.

“But, generally, lengthy procedures, complicated matters, and structural lacunae make it difficult to dispose of the matter in a speedy manner in the fast-track court,” she pointed out.

**May 27, 2014.**

Like so many thousands of families in the villages, Lals did not have a toilet either in their village that is about 300 kilometres from the state capital Lucknow. So the girls had gone out to answer the call of nature.

“I heard cries for help and when I went to the spot where the voices came from, I saw Pappu (the main accused) along with three other men. When I asked what was happening, Pappu pointed a *tamancha* (gun) at me... I rushed to the home of Sohan Lal to tell them,” Babu Ram, a relative of the victims, who is the main eyewitness in the case, told *Gaon Connection*.

According to the victims' family, Sohan Lal went to the Katra Sadatganj police station and begged for help. But he was asked to come back in the morning. By then the two girls were dead.

Both the police persons were suspended, but their suspension was revoked and they are back on duty, Budaun-based Syed Ainul Huda Naqvi (Kaukab), the lawyer representing the victim's case, said.

All the three accused in the case were summoned under Indian Penal Code (IPC) Section 363, 366, 354 and Section 7 /8 of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act. However, all three were released after three months of imprisonment, and they are on bail.

### **Budaun trial: Eight years and still counting...**

In the Budaun case, initial investigation and the postmortem report dated May 28, 2014, accessed by *Gaon Connection*, suggested rape. The accused — Pappu Yadav, Avdhesh Yadav, and Urvesh Yadav — were jailed on June 1, 2014, within four days of the incident.

However, in its November 2014 report, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), which was investigating the Budaun case, ruled out gangrape. The main eyewitness Babu Ram reportedly failed the lie detector test.

Meanwhile, phone records of about 400 calls were found between the main accused Pappu Yadav and one of the victims giving rise to speculation about an affair between them. There were also rumours that the death of the victims was an honour killing.

On February 2, 2015, the CBI filed its closure report at the Badaun court, which was dismissed on October 28 the same year when the lawyer representing the victims protested against it and presented additional evidence.

“Only one accused (Pappu) was summoned but he is also out on bail. I have collected evidence to summon the remaining accused. When the CBI ruled out rape, the accused were released. The argument on the case is pending,” Naqvi said.

“Evidence must be recorded at the earliest and these accused must be convicted,” he added.

### **How effective has POCSO been?**

The POCSO Act, 2012 was enacted to provide a robust legal framework for the protection of children from offences of sexual assault, sexual harassment and pornography. The framing of the Act seeks speedy trial of offences through designated Special Courts.

Under the POCSO Act, whoever commits "aggravated penetrative sexual assault" shall be punished with rigorous imprisonment for a term which shall not be less than ten years but which may extend to imprisonment for life and shall also be liable to fine.

An offence under POCSO Act is a non-bailable offence. “But it does not mean that bail will not be granted. It means that one has to seek bail from the court,” Renu Mishra, a Lucknow-based lawyer explained *Gaon Connection*.

“The objective of speedy trials with which this law was enacted has completely failed,” Rohit Tripathi, a lawyer in the Lucknow High Court, told *Gaon Connection*. “We talk about expeditious trials but we give bail to the accused. This makes the accused tension free. If we end the bail process, then trial can be fast,” Tripathi said.

“If that happened, witnesses would be independent and without fear. Granting bail is a major loophole which defies the objective of the Act. This should end,” he emphasised.

There are other problems with the POCSO Act. “A detailed study of the law [POCSO] shows that it tends to deal with only the offence of sexual assault committed against the child and not with the murder committed after rape. In such cases, where murder has been committed after the rape, the matter is dealt according to both POCSO Act and IPC,” POCSO lawyer Pragya Parijat said.

What was promised on paper with the POCSO is not reflected in the application, said Renu Mishra, the executive director of Association for Advocacy and Legal Initiative (AALI), an institution that provides free legal aid to women in Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand and Bihar.

“A weak investigation by the police, delays in medical reports sent by doctors and delays by lawyers and judges is added assault for a survivor. Police, doctors, judges,

lawyers are insensitive and they make this system weak and the accused gets off free,” she said.

“The statements of survivors are not recorded on camera, which is against the Act. They tend to forget details when asked a number of times. Witnesses also back off. Therefore, the lower conviction rates. Many times people withdraw cases,” Mishra added.

Highlighting issues that police officers face while dealing with cases under the POCSO Act, RK Chaturvedi, former Inspector General of Police, Uttar Pradesh, told *Gaon Connection*, “More than 50-70% witnesses back off from their statements in the courts. It becomes difficult to bring independent witnesses then. Investigation officers also keep changing which affects the quality of investigation. Besides, the casual approach of the police doesn't help. Many cases also go unreported.”

The need of the hour is to have a dedicated unit where all the work related to such cases is carried out. “There should be a system where the medical report is furnished within 24 hours, enquiry happens within 12 hours of receiving the application, and investigation is carried out in the first 90 days. The trial should be completed within a year,” Chaturvedi said.

It's been 10 years since the enactment of the POCSO Act, but the latest National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) 2021 data shows the overall conviction rate in POCSO Act is only 32 %.

“After our daughters were raped and killed, the government built a toilet at our home. If we had a toilet, our daughters would have been alive, it's been eight years. We lost our daughters. Now I fear for my granddaughter,” the mother of one of the Badaun victims, cried.

Shivani Gupta, a correspondent at The Better India, adeptly covers women empowerment, gender issues, health, and societal challenges with five years of experience.

<https://www.gaonconnection.com/lead-stories/badaun-gangrape-allegations-2014-budaun-minor-children-rape-pocso-act-conviction-gender-violence-crime-rape->



## 13. How Kashmir's half-widows are denied their basic property rights

*Safina Nabi / www.scroll.in / January 26, 2022*

If the trauma of their loss wasn't cruel enough, the wives of disappeared men are cut out of inheritances and left to fend for themselves.

Thirty winters have passed since Atiqa Begum, 59, last held her husband's hand. Married at the young age of 19, Atiqa spent the next eight years of her life happily with her husband, who worked as a contractual employee in Kashmir's power development department.

The couple lived in Zogiyar village in Baramulla district with their four children. The youngest was four months old when a knock on their front door on a cold February night in 1990 changed the course of their life.

"We were woken up by loud banging on our front door that night," Atiqa recalled. "Terrified, I held my husband's arm tightly with one hand and my youngest daughter with another. My husband assured me that nothing would happen and went out to check the door. But he never returned."

In 1989, an armed movement for secession from the Indian state took shape in Kashmir – with it came a heavy presence of the Indian military. Kashmiri's lives were thrown in a vortex of conflict, killings and disappearances. While many families accused Indian security forces of taking away innocent civilians, the government claimed most men who went missing went away voluntarily, to join militant groups.

Atiqa, however, distinctly recalls watching a group of men forcibly take her husband away. "Though their faces were covered with black masks and one could see nothing but their eyes, I remember that they were all wearing army uniforms," she said.

Despite the best efforts of her father and extended family members, Atiqa, then 27 years old, could find no trace of her husband. Multiple trips to law enforcement agencies bore no results. The family looked for him in military camps and prisons within and outside Kashmir, but received no information. "My father passed away with this grief in his heart that he was not able to find my husband and bring him back home to me," she said.

The absence of a husband weighs heavily on women in traditional and patriarchal societies such as Kashmir's. With no separate source of income for herself or her children, Atiqa was left at the mercy of her in-laws.

Much to her indignation, Atiqa's in-laws suggested she marry her husband's younger brother. "Another marriage would have brought in more responsibilities and there would have been expectations of more children," she said. "I was also thinking, if my husband actually came back one day, then what would happen."

She added, "I had four children and the youngest was just four months old. The future of my children was more important than mine. I could not take such a drastic decision."

Her in-laws accepted her decision and also assured her that she would be given her husband's share in the family property. However, things changed after her father-in-law, who was sympathetic towards her, passed away in 2015.

"After the demise of his father, my brother-in-law distributed the family property among all siblings, including his sisters," she said. "He did not give my children my husband's share, citing a twisted interpretation of Islamic laws of inheritance."

Atiqa now lives in Zogiyar with her oldest son, who is married and has a daughter of his own – her younger son and younger daughter, who are unmarried, also live with them.

Her children have had to struggle to build their lives. When her husband disappeared, their oldest son was eight years old. At first, Atiqa's father managed the expenses of his education – but when Atiqa's father died, her son had to cut his schooling short and take up work as a daily wager.

Over time, her younger children, too, had to leave school and train in tailoring and needlework so that they could contribute to household expenses.

In contrast, their cousins studied well and secured government employment. One of their cousins works in the district magistrate's office, while the other one is a teacher.

"My children lived a miserable life," Atiqa said. "They struggled and worked hard in the hope that the share from the property would ease our difficulties someday, but it feels like we were waiting for another misery to befall us."

Atiqa's family lives in a roughly constructed three-room single-storey house. Its makeshift tin roof is covered with a white plastic sheet, to keep water out.

As we were walking out after our conversation, she pointed towards a three-storey house some distance away, with white windows, and crimson red walls.

"That's my brother-in-law's house," she said. "When I look at that house I feel that it is painted with my husband's blood."

Atiqa's story mirrors the plight of countless women in Kashmir, whose husbands disappeared and could never be traced. Since the men were not declared dead, their wives spent decades waiting for them in uncertainty – Kashmiri media coined the term “half-widows” for them.

According to the Srinagar-based Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons, or APDP, more than 8,000 men disappeared in the region during the tumultuous period between the late 1980s and the early 2000s. The state government has at different points declared widely varying figures for the number of disappeared men, ranging from 1,105 to 3,931.

Some believe that mass unidentified graves, which have been found spread across the region, may be linked to these enforced disappearances.

In 2011, noting that 2,730 unidentified bodies were buried in 38 sites across northern Kashmir, the state-run human rights commission directed the state government to investigate the mass graves. But in the decade since then, no larger probe has been conducted.

Local organisations like APDP, which have been fighting for justice for the families of disappeared people, believe that these graves may hold answers for many of Kashmir's half-widows. While there are no official estimates of the number of half-widows, in 2011, the human rights group Jammu and Kashmir Coalition of Civil Societies pegged the number at around 1,500.

For women whose husbands disappeared, there has been no closure. The emotional pain of losing their husbands has been compounded by the economic hardship that came with the loss of the family's sole earning member.

The ambiguity surrounding the men's disappearance meant their wives were unable to access any government help. “We have to understand that there is no way for the wives to try and secure employment, as many state agencies often brand the disappeared men as alleged terrorists, leaving them with little options,” said Dr Samreen Hussain, a legal scholar who has worked on property rights of women in Islam.

But if the government has let them down, Kashmir's patriarchal society has not been kind to the women either. The cruellest blow has often been dealt by their own families, who have cheated them of a rightful share in the family property.

Until the government disallowed public gatherings in the aftermath of the abrogation of Jammu and Kashmir's special status under Article 370 in August 2019, a group of families used to gather at Srinagar's Press Club every month to voice their concerns about their disappeared loved ones.

Tahira Begum was a regular in this group.

Nearly 20 years have passed since Tahira, now 45, last saw her husband. In 2002, her husband, a mason in Baramulla's Uri village, went to work one day but never returned. He worked at the Uri power station, which was under the control of the army – and so she suspected that the army had taken him away.

Tahira said she “searched for him everywhere, including in army camps, jails, and even torture centres but there was no trace of him.” The family filed a missing persons report 20 days after his disappearance, but it did not help.

“Nobody was able to trace him,” she said. “How is it possible that police were not able to track a person in all these years?”

The International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance codifies individuals' right to be free from enforced disappearance in all circumstances. Since India signed but did not ratify the convention, it is not entirely bound by its provisions. In practice, India often contradicts the aim and intent of the convention, particularly in Kashmir, by offering impunity to those behind these enforced disappearances. For instance, if a missing person is ever located, the armed forces personnel responsible may be exempt from prosecution in civil courts under the Armed Forces (Jammu and Kashmir) Special Powers Act, 1990 – leaving no hope for justice or redressal.

Tahira, who is associated with the Jammu Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society, and works on the issue of disappeared persons, doesn't even hope for justice for herself – but wishes she could get some information.

“At this point, I just want to know what happened to my husband,” she said. “I feel he is around, and I can still smell him. But if he is dead, I want to know where he is buried so that my children and I have an address where we can go to mourn. Our sons can visit their father's grave and offer a prayer. This is why I will keep fighting for him till I am alive.”

But before she became part of a larger, public fight for justice, Tahira had to wage a quieter battle at home.

Her story played out as it does in many patriarchal families: her husband's disappearance led to the erosion of her agency and her in-laws began misbehaving with her and picking fights with her frequently. Within forty days, she said, they told her to remarry and leave the house. If not, they warned her that they would force her out.

She had reason to worry for her children's welfare in the house. “My in-laws had mentioned that I should send my children to work as labourers,” she said.

Tahira left, along with her three sons. She moved away from Uri to Srinagar in search of better employment opportunities, and to give her children a better life. She

took up several odd jobs at tailoring centres, beauty parlours, and other workplaces, before a local rights group helped her train as a beautician. Her three sons, meanwhile, lived and studied in orphanages as she moved from one job to another, seeking better opportunities.

“My life changed within an instant. From a homemaker who lived with her three loving sons and a husband, I became a half-widow who was forced to leave her children in orphanages,” she said. “I had no choice, because I wanted to ensure they had a roof over their heads and food to eat.”

She added, “My sons would miss me, crave for my presence, and ask me to take them along whenever I visited them in these orphanages. But I had to be stoic. Despite being clueless, I had to assure them that everything would be better and I would be able to take them home someday.”

In 2013, she applied for a loan to build her own home. Her sons moved into her rented accommodation the same year. Over the next three years, she gradually built her house, in Srinagar’s Shalteng area. In 2016, the family moved into the house, where they now live. Her eldest son is in his second year of college, while her middle son is in the twelfth standard – both also work part-time to help manage the family’s finances. Her youngest son is in the tenth standard.

In all this, there was no help from her husband’s family. “Eventually, the family disowned us, refusing my children a share in their family inheritance,” she said.

Like hundreds of other half-widows Tahira did not consider putting up a fight. “When I left Uri, I had no resources to live or take care of my children. A legal fight would have been devastating for me,” she said. “I have some resources now but I do not want to burden myself with these legal issues. I am grappling with depression and have suffered immensely in the last 20 years. I want to live in peace and help other half-widows who are struggling.”

In India, there is no uniform inheritance law. “We have religion-based succession laws,” said academic and author Jaya Sagade, who has written about the impact of such laws on women.

Under Islamic succession laws, Tahira’s children were at a considerable disadvantage.

According to one law, “a person is considered dead when there is no information on their whereabouts for seven years,” explained Habeel Iqbal, an advocate who has worked extensively in the area of Islamic inheritance law. And under another law, “if a man dies while his father is alive, the children of the deceased will not have a share in the grandfather’s assets.”

The majority of land ownership in Kashmir comes from such ancestral roots, according to Iqbal, but the children of the men who disappeared find it hard to get their share in family property “because their father is considered dead in the lifetime of their grandfather,” he explained.

Children like Tahira’s are further shut out because Islamic law lays down strict rules about how property can be distributed.

Except for Muslims, all other religious communities in the country “are entitled to dispose of their entire property by making a will according to their choice,” Sagade said. But, as Iqbal explained, according to Islamic law, two-thirds of a Muslim’s property must go to the direct heirs, and only one-third can be disposed of at the owner’s discretion.

However, Dr Samreen Hussain, who teaches at Dr Ram Manohar Lohiya National Law University in Lucknow, pointed out that the grandfather can still ensure that the grandchildren receive a fair share – either by making a gift deed of property during his lifetime, or allocating the inheritance of the one-thirds that it is at his discretion to them through what is called a “mandatory will”.

The mandatory will is a document that fulfils a tenet of Sharia law, whereby a property owner has to pass on the one-third discretionary portion of his property to those in his family who are not direct heirs and are in need. As per the law, the owner has some discretion to determine who such people might be. But in several Islamic countries, like Turkey and Syria, the governments have made it mandatory in cases where a father dies, for a grandfather to will this one-third of the deceased’s property to his grandchildren, who would otherwise be left out of the inheritance.

Though this is broadly in line with the principles of Sharia law, it is rarely followed in India.

There is another route under Sharia law through which children can claim some support for themselves: they can demand “maintenance” from their grandfather, which can take the form of a share in property.

But here, complex guardianship laws get in the way. “Under Islamic law, a guardian is supposed to take care of the child and fulfil their basic needs such as food, health and education, and this responsibility mostly lies with the male members of the family,” Hussain explained. So when the father dies, she pointed out, it is the grandfather who becomes the guardian, and then the eldest uncle. It is only if there are no uncles, or they are unwilling to look after the child, that guardianship passes to the mother. Technically, Hussain noted, it is only at this stage that the mother can on behalf of the children claim maintenance from the family.

Male family members often misuse this system to avoid paying maintenance to a woman and her children, Hussain said. “The uncles and grandfathers will claim guardianship to shirk their responsibilities.”

Iqbal, the advocate, explained that the family “will claim to be their guardians and yet fail to discharge the duties of a guardian. Sometimes the children of those disappeared have often been found to be living a life of indigence despite these ‘guardians ’being there.”

Children who are exploited in this way are often too young to know their rights. The mothers often lack the education and resources to fight on their behalf.

“So far, there are no mechanisms in place to transfer the ownership of the disappeared man’s property or assets to his wife to make her financially independent. Hence, the cycle of abuse and trauma for the woman continues indefinitely,” Hussain said.

While in theory, children of a disappeared man at least had the option of trying to claim maintenance from their family, their mothers were completely left out in the cold. They were not entitled to receive any inheritance or claim any maintenance from the family. Women with children could receive indirect support that the family gave the children as maintenance, but those who hadn’t given birth to children found themselves completely bereft of support.

Further, the women were also not allowed an easy route to remarriage.

All major schools of thought in Islam, including the Hanafi, Maliki, Shaafi, Hanbali, and Jafria schools, provide different guidelines on the practice of remarriage when a husband disappears. While the Hanafi school states that a woman should wait for 90 years after her husband’s disappearance, different scholars of the Maliki school set the waiting period at a more pragmatic four or seven years.

In 2015, the Jammu and Kashmir government issued a circular that said that a half-widow had to wait seven years after the disappearance of her husband to remarry. This was in conflict with a landmark judgement by a Kupwara court on December 31, 1993, which granted a woman named Hamida permission to remarry four years after her husband had disappeared.

A congregation was organised in 2015 to discuss the question. Eight ulemas, or religious scholars, from different schools of thought of Islam participated in the event, along with members of civil society, APDP representatives, and half-widows. After discussion, the ulemas expressed a joint opinion that half-widows could remarry after four years of their husbands ’disappearance.

However, the move was too little, too late. It had been over two decades since enforced disappearances began disrupting the lives of the state’s half-widows.

For these women, this move brought little relief. By this time, most were planning their children's marriage or tending to their grandchildren. Very few of them wanted to get married again.

***“How would a new marriage at such an age help me?” Atiqa said. “I am old and want a peaceful time now. I already had a difficult time being a half-widow and a single mother all these decades. I had married off one of my daughters and was planning my son’s wedding when the ruling came.”***

What many of the women want is to improve their existing lives and ensure that their children get their due. “As soon as my father-in-law dies, I am sure my brother-in-law will disown us to ensure that when the family assets are distributed, we don’t get our share,” said Haseena Begum, a resident of Delina village, in Baramulla.

Haseena Begum’s husband was taken away by security forces in 2000. “The armed forces had local people along with them when they came looking for my husband that night,” said Haseena, who is now 50. “As the men dragged my husband out, we even had an argument with the forces, but they took him anyway. The next morning when we went to the Army camp, they denied everything.”

She looked for her husband everywhere for years but could not find him.

Haseena’s in-laws have given her two rooms in their old wood-and-mud ancestral house in Delina – the rest of the house is unused. But she is anxious about the future.

***“My father-in-law has six sons,” she said. “All of them have their own houses and land that they cultivate, but I have nothing except these two rooms.”***

She explained that she has been asking her father-in-law to complete legal documentation that would distribute his assets equally. “While he has been giving me verbal assurances, there is nothing on paper,” said Haseena, whose four children live with her. “How can one rely only on assurances?”

But it isn’t just the husband’s family that lets women down – often, even their own families are not supportive of their needs.

Naseema Begum’s husband disappeared in 2002. Her husband worked as a painter in summers and as an auto-driver in winters. One summer day, he left their home in the Fateh Kadal area of Srinagar, to carry out some painting work, and never returned. When Naseema searched for him the same evening, she found out that he had never reached the place of work. She checked with all her relatives and filed a police complaint, but her husband never came back.

In the two decades since, Naseema, now 40, has worked as a domestic worker and taken care of her daughter, as well her husband’s mother and disabled brother, who all lived in the same house.

After her mother-in-law died, Naseema’s brother insisted that she either marry her brother-in-law, or move to her maternal village of Grindwan, around 70 km away from Srinagar. He felt that her cohabiting with a man who was not her husband would damage the “family honour”.

***“I had no option but to shift to my native village and live there, as my brother was adamant that I could not live in the same house with my disabled brother-in-law without marrying him,” she said.***

Once she moved out, her father-in-law’s sister seized the family property, she said, refusing to give Naseema’s daughter a share in it. “We filed a case in the Kupwara court, which has been going on for a decade now without any outcome,” Naseema said.

Meanwhile, in her native village, Naseema managed to construct a two-room house for herself and her daughter with the help of local organisations, such as APDP. But her brother began eyeing the house and interfering in her domestic matters. She recounted that he even interfered in the matter of her daughter’s marriage. “I wanted to marry my daughter to someone who could live with us here but my brother objected to that as well, so I had to marry her in a different village,” she said.

Naseema now lives alone in her two-room house.

“My husband had a wish to build a house and live in this village,” Naseema said. “I fulfilled that wish by building these two rooms but I have a strong feeling that I will die alone the way I lived alone.”

Safina Nabi is an independent Kashmir-based multimedia journalist covering South Asia, focusing on conflict, human rights, gender, health, culture, and the environment; featured in Guardian, Al Jazeera, Slate, Vice, among others; honored with grants and fellowships from Pulitzer Center, Reporters Without Borders, Dart Center, and Tactical Tech.

<https://scroll.in/article/1015849/how-kashmirs-half-widows-are-denied-their-basic-property-rights>



## UNVEILING HARMFUL SOCIAL PRACTICES

Gender, social norms, and harmful practices intricately shape societies, perpetuating inequality and discrimination rooted in traditional beliefs. In India, son preference contributes to skewed sex ratios, pre-birth sex selection, and the abandonment of newborn girls, fostering gender-based violence. **Arjun Parmar** investigates the alarming trend of abandoning baby girls, with 602 reported cases in the last decade in developed states like Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Delhi. Social biases, economic pressures, and a preference for sons drive this issue, leading families, particularly those with multiple children, to resort to abandonment due to societal pressures and financial constraints.

Dowry, another deeply rooted tradition, reinforces the notion of women as commodities, undermining autonomy and perpetuating unequal power dynamics. **Nikita Jain** reveals the persistence of dowry-related violence in society, reporting over 6,700 dowry-related deaths in 2021 with a 25% rise in complaints. Despite legal measures such as the Dowry Prohibition Act enacted in 1961, the low conviction rate points to compromises and slow trials. Nikita counters the argument that the law is misused, emphasizing the underreporting of genuine cases due to threats, tedious legal procedures, and social pressure leading to compromises or withdrawals.

Less visible but equally harmful are the discriminatory practices in food distribution, which further exacerbate gender disparities in health and well-being, overlooking women and girls' nutritional needs. **Pratyush Prashant** asserts that true equality can only be achieved when there is parity in food distribution, urging women to assert their rights to equal and nutritious meals within their families.

Lack of education limits the opportunities and aspirations of girls. Yet, access to education remains a significant challenge for girls, reflecting the undervaluation of women in society. **Divya Goel** shares a heartwarming story of two girls overcoming obstacles to access education. However, it serves as a poignant reminder that quality education remains elusive for many girls in our society.

**Sahil Pradhan** highlights the paradox in a society that celebrates menstruation in festivals but stigmatizes and discriminates against menstruating women. Menstruation stigma, pervasive and detrimental to well-being and dignity, results from cultural taboos and misconceptions. Breaking this stigma requires comprehensive education, open dialogue, and promotion of menstrual hygiene.

In a society where marriage is a norm, societal stigma against single individuals, particularly women, perpetuates harmful stereotypes and pressures conformity to

traditional expectations. **Jashvitha Dhagey** exposes the challenges faced by single women in securing safe and affordable housing in cities, limited by discrimination, intrusive questioning, and restrictive conditions. Initiatives like multipurpose housing with community spaces can address these issues, fostering inclusivity, empowering women in the workforce, and providing access to work opportunities.

Gender, social norms, and harmful practices intersect to perpetuate inequalities, hindering social progress. Addressing these issues necessitates a multi-faceted approach encompassing education, legal reforms, and cultural shifts. By challenging harmful norms and advocating for equality, media can create a more supportive environment for women's rights and equality.

## **14. Why girls are abandoned in so called ‘developed’ states including Gujarat? (Translated from Gujarati)**

*Arjun Parmar | www.bbc.com/gujarati | March 7, 2022*

A new-born girl, who was found buried alive at Gambhoi in Himmatnagar in Sabarkantha district on August 4, died after seven days of treatment.

Primary investigation revealed the cause of death as cardiac arrest.

It is to be noted that this incident created a stir in the entire Gujarat. Her parents were also arrested on the charge of burying the girl alive.

Talking about the official data on the abandonment of girl children, one girl child is abandoned every six days in the so-called developed states of the country, including Gujarat.

The data received under the RTI act reveals that hundreds of daughters were abandoned on the streets in the past few years in Gujarat, Maharashtra and Delhi. Among which some new-borns died not being able to face this harsh situation.

BBC Gujarati spoke to some experts to investigate the reasons for this trend. Before that let us know with the help of some cases how this disturbing trend is becoming more and more widespread.

Several such incidents came were reported by the local media in just one year.

Despite numerous efforts by the government, non-governmental organisations and civil society, such incidents occur frequently.

In response to an RTI by BBC Gujarati, it was revealed that 602 new-born baby girls were found abandoned in the last ten years in the so-called developed states of Gujarat, Delhi and Maharashtra.

Only these three states have reported one new-born baby girl is abandoned every six days.

We tried to investigate the reasons contributing to such a trend.

### **Incidents of girl child being abandoned**

According to the information received in the RTI, from the year 2011-12 to 2020-21, 150 in Gujarat, 97 in Maharashtra while 355 new-born girls were found abandoned in Delhi.

Talking about this, Ghanshyam, a social worker of Jalandhar's Bhai Ghanaiyaji Charitable Trust, says, "For the last 10 years, I have been associated with an organisation that takes care of orphans. In the past few years, there has been a change in the mindset of abandoning daughters. But a lot more needs to be done in this direction."

Ghanshyam continues, "Based on my experience, I can say that people still tend to abandon daughters more than sons. For which social reasons including economic factors are responsible. Chief among these factors is the craze for sons in Indian society."

### **Why daughters are abandoned?**

Prakash Kaur, who runs an organisation for abandoned children called 'Unique Care' in Jalandhar, Punjab, calls this a very serious social problem and says, "Girls are abandoned by their relatives more than boys. Our social system treats the daughter as a burden. Society's stunted intelligence, low education and limitations of educational system are mainly responsible."

Prakash Kaur has also received the 'Padma Shri' award in the year 2018 for working for the welfare of abandoned children.

Prakash Kaur says, "Less educated parents don't have an understanding of family planning. In order to lessen the strain on the family parents with many children resort to such measures and more often than not girl children are the first to fall prey of such ill practices."

She considers social prejudice to be responsible for such a sad trend and says, "Even today in our society, a son is considered to be the one who takes the clan forward, the name bearer. While the girl child is considered a burden. Whether we believe it or not, this is the truth. We face it every day."

Talking about this problem, Head of Department of Sociology, Gujarat University, Zaverbhai Patel says, "Looking at the trend of some years, there has been a decline in the cases of girl child abandonment. But it is still significantly higher. Economic, social and cultural reasons are responsible for it."

He says, "In Indian society, women are seen as an honour of the society. Because of this, many families have the mentality that if there are more than a certain number of girls there will be trouble. That needs to change."

"Many societies have changed their minds after seeing the miracles that the efforts made by women education and training have brought about in the direction of women's empowerment in the last few years. But it seems that this is still not enough."

Talking further about this, Patel says, “Whenever a couple has a third or fourth child and it is a girl child, they start thinking of abandoning her for any reason, economic or social.”

Apart from this, he concludes that such incidents are also take place due to the rise in the cases of children born out of wedlock in the society.

### **More girls in children homes**

In response to an RTI filed by BBC Gujarati to the Central Adoption Resource Authority, it was found that, “1432 girls are available for adoption against 1032 boys in children's homes across the country.”

This proportion is 38% more. There are 188 boys in the age group of 0-2 available for adoption in children's homes across the country against 241 girls.

It is worth noting here that almost one and a half times as many girls as boys are adopted each year, yet more girls are available for adoption in children’s homes across the country.

Experts believe social attitudes and incidents of excessive abandonment of girls are the possible reasons for this trend.

Along with this, experts believe that it may be that many of the incidents that actually occur are not reported. So it is quite possible that the rate of girl child abandonment in the society is more than the cases reported with the states.

Arjun Parmar, a broadcast journalist at BBC World Services, India, specializes in investigative reporting with diverse experience at Divya Bhaskar and TOI.

<https://www.bbc.com/gujarati/india-60632372>



## 15. Dowry was banned 60 years ago. But cases are rising, while grieving families find justice harder than ever

*Nikita Jain / www.article-14.com / September 22, 2022*

More than 18 women die every day in India in violence related to demands for dowry, which was outlawed in 1961. Although marginally fewer women died in 2021 (6,753) compared to 2019 (7,100), the number of complaints against dowry demands and related violence rose 25% in 2021 over the previous year, according to the latest government data. The conviction rate has plunged, as many who complain are often compelled to or feel it best to effect a compromise.

**New Delhi:** A\* gazed at the wall in silence, while a younger cousin spoke nervously, struggling to keep her emotions in check. A's younger sister B, 28 years old, died on 27 June 2022, hours after setting herself ablaze.

According to the upper middle class Hindu family, B was being pressured by her husband for dowry. A resident of Delhi's Paschim Vihar, he owned a small restaurant in the national capital.

"There was occasional domestic violence as well," according to A.

At the time of her death, B was pregnant. She had just broken the news to her family.

"The day she died, my mother spoke to her in the morning and she mentioned her pregnancy," said A, still coming to terms with the loss of his sister. "By evening, we were looking at her burnt body."

India recorded more than 6,700 cases of dowry-related deaths in 2021. In 2019, the country reported more than 7,100 dowry deaths, a marginal decline, which, experts said, was not a particularly hopeful sign.

More than 18 women die every day in violence connected with the practice of seeking or giving dowry, outlawed more than six decades ago.

Dowry involves the culture of the bride's family giving durable goods, cash and property to the groom, his parents and his relatives, based on a condition laid down at the time of finalising the matrimonial alliance.

The system puts intense pressure on the bride and her family—many families take loans to comply with the demands made, and many continue to receive and fulfill demands during the course of the early years of the marriage.

The law has been useful only to a limited extent.

### **‘Insignificant Statistical Fluctuation’**

According to the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, those guilty of accepting or giving dowry may face imprisonment up to six months, or a fine up to Rs 5,000, or both.

The police have the power to make arrests in cases where domestic violence is reported, under section 498 A of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), 1860. Under section 304 B of the IPC, those found guilty of causing a dowry death may face a prison term of seven years to life imprisonment.

Despite the stringent legal provisions, the practice is far from eliminated.

While India recorded a marginal decline of about 0.2% in the number of dowry deaths, from more than 7,100 in 2019 to 6,753 in 2021, the total number of cases rose. As many as 13,534 cases under the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 were registered in 2021, a 25% increase from the numbers registered in 2020 (10,046), according to data compiled by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB).

Meeran Chadha Borwankar, PhD, retired director general of police who headed the Bureau of Police Research & Development and the NCRB, said the decrease in the number of dowry deaths may not signify an improvement in the situation.

***“Considering two years of Covid, I do not think this is a significant decrease,” said Borwankar. “Citizens, especially women, could not reach police stations and it could be a reason for lesser registration.”***

The issue of dowry must not be pushed under the carpet “under the guise of insignificant statistical fluctuation”, said Borwankar, who is also a member of **Article 14**’s advisory board.

### **Dowry, A Universal Indian Demand**

Uttar Pradesh (UP), India’s most populous state, registered the maximum number of dowry cases in 2021—4,594. This was followed by Bihar (3,362), the third most populous state; Karnataka (1,845), the eighth most populous; and Jharkhand (1,805), ranked 14th by state population.

Adjusted for population, the states that reported the highest number of dowry cases were Jharkhand, Uttarakhand, Karnataka and UP, indicating that demands for dowry had no correlation with literacy rate, violence against married women and income levels.

Consider the top two states by number of dowry cases per capita, Jharkhand and Uttarakhand.

- The female literacy rate in Jharkhand is 61%; in Uttarakhand 80%, according to 2021 government data, the latest available.
- In Jharkhand, 31.5% of ever-married women aged 18-49 experienced spousal violence, compared to 15.1% in Uttarakhand.
- Jharkhand is one of India's poorest states, with an estimated per capita income of Rs 75,587 in 2021; the per capita income in Uttarakhand is more than double at Rs 176,744.

*While UP also recorded the highest number of crimes against women at 15,828 cases, Karnataka, and Jharkhand did not count among the worst five states in general crimes against women in the year 2021, according to the NCRB.*

### **‘Cases Linger for Years’**

In a statement she gave the police just before she died, B said her husband and mother-in-law had mentally harassed her for dowry.

A case was registered against the two, under sections 498 A (husband or relative of husband of a woman subjecting her to cruelty), 304 B (dowry death) and 306 (abetment of suicide) of the IPC.

Her husband was arrested and denied bail on 27 July, while his mother continued to be “on the run”, according to police.

The family, however, has alleged that the police were avoiding making a second arrest and that the investigation was proceeding at a very slow pace.

The investigating officer at the Paschim Vihar police station, police inspector Sunil Kumar, told Article 14 investigations continued.

“While we are investigating the case, regular raids are also being conducted to find the mother-in-law who is absconding,” said Kumar.

Since death was involved, the case was transferred to an inspector, also the station house officer, instead of being investigated by an assistant police sub-inspector or sub-inspector. “The chargesheet will be filed when the investigation is completed,” said Kumar.

A said he was prepared to fight even if the case dragged on.

Social activist Shabnam Hashmi, founder of non-profit ANHAD, which works on gender and social violence, said the situation had worsened and trials stretched over years.

***“I feel getting justice earlier was easy and that the time period was smaller,” said Hashmi. “Whatever cases we are handling, they keep on lingering for years and almost nothing moves.”***

### **Sometimes, No Arrests Despite Evidence**

Delhi resident Karan Batra, 38, was stressed and emotionally drained from the regular visits to the court.

Karan Batra is the brother of Anissia Batra, an airhostess who allegedly jumped off the terrace of her home in South Delhi’s Panchsheel Park, a tony locality in India’s capital.

Anissia Batra, 39, was a flight attendant with Lufthansa, while the accused, her husband Mayank Singhvi, is a businessman.

On 13 July 2018 reports emerged that Anissia Batra had jumped from the terrace. The matter was widely reported and was eventually considered to be a suicide.

***Anissia Batra’s family alleged that she was being harassed for dowry and that her husband had verbally and physically attacked her.***

The case reached the Delhi high court and the Supreme Court, where Singhvi’s bail was rejected. His family, who have also been named, have not yet been arrested.

In February 2020, the Batra family filed an appeal in the Delhi high court after the trial court dropped section 304 B (dowry death) from the chargesheet.

“There is so much evidence on record,” said Karan Batra. “It is still yet to come up (in the Delhi high court). That was back in 2020 and now we are in September 2022.”

While the trial drags on, the victim’s family suffered in many ways, said Karan Batra.

***“For an individual like me, who also works, it is hard to literally leave everything aside and sit in the court the whole day or figure out what needs to be done, while court dates keep coming,” said Karan Batra.***

He said he was aware that justice for his sister would be a long and hard journey. He would continue to fight, he added.

### **Low Conviction Rate in Cases of Cruelty by Husband**

An Indian government advertisement on road safety, tweeted by Union Minister Nitin Gadkari and featuring Bollywood actor Akshay Kumar, attracted criticism for appearing to normalise the practice of dowry.

Kumar, who plays a policeman in the advertisement, makes a comment about a newly married couple in a car with “just two airbags.” A new car arrives, and the groom counts six airbags.

While the video notched up over a million views, many felt the indication that the new car was a gift from the bride’s father promoted an outlawed practice.

“This is such a problematic advertisement,” tweeted Member of Parliament Priyanka Chaturvedi on 11 September 2022. “Who passes such creatives? Is the government spending money to promote the safety aspect of a car or promoting the evil & criminal act of dowry through this ad?”

In 1983, the government introduced section 498 A through an amendment to the IPC, making acts of cruelty and harassment towards the wife by her husband and parents-in-law a criminal offence. This 1983 law not only included dowry, but also other acts of cruelty.

Under this section of law, men or their family members found guilty of mental or physical cruelty to their wives face imprisonment up to three years, in addition to a penalty. The offence was made cognisable (allowing a police officer to make an arrest as per law, without a warrant), non-compoundable (complaints cannot be withdrawn) and non-bailable (only a court may grant bail).

According to reports, from 2006 to 2017, an annual average increase of 10% was observed in the number of pending cases under section 498 A. In 2017, there was a drop in the number of pending cases. In 2018, the number of pending cases under this section once again rose by 6% over the previous year.

Meanwhile, conviction rates of cases under section 498 A slipped from 21.9% in 2006 to 13% in 2018.

### **A Clamour to Dilute the Law**

In 2018, only one out of every seven cases under section 498 A resulted in conviction. That year, convictions under this section were nearly a quarter of the conviction rate of all IPC crimes

This period also witnessed a clamour to dilute the law.

In March 2015, then union minister of state for home affairs Haribhai Chaudhary told the Lok Sabha, the lower house of Parliament, that “quite a large number of cases (under section 498A) were found to be false”.

‘Men’s rights’ groups claimed, among other things, that the low conviction rate was evidence of a flood of false cases under the section.

*Law and gender rights experts have said the bogey of false cases was created by men's groups—prominent women's rights activist and lawyer Flavia Agnes called it “propaganda”.*

Cases that languished in courts for years and end in women making compromises with the accused must not be categorised as false, Agnes wrote.

“... the presumption that women are misusing this legal provision will gain further validity through its sensationalisation in the media, and it will be impossible to file any case under this section in future,” wrote Agnes, “even in cases of extreme domestic violence. This will render the lives of thousands of women from poor and marginalised sections even more perilous.”

### **Data Suggest Under-Reporting of Domestic Violence**

A district level judge in Delhi, on the condition of anonymity, said that while there may have been false complaints, cases of domestic cruelty to wives were in fact grossly under-reported.

“For every two fake cases, there are five genuine cases where the victim does not come forward unless it's too late,” the judge told **Article 14**.

Borwankar also said there were, in fact, few fake cases under section 498 A. The low conviction rate was on account of complainants and witnesses not supporting the prosecution in courts, she added.

“Maybe there is some exaggeration, but totally, false cases are very rare,” said Borwankar. “Low conviction rate is mainly due to the fact that families try to reach a compromise after registering police complaints.”

*Often, only cases where the woman dies by suicide or is killed are pursued to their logical conclusion, she said. “Even in such cases I have seen families reaching some kind of compromises,” she added.*

Hashmi, on the other hand, said that changes in the law have only stopped women from coming forward, despite a rise in the number of cases filed.

Raminder Kaur, a Delhi high court lawyer, said that for every dowry case filed, there were thousands of others, including incidents of domestic violence, that were not reported.

“Only a fraction of these cases ever sees the light of the day,” said Kaur.

According to the latest National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) conducted in 2019-21, 29.3% of ever-married women in the 18-49 years bracket had suffered some form of spousal violence.

There is no evidence to back the narrative that Section 498 A is misused.

Journalist and researcher Shalini Nair contended in a 2018 report that while National Family Health Survey-3 data (2005-06) showed that 40% of 'ever-married women' in the 15-49 age group had experienced emotional, physical, or sexual violence at the hands of their husbands, the number of cases filed under 498 A in 2017 according to NCRB data, was only 104,551, indicating widespread under-reporting.

### **For FIR on Cruelty, Women First Undergo Mediation**

In 2014, the Supreme Court forbade automatic arrests of those named in a woman's complaint under Section 498 A. The apex court also issued directions to be followed while dealing with cases under this section.

Three years later, in 2017, the court further directed that family welfare committees at the district level were to be set up by the District Legal Services Authority to look into all cases reported under section 498 A.

These committees would submit their reports within a month, after which an investigation officer will be assigned to investigate the case. This directive was modified by another order in 2018.

According to inspector Kumar, the investigating officer in the Paschim Vihar case said, "When police receive a section 498 A complaint, the woman and her husband are sent to the Crime Against Women (CAW) cell for intervention, before the FIR is registered."

"We get dowry cases on a routine basis," said Kumar. "But before that, when someone is alleging anything, we send them to the mediation centres."

Across India's police stations, the CAW cell is tasked with handling mediation. If a case is found to fail under appropriate sections, a case may be registered, said Kumar.

Under section 498 A, it is now mandatory for families to go through the CAW procedure. In some cases, this process may take two to three months before an FIR is registered.

***Hashmi said that after 2014, authorities have been "openly seen supporting the perpetrators", and that ultimately, it was the woman who suffered. "Women now have a hard time believing they will get justice," she said.***

Court orders made registration of FIRs and court proceedings slow, prompting many women to look for out of court settlements just to spare themselves the trauma, said Hashmi, who said women needed safe homes that they could turn to when in need.

“These homes should give shelter for a period of time till the time a woman can stabilise herself,” said Hashmi.

### **Fear of Society, Silent Approval For Dowry**

C\*, a resident of Bihar’s capital Patna, continued to relive the trauma of her past even years later. Married to a software engineer in 2019, she moved to Bengaluru to be with her husband.

Within a few days of the wedding, she began to be harassed for dowry, she said. “My mother-in-law kept dissing me for bringing in such a small dowry.” Her dowry included a car and jewelry, as well as jewelry for her husband’s family members.

Soon after, verbal abuse and domestic violence began.

***“He slept around with women, threatened me and beat me up occasionally,” said C. Coming from an educated background, having completed a master’s degree in social sciences in the United States, C had never imagined she could have such an experience.***

The 28-year-old social worker separated from her husband within a year, but has not filed for divorce. She said despite coming from a supportive family, leaving her husband had been a difficult decision.

“It was partly trauma attachment and partly the fear of society,” said C. Trauma attachment refers to abuse or distress emanating from a person who is a close relation or a caregiver.

Batra said that when his sister approached the police after she faced domestic violence, she was told it was a personal matter and should be dealt with at home.

***“We have to understand that the society we live in does not promote somebody standing up or taking action,” he said. “It’s a society which doesn’t like to talk about things which are domestic in nature.”***

Anissia Batra, the flight attendant, was in the process of filing for divorce when she allegedly died by suicide.

While dowry is a crime, it still is common practice. According to Karan Batra, the dowry system has changed—nobody asks for it upfront any more, he said.

His sister was a financially independent woman, he said, who was slowly broken down as her marital family attacked her financial independence. He said they pushed her to sell off her properties, among other things.

“I think towards the end of the period, she just lost hope,” said Karan Batra.

Borwankar, the former DGP, said that economic independence of girls would be a major step to reduce demand for dowry.

“It is a social issue more than a criminal one,” said Borwankar. “There is a silent acceptance and approval of dowry.”

Nikita Jain is an independent journalist in Delhi covering gender, human rights, environment, health, and politics, published in national and international outlets, and is an APWLD 2023 fellow passionate about diverse storytelling.

<https://article-14.com/post/dowry-was-banned-60-years-ago-but-cases-are-rising-while-grieving-families-find-justice-harder-than-ever-63291fa11a171>



## 16. समानता तो महिलाओं की खाने की थाली में ही नहीं है

Pratyush Prashant / [www.youthkiwaaz.com](http://www.youthkiwaaz.com) / March 09, 2022

महिलाओं को खाली-पीली महिला दिवस की बधाई ना दें, घर के अंदर-बाहर उनको संतुलित, समुचित और पौष्टिक आहार दें।

खाना खाने में भी उन्हें समानता दें। खाना और महिलाओं के बारे में जब सोचता हूँ तो टेलीविज़न पर सफ़ोला ओट्स का वह विज्ञापन याद आने लगता है, “शाम ढले कुछ टैस्टी मिले, तुम टुकड़ों में खाना छोड़ दो।” जबकि हम सभी जानते समझते और देखते हैं कि हर घरों में महिलाएं ही घर का खाना बनाती हैं, फिर चाहे वह घरेलू महिला हो या कामकाजी महिलाएं।

खाना बनाने के लिए वे कभी घर के पुरुषों का इंतज़ार नहीं करती हैं। पुरुष कमाते हैं और महिलाएं घर संभालती हैं, खाना बनाती हैं। इस वाक्य का ब्याज महिलाएं ही अदा करती आ रही हैं। यह स्थिति कब बदलेगी यह यक्ष प्रश्न जैसा सवाल है। यक्ष को तो धर्मराज युधिष्ठित ने सारे जबाब दे दिए थे मगर महिलाओं को अभी तक इसका जबाब नहीं मिला है कि वे ही घर का खाना क्यों बनाएं?

परंतु, खाना खाने को लेकर वे अभी भी उतनी मुखर नहीं हैं। महिलाएं आज भी खाना खाने के समय कई अनजानी चीज़ों से लड़ती-भिड़ती रहती हैं। जैसे- घर के सभी पुरुषों ने खाया या नहीं या फिर ‘कोई देख तो नहीं रहा है उसे खाते समय, उसके खाने को लेकर कहीं जज तो नहीं किया जा रहा है।

“कितना खाती है तू”, “हमेशा मुंह ही चलता रहता है तेरा”, “ज़्यादा खाएगी तो मोटी हो जाएगी” और ना जाने कितनी ही बातें होती हैं, जो महिलाओं के खाने पर अनदेखी निगाहे टिकाए रखती हैं, जिसके कारण वे खुद भी अपने खाने को जज कर रही होती हैं।

हमारे आस-पास कई महिलाएं मिल जाएंगी, जिन्होंने अपने खाने-पीने के शौक को पति और परिवार के लिहाज़ से तय कर लिया है। मांसाहार के संबंध में तो यह इस हद तक है कि पति के पसंद-नापसंद के सामने वे छोड़ तक देती हैं। जबकि पुरुषों के साथ इस तरह का कुछ नहीं होता है। पत्नी को नहीं पसंद है, तो बाज़ार में खा ही सकते हैं। ख्याल रखना है तो बस जेब का! और खाया हुआ नहीं पच सका तो समय पर दवाई या नीक-हकीम के उपायों का।

भोजन के बारे में महिलाओं के जीवन में यह यथास्थिति आज के समय से ही नहीं, बल्कि लंबे दशकों से चली आ रही है, जिसके साथ ना जाने कितने तरह के अपराध बोध जुड़े हैं, जो पीढ़ी-दर-पीढ़ी महिलाओं के अंदर चली आ रही है, हम सबों की दादी-नानीयों से चाची-माँ-फुआ-मौसी में और उनसे बहन, दोस्त, पत्नी, भामी में।

आज की नई युवा लड़कियों में यह कम हुआ है मगर पूरी तरह से खत्म नहीं हुआ है। आधुनिक, समृद्ध और शिक्षित घरों में भी यह मनोस्थिति काम करती है कि खाने की थाली

सबसे पहले पिता-पुत्र और पति के लिए ही लगाई जाती है। पुरुष कमाकर लाता है वाली यह मनोदशा पीढ़ियों से महिलाओं पर इस कदर हावी है कि सबकुछ सोचने समझने के बाद भी महिलाएं उससे मुक्त नहीं हैं।

अपने अधिकारों को लेकर हमेशा सचेत रहने वाली महिला, किसी भी तरह के व्रत-त्यौहार ना करने वाली महिला, स्त्री अधिकारों के लिए तमाम तरह के झंड़े गाढ़ देने वाली महिला भी पीढ़ी-दर-पीढ़ी सिखाए गए इस समाजीकरण से मुक्त नहीं हैं कि पुरुषों के बाद बचा-खुचा खाना ही उसका नसीब है। आधी-आबादी को स्वयं स्वस्थ रहने के लिए पहली ज़रूरत भोजन की है, वह भी संतुलित-पौष्टिक होने के साथ-साथ समुचित होना बहुत ज़रूरी है।

अपने पसंद का खाना खाने के साथ महिलाओं का खाना बनाने में भी एक यथास्थिति है। वो यह कि महिलाओं को जैसा खाना पसंद है और वो परिवार के पुरुष सदस्य से अगर भिन्न है, तो उसे दो तरह का खाना बनाना पड़ेगा। फिर दो तरह का खाना बनाने में जो परिश्रम खर्च होगा, उससे बेहतर है कि वे सबों के पसंद का खाना बनाए और उसको ही अपनी पसंद बना लें।

उसमें ही वे अपना आनंद खोज लें, क्योंकि उनकी पसंद का खाना तो किसी को पसंद ही नहीं है और उनकी पसंद का खाना बनाने के लिए परिवार का कोई भी सदस्य अलग से परिश्रम करने वाला भी नहीं है। इसलिए जो परिवार के सभी सदस्यों को पसंद है, वो उनकी पसंद बन जाती है। आखिर विकल्प ही क्या है उनके पास?

रसोई में सबों के पसंद का खाना बनाते हुए वे इतना अधिक ऊब जाती हैं कि उनकी पसंद का खाना मायने ही नहीं रखता है। खाने में उनकी पसंद भी एक मानसिक गुलामी के कैद में है। वह वहां आज़ाद नहीं है। साथ-साथ हर समय दो तरह का खाना बनाने का असर रसोई के अर्थशास्त्र से भी तो जुड़ा हुआ है। रसोई के बजट में थोड़ी सी अधिक उतार-चढ़ाव घर-परिवार की अन्य ज़रूरतों पर भी असर डालती है।

महिलाओं और उनके खाने के बीच एक नहीं कई तरह की यथास्थिति मौजूद है। समाज में उनकी स्थिति, उनके पूर्वाग्रह, घर का वातावरण, रीति-रिवाज़, बज़ार का दबाव, सुंदर-छरहरा दिखने का दबाव, यह सब महिलाओं के साथ इतना अधिक घुला-मिला हुआ है कि महिलाएं अपने पोषण का, हर महीने माहवारी आने के कारण शरीर को स्वस्थ रखने के लिए पौष्टिक भोजन का, बच्चों को पैदा करने के लिए समुचित और संतुलित आहार के बारे में सोच ही नहीं पाती हैं।

महिलाएं इस बात तक अपनी समझदारी पहुंचा ही नहीं पाती हैं कि उनका कम खाना या संतुलित, समुचित या पौष्टिक आहार नहीं लेने के कारण वे एनीमिया से ग्रसित हो रही हैं और कुपोषित बच्चों की संख्या में बढ़ोतरी करने में अपनी भूमिका निभा रही हैं। कल आठ मार्च को पूरी दुनिया में महिला दिवस का उत्सव मनाया गया मगर जब हर घर-परिवार में खाने के थाली तक समानता का अधिकार पहुंचा ही नहीं है, तब वह घर के बाहर कैसे संतुलित और स्वच्छंद हो सकता है? समाज की सबसे छोटी इकाई परिवार में जब खाने की थाली में भोजन

का समान वितरण स्त्री-पुरुष के बीच नहीं है, तो वह समाज और फिर देश में कैसे मिल सकता है?

महिलाएं खुद से जुड़े इस सवाल से जब तक नहीं जुड़ेंगी, वे समाज में अपने लिए समानता और स्वतंत्रता भले ही ज़रूर तलाश लें मगर घर में ही वे अपनी जंग हर रोज़ हारती रहेंगी। आज महिलाओं की तमाम लड़ाई में सबसे बड़ी लड़ाई उनकी खाने की थाली में समानता की भी होनी चाहिए, क्योंकि आधे पेट ना होई कोई भजन गोपाला। महिलाओं को खाली-पीली महिला दिवस की बधाई ना दें, घर के अंदर उनको संतुलित, समुचित और पौष्टिक आहार खाने में भी समानता दें।

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<https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/2022/03/what-does-equality-mean-to-women-hindi-article>



## **17. Riding a boat across Sutlej, two girls from Punjab border village make it to high school**

*Divya Goel / The Indian Express / November 16, 2022*

Kareena and Kirna are the only girls from Kaluwara, a village on the zero line of the India- Pakistan border, currently attending the nearest government senior secondary school across the Sutlej.

For Kareena Kaur (12) and Kirna Rani (13), the journey to school is a giant stride forward – big enough so that their feet soar over the slushy banks and land straight on the floor of the berhi (a wooden boat). This is followed by a ride across the Sutlej and a 4-km walk along the border before they finally make it to the Government Senior Secondary School in Gatti Rajoke in Ferozpur district of Punjab.

Kareena and Kirna are the only girls from Kaluwara, a village on the zero line of the India-Pakistan border, currently attending the nearest government senior secondary school across the Sutlej.

Kaluwara is surrounded on three sides by waters of the Sutlej and by the border fence on the fourth. During heavy rains, the Sutlej floods fields and homes, forcing people to spend days together on their rooftops.

The village of about 50 households only has a primary school and most girls drop out after Class 5, dissuaded by the effort involved in getting to school. Daughters of small farmers, Kirna is in Class 8 and Kareena in Class 6.

On most days, says Kirna, they are the only ones on the berhi, a self-propelled boat that has no boatman or oars but is manoeuvred using an overhead cable or rope that's tethered to poles on either ends of the bank. The girls tug at the overhead rope with all their might, haul themselves on to the boat and wait for it to steady itself, before rowing to the other side.

The berhi is a common form of water transport in these parts and is used to ferry, besides people, cattle and vehicles such as bicycles and motorbikes, even tractors. "As there is no road to reach Gatti Rajoke from Kaluwara, some boys also get their motorbikes onto the boat. There have been occasions when the boat has rolled over due to the load," says Satinder Singh, principal of the Gatti Rajoke school where the girls study.

"In my five years of service in this school, these are first two girls who have taken admission in our school from Kaluwara," says the principal.

He says the two girls have hardly missed a day of school since the current session began. “Even on days when the Sutlej is in spate, they try and reach school,” he says. Around 12 boys from the village are enrolled in the school, but with many of them helping their families earn their livelihoods, endance is usually irreguKirn

Kareena and Kirna leave their house at 7 am to be able to make it to school by 9 am. On lucky days, the boat is already on their side of the river, but on other days, the wait for the berhi extends for up to two hours. “We have to wait for someone from the other side to row towards us,” says Kirna.

Once they get to the other side, the girls walk another 4 kilometers, crossing two villages (Tinidiwala and Jalloke) along the border fence, before finally making it to school.

Kirna says the rides to school were initially tough, but now, she has learnt how to manoeuvre even when the river is choppy. “Earlier, my hand would hurt when I pulled the (overhead) rope, but not any longer. The villagers taught us how to maintain the right balance,” says Kirna.

The 13-year-old says she enjoys learning English in school and when she comes home, the other girls want to know how her day went. Dropping out of school has never been an option. “Zindagi ch kuch banna hai, parents layi kuch karna hai (I have to achieve something in life, do something for my parents),” she says, adding, “Army join karni hai (I want to join the Army).”

Her mother Shinder Kaur says, “They leave home at 7 am, sometimes even at 6 am, and it takes them two hours to get to school. On their way back, they don’t get home before 5 pm. We feel scared and worried, but what option do we have? Most girls from our village drop out because it is so tough just to get to school, but we want our daughter to study.”

Kareena, the younger of the two girls, wishes it was easier to go to school. “It will be good if we had a road to the school. Walking is easier than pulling the rope,” she says.

On Monday, Children’s Day, principal Singh and the teachers of Gatti Rajoke village had a surprise in store for both the girls – the school staff organized a small ceremony to honor them and announced that they would bear all their education expenses until the girls complete Class 12.

The government primary school at Kaluwara village was also established in 2021 after then-education secretary Krishan Kumar visited the village in 2020 via boat and released funds for the new school building. Earlier even primary kids used to go to other villages via boat risking their lives.

Divya Goel is the Principal Correspondent at The Indian Express, Ludhiana, covering politics, education, gender, art, Sikh diaspora, and heritage, with a focus on cross-border issues in Punjab.



## **18. In Odisha we have a festival to celebrate periods but still call it ‘dirty’**

*Sahil Pradhan / [www.youthkiawaaz.com](http://www.youthkiawaaz.com) / May 23, 2022*

The melodic sound of the first raindrops of the season. The enticing smell of the hot cracked Earth getting wet with the precipitation. As new life bursts open from the ground, the Raja festival arrives with all of its pomp and joy in the households of Odisha.

Growing up in Odisha, it is almost impossible to not know about Raja. So it won't be wrong to label it as one of our culture's biggest festivities, much like Rath Yatra or Prathamasthami.

The festival calendar of Odisha is much dependent on natural factors. So we celebrate and worship natural elements as they arrive or leave our lands. So we celebrate Raja to welcome rain and mark the arrival of the agricultural season, we celebrate Margashir Gurubara to welcome the winter harvesting season, and we celebrate Pana Sankranti to welcome the hot summer.

Tracking back to our history, this glorification for nature must be because we hail from a land of people for whom nature is much more than just a factor of life but rather a lifeline itself, a mother.

Nature is sacred for Odias. As we personify the divine earth goddess, Raja celebrates the womanhood of the goddess.

Raja, which falls on the first day of the Hindu month of Asadha, is a four-day-long celebration. Throughout the festival, households around Odisha are filled with the sweet smell of pithas (a typical Odia dish that is almost like sweet stuffed dumplings that come in different flavours, stuffings, and shapes) and mithas (different types of classic Odia sweets).

The festival is a pompous celebration of womanhood and women. Women are supposed to rest during this time, with lesser household work and not walking barefoot on bare ground. Receiving gifts, dressing up in new clothes, eating special foods like pithas, playing on swings (a significant factor in the festival), playing Puchi (a game famously played during this festival), and decorating themselves with Alta and ornaments, are all elements of Raja. As women go through a rest period, the Earth, too, is supposed to go through the same.

## **Raja Festival and its Celebration of Menstruation**

The term Raja is derived from Rajaswala (meaning a menstruating woman). During the medieval period, the festival became more popular as an agricultural occasion remarking the worship of Bhudevi, the wife of Lord Jagannath. A silver idol of Bhudevi is still found in Puri Temple beside Lord Jagannath.

Raja's main festivity is on the second day. According to belief, after the first day, called Pahili Raja, like Earth, she enters into the second day of her menstruation period. Therefore, the three days of Raja, Pahili Raja, Raja, and Basi Raja are the three days the Earth gives her rest period for her menses.

Thus, all agricultural activities and barefoot walking on the ground are avoided and stopped as they might hurt the Earth. On the fourth day, the women wash the grinding stone (a common utensil in Odia households and an essential factor in many other festivals, too, as it symbolizes Bhumi or Earth) in their kitchen (called pidhi/pidha) – with cow dung, grass, turmeric paste, sindoor and flowers, akin to giving her a ceremonial bath, much like what women have at the end of their menses.

Raja has always celebrated menstruation and how the female body is sacred as someone who can generate life from within her. Therefore, adolescent girls are among the most pampered at the festival. There are new clothes, new Alta, swings, tasty food, no expectations for doing household chores, paan, and pithas everywhere.

Yet, even with a whole festival that celebrates the natural bodily function of periods, discussion around menses and menstruation itself is still taboo in our society.

## **Periods, My Mother and Me**

Every month, for a period of around four days to a week, I am the one who has to do the household puja, a chore that my mother commonly does. When I was younger, I couldn't understand why I had to do this every month. Was there an issue every month? Or was it like some ritual?

As I grew older, I understood that my mother went through “those days of the month”, and thus, she couldn't be the one to enter the puja room. This was not something that my mother eventually told me as I grew up or my parents had a discussion about. I had to conclude it myself.

I don't think periods are a thing that can be discussed in an Indian household. You might see the secretive talks about it everywhere, suggestive ads on TV, study in school biology or even face it yourself. But, you would never hear it from your parents. I don't think my family ever has talked about periods or anything like that. So why is the discussion about menstruation such a big taboo?

I might have told you how Odia culture has a whole festival to celebrate womanhood and menstruation, but the reality and stigma around periods remain. Of course, many other cultures in India glorify periods through festivals, rituals, ceremonies, or something else, but still, the stigma remains.

While we glorify menstruation through festivals and cultures like this, we still shun menstruation as dirty and nasty.

My mother rushes from the washroom during “those days”. She rushes towards the dustbin to dump something wrapped tightly in a newspaper page, her countenance making it clear that what she is rushing to throw is something she considers disgusting.

I don’t want to see my mother, who was the one who bathed me and cleaned me in my childhood, being disgusted by a fraction of herself only because generations of the societal structure have labelled menstrual blood as something impure and dirty.

If a man bleeding is considered a mark of courage, why is a woman bleeding dirty?

I don’t think I have seen my mother being given her time to rest or any acknowledgement of the painful time she has gone through during her periods. She is supposed to go on, work, and complete the household chores without a break. Why does my mother work without rest while in pain or experiencing cramps, while my father or I can rest if we are sick or have body pain?

I am to blame, I may try to help my mother by doing some minor household chores, but it doesn’t change the fact that my mother still has to face challenges during her period days, all while suffering silently.

If you are someone who gets YouTube recommendations, I am sure. Much like me, you must have seen famous YouTubers doing the period pain stimulation challenge and crying out of pain. It is baffling to see how none of them ever acknowledge that their mother, sister, girlfriend, female friend, peers, or coworkers had to go through this pain and yet expected to go on and be normal.

The festival of Raja is soon to come, and people and articles will soon talk about how great Odia culture is to celebrate such a festival. Unfortunately, however, one of every two women in Odisha uses unhygienic methods of menstrual protection.

The latest National Family Health Survey (NFHS) data indicate that 53% of women use unhygienic methods and around 69% of women in the State still use cloth. In addition, the report shows that women’s overall use of sanitary napkins in Odisha is 33.5% against the national average of 57.6%.

Only 30.3% of women in rural areas have access to napkins though 49.4% of urban women use them as a method of menstrual protection. Surprisingly, the cloth

preference is about 65.5% of adolescent girls (age group 15-19) and 72.7% of young women (age group 20-24).

Whenever we go on a trip, my mother ensures to pack her pack of sanitary pads, hidden deep down inside the suitcase. I don't remember ever seeing her buying a sanitary pad while I was around her. This is not something she is doing knowingly; it is almost coded into our brains that menstruation is a topic that is forbidden, much like sex, sexuality, and mental health struggles.

What is the glory or joy about celebrating a festival like Raja when I see all around myself women still struggling? How do I find pride in my culture when I still see "those days of the month" being a taboo topic? How do I read innumerable articles about how Raja is a progressive festival when I see my mother still in shackles, bound by a patriarchal society's ignorance of her pain?

I wish there would soon be a time when mothers don't feel uncomfortable talking about periods with their children. I hope for a time when menstruators are given their due acknowledgement, and discussion around menstruation is not limited to whispers.

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<https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/2022/05/odisha-festival-celebrate-periods-still-call-dirty>



## 19. Wanted: Safe and affordable housing for working women in cities

*Jashvitha Dhagey / [www.questionofcities.org](http://www.questionofcities.org) / October 21, 2022*

The basic human right to safe and affordable housing eludes most working women in cities. They are forced to submit to scrutinising interviews during their house search and forced to agree with a laundry list of conditions while signing the lease. It restricts their choice and decision to work, or drop out of the workforce. Not all working women in the formal sector have equal access to housing, those in the informal sector compromise on space and safety in order to work. Our non-inclusive cities offer limited housing options for women but it does not have to be this way. Easing the burden on women by providing them safe and affordable housing can go a long way in making women more comfortable in their workforce roles.

Thirty-year-old Mahima Thakur was working from her hometown Shimla throughout the lockdown months during the Covid-19 pandemic. Now, she is looking to move to Gurgaon for a new job. And is busy doing house-search.

Thakur, who lived in Mumbai earlier for career purposes, did not know what was in store for her in Gurgaon. She was piqued by the concept of ‘builder floor’ homes, relatively cheaper to rent than homes in gated housing societies, which are two-three-storey houses but do not boast of amenities that the gated complexes have. But the cheaper rent comes with expensive electricity and lack of safety.

The latter made Thakur expand her house-search to gated societies that may offer some security to a single woman. However, she has been rejected by three house owners because she is single. She tried to fit herself into the “family category” by explaining that her mother would be visiting and living with her frequently, but it did not cut ice, making her wonder if she will be able to take up her new job in Gurgaon. “They only prefer married couples as tenants. What if I decide to not get married and live alone? Will I always face ire while living in a city?” she asked.

### **Restrictions, curfews only for women**

Single women are not included in the concept of housing – it has been structured for families living in apartments, independent homes, and housing societies. City plans, when they do focus on housing, do not take into consideration that women moving away, alone, from their families would need accommodation too. In the absence of private accessible accommodation, women of middle classes fall back on the few public hostels that some cities have.

However, here, they must put up with curfews and restrictions. Constant monitoring and control by hostel wardens are a hurdle for women who work night shifts or irregular work hours. Some women who manage to get their desired houses on lease have to deal with house owners imposing riders on who they bring home (people of the same sex and gender) and get “permission” from parents if they stay out for a few days. These restrictions are often not imposed on men.

Koyena Saha, 25, an experience designer from Kolkata, moved to Bengaluru in May this year. Saha found a flat and paid the token amount after which, the house owner told her that she could not bring home friends of any gender, play music in the house, or have parties since this was a residential area. She went along because she wanted the work assignment.

If women’s single status irks house owners in “good” housing societies, then women with partners pose a bigger problem. After Saha found a house on lease, her partner coming in from another city to help her move raised many eyebrows. To quieten nosy neighbours and sundry others, she introduced him as her fiancé. “I had to divulge unnecessary personal details to convince them that it was appropriate for me to live in this area. House owners behave like we (women who live alone) will defame the housing society by calling friends or boys to our house.”

Many single working women have to deal with house owners who chalk out a long list of dos and don’ts, making it difficult for them to rent houses. Amita Sana, 24, a UI/UX designer from Hyderabad, moved to Bengaluru after her company’s working model turned hybrid. She lived in a PG for six months as she could not find a house. The brokers would not show her around residential or family-friendly localities because landlords in these areas were against renting houses to bachelors. When she did find a house that she liked, the house owner told her and her housemates that they had to be home before 9pm, could not invite boys over and also had to have their parents inform the landlord if they had to go out of town.

No amount of influence or popularity can spare a single woman from being subject to the infantilisation impinged upon them in the house-hunting process. A famous television personality once had to fly down from Delhi to Mumbai to talk to his daughter’s prospective house owner in south Mumbai and assure the latter that the grown woman had the character to be rented a house to. She, a trained lawyer working with a well-known legal firm, could not escape the scrutiny. The house owner had refused to sign the lease papers without meeting at least one of her parents.

### **A constant juggle to stay safe**

For women, wanting to lead better lives is not only about finding a house in a new city — it’s also about how they assert themselves so that people do not take advantage of them. It is a constant exercise of setting boundaries for others, to juggle

between asserting herself and keeping herself safe. Sana had to deal with brokers who would constantly talk over her. She said, “When you’re negotiating the deposit with brokers or landlords, some of the men dominate because you’re a woman. They speak over you, they don’t let you negotiate, and when you do negotiate they make you feel like you don’t know enough.”

Women bear it all just to be able to live in a city. Away from the control of their watchful families, they finally get to experience life as individuals. The idea of living alone might be daunting for some women, making them opt for hostels where some chores are taken care of – food is cooked, washrooms are cleaned, and electricity bills are paid. But hostels have restrictions — curfew time, no outside food, and no guests. Most hostels and paying guest accommodations are designed such that the residents directly go to their rooms with limited spaces to be social. In several instances, these forms of alternative housing are not accessible because they have a long wait list of applicants.

Safety is still a major concern for women. Often, it comes at a cost. Formal workers can live in hostels, paying guest accommodations or flats. Informal women workers who live a hand-to-mouth existence, often to support their families, lack safe accommodation. How will they pay for a safe home if they have to send money home?

### **Housing hurdle for women**

Historically, settlements like chawls in Mumbai have served as a place for men who worked in the mills to inhabit these small, congested rented spaces in shifts. Some caught up on sleep while the rest went to work. They could all send home what they earned. Women, however, would and still have to worry about safety, in any space.

Dr Nandita Shah, co-founder of Akshara and a member of the ‘Gender and DP’ group of Mumbai that advocated for the inclusion of gender in Mumbai’s Development Plan, points out that despite Mumbai being India’s financial capital, it has only 16 % women workforce – an abysmal number compared to the national average of 27 %. “Financial independence is critical for the empowerment of women and that’s why we believe that women need to join the workforce and to contribute to the society at large,” she said.

The ‘Gender and DP’ group has been instrumental in starting the conversation on gender mainstreaming, urban planning, urban governance or urban management structures. One of the facilities that they have been pushing for under the expertise of architect Shimul Javeri Kadri is the multipurpose housing for women in all of Mumbai’s 227 civic wards. After surveying several women’s hostels in Mumbai, the group opined that women should not have any restrictions – they are adults who can look after themselves.

## Affordable housing for all

Women who come to the city for a short while, especially to look for jobs, have no place to stay. The group felt the need to create places, which can be used by different groups of people and women. Dr Shah says, “We felt that the government should make provisions for women to get accommodation in a city like Mumbai. It should be like a working women’s houses, which allows for a short stay and also a long-term housing for three years.”

Explaining why the group is pushing for multipurpose housing and not just hostels, she said, “We have also included short-term centres for women in case of emergencies. When women face domestic violence, there isn’t any shelter where they can go to. Why do such shelters have to be separate? Why can’t it be with other working women as they can help those facing challenges? It also connects them to the other world. That’s why we’ve designed the concept of multipurpose housing to allow it to have these community spaces for interactions. By design, it is meant that you don’t just go to your room, you go through a common space that makes it possible for you to socialise more.”

Nikita Shisode, 25, works as assistant to film directors. She moved from Pune to Mumbai last year. Shisode’s profession invited untoward glances from homeowners who, until knowing her job, are open to rent but decline once they know her work. But that is not all. She was looking for a flat with three other women, one of whom was accompanied by her male partner. “She would bring him along to show him the place. Every homeowner we met made sure to enquire about how he was related to us. Once we saw a flat we liked, the owner seemed happy with us too. But as soon as she told the owner that the guy accompanying us is her boyfriend, the owner rejected us and gave it to a family. After a point, it made her so uncomfortable that she started telling everyone that he’s her brother,” Shisode said.

The women finally landed a lease but their problems did not cease even after they moved in. The broker who got them the flat began harassing them because they had not, according to his version, paid the full brokerage amount. “When we did not heed this, he called one of my roommates to say ‘*Yahan pe bohot time se broker ka dhanda kar raha hoon. Aap chaar ladkiya hi ho aur meri iss area mein bohot pehchaan hai* (I have been in the business of brokering for many years now. It’s just the four of you girls here and I know many people in this area)’. Then he casually mentioned that he intended to contest the upcoming elections on a BJP ticket,” Shisode said. The women feel unsafe.

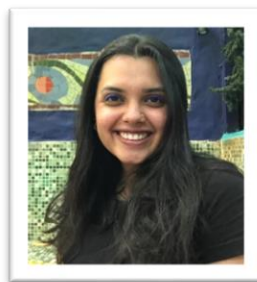
The lack of accessible and affordable housing is a hurdle for women who come to cities to work. Multipurpose housing could help working women in the formal sector with an affordable housing option. The group is also looking at providing childcare

centres and senior citizens' care centres to relieve some of the burdens of working women.

These facilities may help women join the workforce, and perhaps ease the patriarchal restrictions. The more we delve into women and housing in cities, the deeper we realise the fault lines are in our cities' plans. There is a persistent gap between including women in planning cities and actually implementing the suggestions. We need urban planning that is inclusive and gender-sensitive, spaces where women feel safe, and housing which comes without restrictions. Unless this is done, at least some women will be forced to drop out of the workforce.

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<https://questionofcities.org/wanted-safe-and-affordable-housing-for-working-women-in-cities/>



## BUILDING INCLUSIVE SPACES

Building truly inclusive spaces in India for the LGBTQIA+ community involves navigating persistent challenges across various sectors. Despite strides in LGBTQIA+ rights, issues like conversion therapy, resistance within educational institutions, healthcare disparities, and systemic challenges within the prison system persist. Achieving genuine inclusivity demands nuanced and comprehensive approaches.

**Nolina Minj** exposes the horrors of conversion therapy, highlighting the challenges in fostering a truly inclusive healthcare environment. She emphasises the need for targeted awareness campaigns and systematic sensitivity training for healthcare professionals to address the complex interplay of societal prejudices faced by trans individuals.

**Sohini Sengupta** discusses the shortcomings in creating safe environments for transgender and queer communities on university campuses. Tokenistic measures prove ineffective without buy-in from stakeholders. Sohini emphasizes the need for inclusive education initiatives to challenge discriminatory norms and foster a broader understanding of gender diversity.

**Sayantana Dutta** examines gender-segregated policies in science education institutes, unraveling systemic inequalities impacting non-binary and gender non-conforming individuals. By focusing on specific instances at IIT Bombay and IISER Mohali, the article emphasizes the struggles faced by students and calls for inclusive spaces to challenge gender segregation policies.

**Sonal Matharu** sheds light on Delhi University colleges' resistance to officially recognizing queer collectives, exposing the gap between policy rhetoric and on-ground realities. The absence of institutional support creates a hostile environment for queer students, underscoring the urgency for a comprehensive re-evaluation of inclusivity.

While the recent Supreme Court verdict on the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act is a landmark for reproductive rights, **Priya M Menon** highlights the challenges that trans men face in seeking gynaecological care due to societal biases. The article emphasizes the need for sensitization among medical professionals, affordable healthcare, and awareness campaigns addressing the unique needs of trans men.

**Shikha Sharma** analyses the plight of transgender individuals in jails, revealing physical and sexual abuse, medical negligence, and institutionalised discrimination. The lack of recognition and uniform policies exacerbates their vulnerability and invisibility, calling for reform in self-identification policies, violence prevention, and community consultation.

Building inclusive spaces requires legal reforms, awareness campaigns, and a societal shift towards acceptance. The challenges faced by the LGBTQIA+ community underscore the urgency for change across educational institutions, healthcare systems, and the criminal justice system. An analytical understanding of these challenges is imperative for informed, effective, and lasting solutions, and media could play a significant role in creating such understanding.

## 20. The horrors of queer conversion therapy in India

*Nolina Minj / www.scroll.in / September 7, 2022*

From bizarre rituals to hypnosis, queer people continue to be subjected to various “treatments” aimed at changing their gender identity or sexual orientation

One late morning in September 2018, Div, a 17-year-old, queer transfem person, accompanied her parents to a temple on the outskirts of Pune city in Maharashtra, to be “fixed”.

What happened there left her scarred for life.

Div’s parents had already been trying to change her: for the preceding three months, Div had been taking sessions with a Hindu baba who sought to convert her gender identity. Assigned male at birth, Div realised early in childhood that she did not fit into the constraints of the gender binary. At school, she was heavily bullied by both teachers and fellow students. “I was too masc to play with the girls and too fem to be friends with the boys,” she said on video call.

That morning in September, Div, along with her parents, the baba and a few other men climbed up a hill near the temple. Once there, the baba made Div sit inside a circle, on the circumference of which the men poured out petrol. Div’s parents stood nearby, watching. The men set the ring on fire.

Next, one man set fire to a large pumpkin and placed the burning vegetable on top of Div’s head. Then, with a sword, he swiftly sliced the pumpkin vertically in half, with one stroke. “I was scared for my life,” she recalled thinking to herself. “Am I getting burnt to death? Are my parents sacrificing me to god?”

The blade was very sharp, and Div felt a sharp pain as it struck her scalp slightly.

Some blood oozed out from the wound, and a tuft of hair was cut off.

But she did not cry. Instead, she pretended that the grotesque ritual had worked on her, and that she had been cured. She jumped out of the circle, even as the fire burned on. Then, Div proceeded to leave the hilltop calmly. She had sensed that if she created a ruckus, she would be made to remain in the temple complex. “I was grateful I did not die,” Div said. “I thought I was getting murdered.”

Div had had misgivings about the baba for some time. In sessions with the baba before the temple incident, he instructed her to wear lockets and bracelets, and gave her powders to put in her food, which would leave her feeling tired. From the start, Div said, the baba’s physical contact made her uncomfortable.

*“It was disgusting to be around him,” she said. “He was very weird in a sexual way.” But Div never said anything about it to others because she didn’t think they would believe her.*

A few months after the hilltop incident, the baba was accused of sexual harassment and revealed to be a *dhongi* – an impostor. Following this, Div’s parents stopped making her take further sessions with him.

But Div had already suffered immense trauma. About a month after the incident Div attempted to take her life by consuming her sister’s sleeping pills – she was rushed to the hospital just in time and survived.

The horrifying ritual that the baba performed on Div falls under the umbrella term of conversion therapy, or conversion treatment. Eight years after a Supreme Court judgment, known as the NALSA judgement, legally recognised trans persons as being of a third gender, and four years after a part of section 377 of the Indian Penal Code was repealed, effectively decriminalising homosexuality, such practices continue to be widespread across the country.



*Eight years after the Supreme Court recognised trans persons as being of a third gender, and four years after it effectively decriminalised homosexuality, conversion therapy remains common in India. Photo: AFP*

Queer activists and mental health practitioners are averse to legitimising conversion practices by referring to them as therapy or treatment, and instead prefer the term Sexual Orientation & Gender Identity Change Efforts. They hold that such practices, which pathologise gender identities and sexual orientations, are unscientific in nature and intent and are rooted in homophobia and transphobia.

While there is no specific research looking at the prevalence of conversion practices in the country, Dr Shruti Chakravarty, chief advisor at the mentalhealthcare funding and advocacy agency Mariwala Health Initiative, noted that oral testimonies, and discussions within the queer community and with mental health practitioners indicate that they occur at a high frequency.

*“I would say about 80% of queer persons undergo it, depending on what you think is conversion practice,” said Chakravarty, who also leads the queer affirmative counselling practice at the initiative.*

She explained that alongside medical and therapeutic practices, there also exist “socially driven conversion practices”, such as “forced heterosexual marriages and forcing trans persons to wear clothes of the gender that they were assigned.” Other extreme practices, as listed in a 2020 report by Victor Madrigal-Borloz, the UN independent expert on sexual orientation and gender identity, include corrective rapes and electroconvulsive shocks.

Further, the report categorically states that conversion treatment by its very nature is “degrading, inhuman and cruel and creates a significant risk of torture”, and that it “provokes profound psychological and physical damage in lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans or gender-diverse persons.”

PhD researcher Rianna Price, who is studying the history of psychiatric discourse on the “treatment” of homosexuality in India, notes that conversion efforts first emerged from aversion techniques used by psychiatrists to treat addictive behaviours – whenever a patient indulged in undesirable behaviour, they were subjected to stimuli that would cause discomfort.

In a prominent instance of this so-called treatment, from 1977, the Department of Psychiatry at AIIMS conducted an experiment on six queer persons to “sexually reorient” them using aversion therapy. The six participants were administered electric shocks as they were asked to “activate sexual feelings”, while being shown attractive photos of people of their gender. They were also made to listen to their favourite music that had “sexual-emotional” content, while they were shown photos of the opposite gender, in a bid to reinforce feelings of sexual attraction. In

1983, this study was published as a successful experiment in the Indian Journal of Psychiatry.

Over the years, however, there have been some shifts in the official position on homosexuality.

In 2014, for instance, after the Indian Psychiatric Society's former president Dr Indira Sharma made controversial statements about queer people, arguing that they make people uncomfortable by bringing their "talk of sex to the roads", the society issued a statement declaring that homosexuality was not a mental illness or disease. Chakravarty recalled that the 2018 reading down of section 377 also created a buzz in mental health circles and prompted an uptick in the provision of queer friendly therapy to queer persons.

But she emphasised that this did not mean that mental health services had decisively moved away from conversion practices. "Even today, it's far easier to find someone who's willing to change a person's sexuality than someone who's willing to say it's natural and normal," she said.

In February this year, the Indian Psychiatric Society started an inquiry against its member and popular psychiatrist, Dr Deepak Kelkar, who has over 1 million YouTube followers, and who claimed in some of his videos that homosexuality was a disease that could be cured by therapy.

The fallout of such views is that conversion efforts continue to be inflicted on queer people across the country.

In a recent instance, from 2020, a bisexual 21-year-old student named Anjana Harish, from Kerala's Kannur district, was subjected to conversion therapy at a mental health facility. Harish died by suicide in May that year, sparking a furor across the country.

In response, several mental health groups issued official statements denouncing conversion therapy and calling for an end to the practice. A petition initiated by the counsellors working at the Mariwala Health Initiative stated, "All bodies, genders and sexualities are normal. There is nothing to cure or treat." To date, it has received over 1,900 signatures.

After the incident with the baba, Div recounted, she fell into a deep depression. "I just stopped showing emotions, I stopped talking to

everybody," said Div, who uses the pronouns she and they. This led her family to seek more support.

The first psychiatrist Div met at this point pretended that Div's sexuality didn't exist. "He told me it's all in your brain," said Div, speaking with long pauses. "You've just been on your phone too much. You are in Western culture, and we are not Western."

The idea that people who are LGBTQIA+ are so because of Western influence is a prevalent myth. But Dr Ketki Ranade, who prefers being called KP, a faculty member at the Centre for Health and Mental Health at TISS, Mumbai, noted that there was historical writing from ancient Indian texts that captured the presence of “fluid genders and sexual attraction across all genders including same genders”.

As Ruth Vanita writes in the preface to the book *Same-Sex Love in India*, which traces a literary history of homosexuality and gender diversity in pre-colonial India, “Our study suggests that at most times and places in pre-19th-century India, love between women and between men, even when disapproved of, was not actively persecuted. As far as we know, no one has ever been executed for homosexuality in India.”

These writings, KP said, “suggest that Indian culture was actually quite sexually permissive. It was the influence of the British colonial rule that sought to regulate and moralise sexual conduct to the extent of criminalising same-sex sexuality.” They added that this “made homosexuality and being trans, or trans expression, a taboo. So, it’s actually Western influence that has made us more repressed.”

In September 2018, when Div, a queer transfem person was 17 years old, her parents took her to a temple on the outskirts of Pune city, where a Hindu baba performed a bizarre conversion ritual on her.

The next psychiatrist that Div saw put her on heavy medication, prescribing seven or eight pills a day, which numbed her entirely, and left her with no energy.

***“I was like a living dead body, I didn’t laugh,” she said. “I was scared they could take me anywhere they wanted, and I wouldn’t even be able to lift up my phone and call someone for help.”***

The psychiatrist also suggested that Div stay for some time at a mental health institution. “She told me that if I stayed tied up every day for six months, I would be fixed, because I wouldn’t have access to the internet,” said Div.

The third psychiatrist was more accepting, but still not quite helpful. She repeatedly told Div, “It’s okay to be you.” Div said that this was unhelpful, and that what she needed was someone to support her through her trials. This psychiatrist also made Div continue the numbing medication for a year.

Div’s experience underscores an important concern of activists – it is not enough for therapists to be queer friendly; they need to be affirmative. That is, they need to be cognisant of the specific kinds of oppression and marginalisation that queer communities face, and work with clients to address those problems. This view arises from the theory that marginalised people face unique stressors in their lives, which the American psychiatric epidemiologist Ilan Meyer termed “minority stress”. In

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the case of queer persons, they comprise “experiences of prejudice, expectations of rejection, hiding, concealing, internalized homophobia and ameliorative coping processes”, according to Meyer.

As a resource book on Queer Affirmative Counselling Practice published by the Mariwala Health Initiative notes that among other requirements, affirmative therapists must work to “deconstruct the influence of heterosexism and cisgenderism” in therapeutic practice and in the lives of their queer clients, educate themselves about protocols in working with queer clients and be “self-reflexive” about their own beliefs and practice.

Div said she initially agreed to conversion efforts because she wanted to be “fixed”. Mental health practitioners are often asked about the possibility of such situations, in which queer people say they want to become heterosexual or cisgender. In such instances, KP said, it is important for the therapist to ask what might drive a person to harbour such a desire. “The answer is all the impediments they face in being themselves, which can be worked upon in a therapeutic context and in real life,” said KP. “We need to find the obstacles in people’s life that prevent them from being who they are and remove them.”

After four years of struggle, Div eventually found a queer affirmative therapist, who was recommended by her friend. “She is helping me grow into a person who younger me would be proud of,” she said. “She helps me be okay with my identity and sexuality. Day by day I see that I’m healing from my trauma.”

Not every queer person undergoes experiences as physically harrowing as Div’s. But many have to fight other kinds of efforts to change them, typically different forms of coercion from their families and mental health practitioners.

Twenty-eight-year-old Mani from Mumbai, who identifies as a man, was assigned female at birth. He first came out in 2014. While school went by without much incident for him, he recounted that he faced extreme harassment and transphobia in his college, which affected his studies. At home, his father grew distant from him, unable to accept Mani’s true gender identity. Soon after Mani finished college, he had a heated discussion with his mother about his gender identity and left his parents’ home for one-and-a-half years. He returned home only after his mother apologised and said that she didn’t want to lose touch with her only child.

Mani remains close to his mother. But over the years, she too has tried desperately to persuade him to seek “help”. Mani faced conversion efforts not only when he met counsellors of his mother’s choice, but also when he sought counseling of his own volition.

I met Mani at the end of July at a café near his workplace. Despite the troubles he has had to navigate, he remains cheerful and easygoing, and has found significant professional success.

Over tea, he recounted the first of his experiences with attempted conversion. Struggling with his gender identity in college, he approached a counsellor that a friend had recommended.

The questions that the counsellor asked Mani made him very uncomfortable. She asked him to close his eyes and said, “Imagine you’re in Goa and ...tell me a nice colour for a bikini?”

Mani replied, “Red.” The counsellor continued, “A girl in a red bikini in Goa is walking out of a pool or beach toward you. What would be your reaction?” Mani imagined the situation and then replied naturally, “Nothing. I guess I would appreciate her and then forget about it.” The counsellor was not satisfied and proceeded to repeatedly ask him the same question.

Finally, Mani lost his temper, “Do you want me to say I’ll jump or pounce on the girl?” he asked the counsellor.

*He had judged her accurately. The counsellor replied that if Mani was male, he would “go into a lust zone and not just stop at looking at her”, Mani recounted. Therefore, the counsellor said, “I feel you’re not that much of a guy.”*

This was Mani’s first ever experience seeking mental health support, one that left him thoroughly confused. While he laughed as he narrated the incident to me, at the time, he said, it had intensified the gender dysphoria he was already dealing with.

Twenty-seven-year-old Yohann, a trans man from Mumbai, recounted facing a similar situation when he first sought help, from a renowned psychiatrist in the city.

As with the therapist Mani met, this one’s line of questioning also revealed stereotypical ways of thinking about gender roles, which were couched in the framework of therapy. When Yohann told the psychiatrist that he was a trans man and was dating a woman, the psychiatrist asked him if he thought the girl should depend on him for everything, and if he should provide for her entirely. Yohann replied in the negative to both answers.

She then asked, “Do you think its okay for her to work and earn her own money?” to which Yohann replied in the affirmative. It seemed to him that the therapist felt that his non-conventional responses raised questions about his gender identity. And indeed, after the questions, the therapist repeatedly told him that he was not a trans man and instead just liked “cross-dressing”.

Yohann was left feeling miserable – he not only stopped seeing the therapist, but also gave up on seeking all mental health support for some time.

A few years later, extreme suicidal feelings led him to another therapist who was more accepting of his identity, but despite this, repeatedly used female pronouns to refer to him. The therapist also insisted that he come out to his conservative father, because she thought he “deserved to know”.

“She didn’t consider the fact that I wasn’t and am still not ready to come out to my family for fear of abandonment and conversion therapy and also mental, emotional and physical harm,” said Yohann. “Both these experiences made me lose faith in the mental health care system, until I found out about queer affirmative therapy.”

Yohann finally approached Guftagu Counselling and Psychotherapy Services, which he learnt about from a fellow trans man who worked there, and which offered queer affirmative therapy. The therapy has made a huge difference to his life. “It made me feel like I’m not wrong for being queer, and that I also deserve to live a happy and normal life just like any other person,” he said. “It has really helped with my confidence and mental health.”

But often, even after queer people find mental health practitioners that are supportive, their families continue to try and manipulate them. During the lockdown in 2020, Mani’s mother attended a one-month introductory online course on general counselling to be able to counsel Mani. When the lockdown was lifted, she took Mani to meet her teacher for a counselling session. They ended up speaking for two hours, and by the time they walked out, and Mani’s mother came up to meet them, the two had developed a friendly equation.

The teacher asked Mani’s mother, “He is a good man, why do you want to change him?” This pleased Mani, even as he saw his mother start to sulk.

A few days later, he realised the teacher had “played a double game”. His mother explained that the teacher had privately told her that it might have been possible to change Mani when he was younger, at the age of 12 or 13. But after the age of 25, the teacher said, it was difficult to convert people because they would simply refuse to listen to others. Mani’s mother then scolded him saying, “It’s your fault that you didn’t tell us and now we’re unable to change you.”

*Reflecting on the experience, Mani said, “It was his strategy to make me feel like he’s on my side, and then maybe try to change me again.” Mani did not meet the teacher again.*

Eventually, Mani saw a queer affirmative therapist for a few months, an experience he found helpful. His primary concern is to get his mother to accept him as he is – he lives with her, and is attached to her, but also finds the experience suffocating.

The therapist “made me feel okay about choosing myself over other people, even my mom,” he said.

Mani wants to medically transition and take masculinising hormone therapy. At one point, he realised it would be beneficial for his mother to see a queer affirmative therapist, but when he brought it up with her, she refused outright.

“Families of birth are often homonegative or transnegative and a site of a lot of violence,” explained Jagruti Wandrekar, psychologist and co-founder of the queer therapy group SAAHAS. “Using queer affirmative approaches helps people unlearn a lot of guilt that they internalise.” She added, “We prepare them for dealing with a lot of frustration and resentment they face and building a family of choice” – a common term used in queer culture to refer to a group of supportive people that an individual might surround themselves with as their family, as opposed to families of origin, who are often not accepting of a person’s queer identity.

Sometimes, parents of young queer people coerce them into some forms of conversion treatment even if they haven’t come out.

Twenty-three-year-old activist Rishi, who lives in Pune and identifies as a nonbinary trans person, recounted that one evening when she was 15 years old, her parents told her, “We’re having a lot of fights at home, let’s go see a counsellor.” They took Rishi to a private hospital, where she met with a psychiatrist.

Over a video call with *Scroll.in*, Rishi recounted that she told the psychiatrist that she was queer and requested him to keep her gender identity and sexual orientation a secret, worrying that she would be thrown out of the house. The psychiatrist agreed and suggested that they tell Rishi’s parents that her testosterone levels were low, and that that was the reason she behaved in a conventionally feminine manner.

After some hesitation, Rishi decided to go along with the story. And so, they returned to Rishi’s parents – the psychiatrist recommended that Rishi join a gym, saying her “testosterone levels will rise, and after six months or so, things should be fine”, Rishi recounted.

Privately, the psychiatrist also suggested to Rishi that she join a dance class if she “wanted to express herself”. This upset Rishi, who felt he was stereotyping her. Eventually, she joined the gym for a few months, but did not take a testosterone test. When she left the gym after the six months, her parents repeatedly asked her to return – but Rishi refused.

A few years later, Rishi’s parents redoubled their efforts to “treat” her. In 2017, she was taken to see Nawnath Gaikwad, a hypnotist and counsellor in Pune. At first, she recalled, he told her, “I can help you do better in life, in your career and studies.”

By now, Rishi had a supportive community and was also engaged in activism, so she replied, “I’m comfortable with who I am, I don’t need to be changed.”

Rishi recounted that Gaikwad then said, “But I have helped people change their gender and sexuality,” and that he claimed he could hypnotise her so that “it’ll become a part of you, so that you can have a normal life.”

Gaikwad did attempt to hypnotise her, asking her to close her eyes and focus on his voice. But Rishi refused to submit to the process, remaining focused on her own inner voice. She spent an hour and a half at the office and left unaffected – her parents paid Rs 6,000 for the session. Believing he could still help her, the hypnotist asked her to return, but Rishi never did.

Rishi, who is 23 and identifies as a nonbinary trans person, was taken to see a psychiatrist by her parents. Later, she was taken to a counsellor in Pune who tried to change her using hypnosis.

Apart from struggles in heteronormative spaces, Rishi also had to fight marginalisation within queer spaces because of her identity as a Dalit. “Very few people talk about caste in queer spaces, and when they do, they are uncomfortable about it,” Rishi said.

*Rishi described profiles she had seen on queer dating platforms that were explicitly bigoted. Among the preferences that she had seen people express, she said, were “no Dalits, or lower castes, I want upper castes only”.*

Div recounted facing physical violence because of their caste location. The childhood incident that most haunts her today is of being beaten up by her principal in class for forgetting to carry her drawing book. This occurred, she said, because of both her gender and caste identity. “There were other students who had also forgotten their books, but one was Maratha, and the other was Brahmin, so they were not touched,” Div said. “The only person who got kicked was me: a Dalit and queer person.”

Recognising multiple marginal identities is a crucial part of queer affirmative therapy. “As therapists we have to recognise people’s caste, religion, and other identities in our work, simply because there is another layer of oppression they face because of it,” explained Wandrekar.

While conversion efforts remain prevalent across the country, there are some reasons to hope that they may eventually cease. Most recently, in August, the National Medical Commission announced that in compliance with directions issued by the Madras High Court earlier this year, it was declaring conversion therapy “professional misconduct”.

The court's directions arose in a case that pertained to an incident from February 2021, when a lesbian couple from Madurai, whose parents opposed their relationship, escaped their homes, and fled to Chennai. There they received support from the International Foundation for Crime Prevention and Victim Care, an NGO, and the larger queer community of the city.

The couple approached the Madras High Court, seeking protection from their parents, who had filed missing persons complaints about them, as well as from the police, who had interrogated them at their new residence.

In an unprecedented move, Justice N Anand Venkatesh not only referred the petitioners and the respondents to queer affirmative therapy, but also underwent counselling himself.

In his order, the judge reasoned that, like most of Indian society, he was “not fully ‘woke’ when it came to understanding the LGBTQIA+ community. And so, he sought to conduct research and speak to members of the queer community to shed his own misapprehensions and deliver an order that arose “from the heart”.

In a 2021 case, pertaining to a lesbian couple who had fled their homes, the Madras High Court judge Anand Venkatesh voluntarily underwent counselling to understand the issues at stake.

The order, delivered in June 2021, noted that the case needed to be “be dealt with more sensitivity and empathy” and that it was telling of how society was still “grappling to come to terms with same-sex orientation”.

In the order, Venkatesh didn't only confine himself to the petitioners who had moved the court – rather, he used the case as a means to address wider issues that pertained to the queer community.

The judge issued various directions to different state and Central bodies. For instance, he ordered the Home Department and the Ministry of Law in Tamil Nadu, the National Medical Commission, and the Central ministries of education and women and child development to conduct sensitisation and awareness programmes on queer issues with police and prison authorities in Tamil Nadu, as well as members of the state's judiciary, physical and mental health professionals, parents of school going children and anganwadi workers.

The order also issued guidelines to the National Medical Commission, the Indian Psychiatric Society and the Rehabilitation Council of India to “prohibit any attempts to medically ‘cure’ or change the sexual orientation of LGBTQIA+ people to heterosexual or the gender identity of transgender people to cisgender”, as well as to take action against any professionals who involved themselves “in any form or

method of conversion ‘therapy’” – these actions could include withdrawing their licenses.

Venkatesh’s order emphasised the idea that society needed to adapt to queer people, rather than vice versa. Wandrekar noted that this was important, given that parents usually expected therapists to change their children. But queer affirmative practitioners often work with the parents to help them “process their feelings and connect them to resources such as support groups for parents of queer people,” she said.

In the Madurai case, the petitioners’ families had a difficult time accepting their daughters’ sexual orientation.

*When Scroll.in contacted the two women through email, one of them responded, “Our families went to 2 to 3 counselling sessions, but they couldn’t understand us.” They firmly believed “that only family prestige is important,” she added.*

*Nevertheless, the order was a vital one, she explained, one that helped “many of the LGBTQ people and couples to come out.”*

According to KP, some of the education imparted by queer affirmative therapists can be used in other settings too. They said if educational efforts were undertaken with teachers, parents, the media, police and the judiciary, “then the demand for conversion treatment would go down”.

Such efforts are being undertaken slowly – though several challenges remain. KP mentioned that in October 2019, a teacher-training manual on the educational inclusion of trans and other gender-nonconforming persons was put up on the website of the National Council of Educational Research and Training. However, by November, it was pulled down after a complaint to the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights from transphobic dissenters. Under the banner of a group of pro-bono lawyers called the Legal Rights Observatory, the complaint stated that the manual would “psychologically traumatise school students in the name of gender sensitisation”.

According to KP, this incident was “a classic case of moral panic and betrays deep rooted trans-prejudiced attitudes”. They added, “It is these very reactions of ‘don’t corrupt our children’ that lead to the exclusion of gender non-conforming children”. This, in turn, forms “fertile ground for parents, teachers and other adults to think that they need to seek cure for this ‘deviance’”.

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<https://scroll.in/article/1032115/the-horrors-of-queer-conversion-therapy-in-india>



## 21. Trans voices in campuses: The need for safe spaces beyond electoral lip service

*Sohini Sengupta / [www.feminisminindia.com](http://www.feminisminindia.com) / June 30, 2022*

In 2019, Uttar Pradesh's Kushinagar made headlines as Akhil Bhartiya Kinnar Siksha Seva Trust announced the building of India's first university for the transgender community. Three years later, there is no traceable news in major bulletins about the campus's progress. In 2015, major media houses and magazines lauded the appointment of Manabi Bandyopadhyay as the first openly transgender college principal at Krishnagar Women's College. By the end of 2016, she faced so much resistance and harassment from the college teaching staff that she tendered her resignation.

A few newspapers carried the news as an afterthought, only to come back in 2017 with the news that the education department had rejected her resignation. In her own words, "I am passing through terrible mental agony and can't take it anymore". But she was reinstated in her position as the charged staff denied wanting her to resign, and the State did not want to lose a campaign slogan.

These incidents are some recent displays of the State's tendency to queer-wash campuses. But what is the reality of these communities on the Indian campuses? What changes have these spaces undergone in the last decade? Does a trans-inclusive campus ensure the safety or empowerment of individuals from the community?

In 2018, the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, through the efforts of a student body named Queer Collective, flagged off the first gender-neutral campus hostel in India. But the morning does not show the day in a heteronormative sky. Four years later, in March this year, Yashika a 27-year-old Dalit Trans woman was under duress for seeking accommodation in a women's hostel and being denied the same by the administration of the Punjab University.

Trans visibility's burden cannot be on the community alone. The campuses, the students, and the administration need to be educated and sensitised to allow the community to thrive in that space. The violence inflicted upon the community, categorically, in every scope of their lives endangers their very existence, let alone academic pursuits

Dr Trinetra Haldar Gummaraju filed a petition in the Karnataka High Court after being denied a women's hostel at the Kasturba Medical College, Manipal. Even as

the safety of living is at stake for trans and queer individuals, the Nalsar University of Law, Hyderabad, saw the unveiling of gender-neutral spaces, including washrooms, on the campus this year.

Yet, these measures move at a sloth pace, with slower change in the social context for queer and trans-lived experiences. In a report from 2019, released by the Centre to the Lok Sabha, the numbers revealed that 814 transgender students had enrolled in the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) in the last five years, and none in the central universities.

Adding to the weight is the fact that there were no teaching or non-teaching trans staff members in these universities either. It goes without saying that the report does not include the number of trans and queer students who choose to refrain from officially identifying as the same.

Abu Sohel Khondekar, a Kolkata-based artist and photographer, reflects the same reality in her words, “Trans presence on campus is very important. But most Trans people on campus live in the margins. A lot of us aren’t even visible because they never make themselves seen.” Oftentimes, trans people hide behind a carefully constructed veneer to avoid scrutiny and interrogation. The responsibility always seems to be on the trans body to justify the space they take up.

Shirsho Basu, a cognitive science research scholar at Jadavpur University, agrees that they had to overexplain their identity to the gender-conforming majority that occupies the space. “Those of us who are associated with queer or trans activism, in one way or the other... the onus is always on us. Because we have to make people understand, we have to tell them what gender and sexuality is...” “During my time in JU, I knew only one other Trans person.” Abu Sohel shares her experience of studying at Jadavpur University.

Trans visibility’s burden cannot be on the community alone. The campuses, the students, and the administration need to be educated and sensitised to allow the community to thrive in that space. The violence inflicted upon the community, categorically, in every scope of their lives endangers their very existence, let alone academic pursuits.

Abu Sohel recalls her experience, “I was once prevented from presenting my full paper on the convergence of Standpoint Theory and Intersectionality at the 2018 Annual Queer conference by Sappho. I was talking about how Trans people are in a better position to make laws and regulations for themselves, as we understand our oppression better.” She was jeered for “wishful thinking”.

Even the feminist spaces of the campus and their peripheries continue to marginalise and invisibilise the trans community. Shirsho shares a different academic experience as they did not personally face discrimination based on their gender location, but adds that any occurrence of such prejudiced behaviour is definitely in congruence with the normative biases campuses show.

The Jadavpur University is a left-liberal space, often touted as one of the few progressive campuses in this country. “The traditional Marxist politics is not really evolved enough to accommodate identity politics... they call identity politics vague and meaningless,” Shirsho adds. Even in the progressive leftist spaces, voices from marginalised gender and sexual identities are thwarted and questioned, cornering them in the mainstream political discourse of the campus.

The sporadic indicators of progress and inclusion feel gimmicky when the rest of society does not reflect any understanding of the purpose of those changes. When asked about the trans university at Kushinagar, UP, Abu Sohel responds, “I feel for a Trans University to function and work effectively, the outside world also has to be accepting of Trans people... There’s no point in having a campus if the outside world is not conducive to our existence.”

When families are not safe for queer and trans individuals to live their identity freely when the community is targeted with violence, molestation, and murder, and when there are compromised rights and remedies available to them through legislation – what can such tokenistic measures do to ensure dignity?

The radical love practised within the community fights every day against hatred, invisibilisation, and violence. The world that opens up to an 18-year-old looks different based on their gender location, and sexual preference. As a handful of campuses across the country take some basic measures for trans-inclusivity and building queer safe spaces, the major campuses in the country continue to push these identities to the backbench

A trans-exclusive campus as Abu Sohel reflects can prove to be more harmful as the community will be visibly concentrated in one space for the society to target them. “The movement of the larger Trans-working-class mass is still negotiating the right to existence/recognition. My Hijra sisters first need to achieve that, before they can think of education.”

On being asked how they think a campus can be rendered safe for queer and trans students, Shirsho opines that education is the key. Calibrating understanding of gender and sexuality as a collective in campus discourse can inform, educate and sensitise students. Beyond helping people from the community feel safe, this

journey is essential for every individual to take, to be able to discover themselves beyond binaries.

“I genuinely believe that traditional leftist politics must not look at the undifferentiated sense of womanhood to understand what a woman is. Women as ontological entities are always differentiated from men. The word ‘woman’ purportedly has no essence. Traditional leftist politics must accommodate this de-reifying model of gender”, Shirsho adds before signing off.

In a recent interview, 30-year-old gender non-conforming, transfeminine artist Alok V Menon spoke to Forbes magazine with the words resonating in the global community, “Its all hands on deck right for trans and nonbinary justice. We must all work together to challenge gender norms and create a world where people are safe to be...I love trans and nonbinary people more than they could ever hate us.”

The radical love practised within the community fights every day against hatred, invisibilisation, and violence. The world, that opens up to an 18-year-old, looks different based on their gender location, and sexual preference. As a handful of campuses across the country take some basic measures for trans-inclusivity and building queer safe spaces, the major campuses in the country continue to push these identities to the back bench.

From safe hostel accommodations to public toilet accessibility, our campuses are still struggling to provide the basic infrastructure to support the trans community beyond electoral lip service. The community grows stronger and bolder each day, with the support of each other, but the allies, the political unions, and the authorities of a college campus need to hold up their end for the nurturing of the students from these communities and help build an ecosystem that allows them to reach their academic potential.

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<https://feminisminindia.com/2022/06/30/trans-voices-in-our-campus-the-need-for-safe-spaces/>



## 22. Indian science institute's curious penchant for gendered hostels

Sayantana Datta | [www.science.thewire.in](http://www.science.thewire.in) | September 20, 2022

- *A very small fraction of India's science education centres facilitate equitable access to various spaces for people of different genders.*
- *This pattern is especially acute with student hostels – where male and female students are housed separately, with disparate opportunities and rights.*
- *Gender-segregated hostels exacerbate existing biases towards (cis-)male students, sexualise friendships and are a gateway to “compulsory heterosexuality”.*
- *Such segregation also gets in the way of collaborations for scientific work and creates an “artificial” living and learning environment.*
- *Gender segregation in Indian science institutes also almost always leaves out concerns of transgender, gender non-conforming and gender non-binary persons.*

When researchers Chayanika Shah and Chinmay Shidhore looked at the sitemap of IIT Bombay, they found indelible evidence of campus spaces segregated by gender. In the book *Space, Segregation and Discrimination* (2021), the duo wrote,

“Far away from all student housing and facilities, there is one students’ hostel, H10, nestled at the edge of the teaching staff housing. It stands just before the academic area begins, right across from where the old director’s bungalow was, and now where the various guesthouses are.”

Shah was one of the residents of H10 in the late 1970s, when it was called “Ladies’ Hostel” as opposed to the nine “Students’ Hostels”, all of which housed men. In 1979, after growing dissent from the boarders, the institute changed its name. Around the same time, all curfews on the women residents were removed and male visitors were allowed between 6:30 am to 11:00 pm.

Shah and Shidhore found that over the years, while the institute built newer hostels – primarily for men – on campus where the rest of the hostels were, most women were still housed in H10, which has been demolished and rebuilt several times to increase its occupancy. According to them, “IIT-B has gone to a lot of trouble to

keep its women students only in the initial plot that was allotted to the hostel designated for them.”

As a result, each student in H10 has about 5.8 sq. m each, Shah and Shidhore reported – lower than for the students in any other hostel.

At the end of their chapter on IIT Bombay, they wrote that “segregation of students along gender lines is itself a sexist measure ... isolating [women] from the larger student community in the way that campus geography does, marginalises them even further.”

More importantly, they also noted that this doesn’t apply only to women: it also “works against all those who do not fit into the image of the masculine male student”.

In May this 2022, all students at the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (IISER), Mohali, received an email from the institute’s director. Aditya Raj, a second-year student, said they froze with fear when they read it.

Among other things, the email announced the director’s proposal to segregate “at least two” student hostels into “one each for boys and girls”, with “gender-segregated stay [being] compulsory for all first year BS-MS students and for those whose age is below the legal age for consent”.

Raj, who identifies as a non-binary individual and is one of the cofounders of the institute’s LGBTQIA+ collective, told *The Wire Science*, “I did not handle that well and was a complete mess.” It seems gender dysphoria – the sense of unease a transgender person might feel – was making its presence felt.

The director, J Gowrishankar, wrote in an email to *The Wire Science* on August 21 that he is yet to engage with transgender, gender non-conforming and gender non-binary persons on campus with regard to gender-segregated hostels. “I am open to receiving implementable suggestions on the matter,” he said.

But Raj said that they and their peers had raised their concerns with the director in an open-house meeting at the institute – and that they were silenced without engagement.

### ‘Arbitrary’

Anu Sabhlok, an associate professor at IISER Mohali, has written that the issue of segregated hostels at the institute first arose in 2010. The first batch of students were overwhelmingly male (22 out of 26) – a trend that continued for at least the next two batches. According to Sabhlok, the second batch had only six female students in a batch of 40 and the third had 21 female students in a batch of 105.

Given the institute had only two hostel buildings at the time, and only a few female students, “it did not make sense to have hostel buildings with assigned genders,” Sabhlok said in an interview. So the institute decided to house students of the two sexes in separate wings of the same hostel, with shared common spaces, like the dining area.

In Sabhlok’s telling, while the then-director, N. Sathyamurthy, was sceptical of the arrangement, he later acknowledged that he was “happy with how it shaped [their] students.”

Temporary partitions were used to separate the wings. They could be opened only from the side of the female students. Gowrishankar told *The Wire Science* that these partitions were recently certified to be “a hazard to fire escape routes” and thus removed.

Manjari Jain, an associate professor at IISER Mohali and a former hostel warden, told *The Wire Science* that reports of students crossing over the wings eventually became commonplace – prompting an expression of concern from the director in 2021.

A meeting that soon followed, where the management told students that they will be given official visitation rights: students of one sex would be allowed to access a wing allocated for a different sex only during certain hours of the day. In return, the students would have to adhere to due process – including registering their movement with a security guard at the hostel.

According to Gowrishankar’s email to *The Wire Science*, cross-gender movement of students across hostel wings resulted in several “disciplinary and sexual harassment complaints”. He added that “in the present system, no effort has been made to identify students who may be uncomfortable with the present arrangement and who desire to stay in gender segregated spaces.”

A few replied to the director’s email expressing their support; several others resisted the move. A series of exchanges between Gowrishankar, students, faculty members and other members of the institute’s administration followed. The tension in these emails, copies of which *The Wire Science* has seen, became increasingly palpable.

In mid-July, IISER Mohali organised an open house to facilitate a dialogue between Gowrishankar, the students and other stakeholders. It “led to no resolution and ... concluded with a walkout *en masse* and demonstration and slogans against the autocratic attitude of the administration,” the IISER Mohali Student Representative Council (SRC) told *The Wire Science*.

On May 26, the institute’s board of governors – of which Ajay Sood, the current Principal Scientific Advisor to the Government of India, was the chairperson – met

to deliberate on the issue of gender segregated hostels. According to Gowrishankar, the board decided that all first year students and those not legally adults would have to stay in mandatorily gender-segregated hostels. The others could avail an “opt-in” choice to stay in non-segregated hostels after signing a letter of consent.

The SRC, however, said it wasn’t aware of the board meeting’s proceedings until the dean of students forwarded a consent form. Raj told *The Wire Science* that one of the clauses of the form was that the institute might inform a student’s parents or local guardians of their decision to opt for a gender non-segregated living space. Several students refused to sign it.

Why inform the parents? According to Gowrishankar:

“The Institute has sought and obtained legal opinion to the effect that even though the students are above the legal age of consent, a court of law may take the reasonable view that the Institute is legally and morally responsible to a parent petitioner who may approach it should any untoward incident concerning their offspring take place in the campus which the petitioner attributes to the policy of students staying in non-segregated hostels and that was not communicated to the petitioner by the Institute.”

A student of IISER Mohali, who wished to remain anonymous for fear of repercussions, told *The Wire Science* that by informing parents of adult residents, the institution might be imposing “invigilation and moral policing” on students. “The institute does not have the authority to act as our proxy parent.”

“The [board of governors] did not mandate the letter of consent,” she added. *The Wire Science* obtained a copy of the minutes of the board’s meeting on May 26. They do not mention a letter of consent.

At the time of writing, deliberations on the matter were stuck at an impasse.

“While the students have different opinions on the matter of segregation ... it is evident from the series of events in the last few months that the students are largely opposed to the arbitrary imposition of rules by the administration by subverting the agency of the students in the matters concerning their daily lives,” the SRC said in its email.

### **A history of gender segregation**

Not all spaces in science institutes are segregated by gender.

As the introduction to *Space, Segregation and Discrimination* pointed out, a science institution might have four kinds of spaces: administrative, academic, residential and recreational. The administrative spaces typically consist of, for example, offices of faculty members and administrators; the academic spaces include classrooms,

laboratories and workshops; the residential spaces include the student, faculty and non-teaching staff housing; and the recreational spaces include spaces like the gym, sports grounds, activity centres, etc.

In these spaces, gender segregation is often the most pronounced in residential spaces – and especially in spaces that house students. At IISER Mohali, for example, four blocks are used to house faculty members and other staff. The SRC said these blocks aren't gender-segregated.

When student hostels are segregated – as might be the case with most institutes in the country – the separation can manifest in various forms. Some institutes might have clearly demarcated hostel buildings for male and female students (e.g. IIT Bombay). Others might decide to separate the floors of a building (IISER Pune) and yet others might segregate students from different sexes into different wings (IISER Mohali).

Even the rules for cross-gender access vary. As at IISER Mohali, some institutes may allow visitation rights for a particular period of time. Others may forbid any kind of cross-gender access, and a few may allow the free movement of students across segregated spaces.

In his email, Gowrishankar had highlighted several cases of alleged indiscipline on students' part – including loud music, drinking, smoking and sexual activity in hostel rooms as well as allegations of sexual harassment reported to the institute's Internal Complaints Committee (ICC).

This was to suggest segregation would tame indiscipline – a dubious idea.

The founding faculty-members at IISER Mohali “intended to create spaces that foster healthy relationships and the overall growth of ... students” – a goal that might actually be fulfilled by cohabitating in non-segregated spaces, Sabhlok wrote in her article.

“Co-ed living arrangements provide for more natural (i.e. ‘at home’ or ‘real life’ kind of situation), informal, low anxiety engagements with those from the opposite sex and help students learn how to develop enriching relations with the other that are not riddled with awkwardness and objectification (especially in the long term).”

Chayanika Shah, the researcher who edited *Space, Segregation and Discrimination*, agreed. She called gender segregation the “language of compulsory heterosexuality,” and told *The Wire Science*: “Constant segregation in a world that is binary-gendered means that I can only look at people of ‘the other gender’ through the eye of sex and sexuality. I can't make non-sexual friendships with them.”

According to her, the anxiety that cohabitating in non-segregated spaces means sexual transgressions among male and female students reflects a regressive stand on

sexual desire itself: that the only form of sex possible is heterosexual. But more importantly, it reinforces the belief that students can only see each other as sexual beings, and not as friends.

“Gender segregation is a way of *educating* people into compulsory heterosexuality,” Shah said (emphasis added).

Sabhlok’s article cited three studies (this, this and this) that together demonstrated that students who cohabitate in non-segregated spaces *refrain* from looking at their peers as sexual beings. Instead, they cultivate more sibling-like bonds.

Sabhlok also argued that the higher reporting of incidents of sexual harassment to the ICC might be a “reflection of the openness to speak up on the part of the students and perhaps evidence of their (tentative) trust in the institutional process.”

Ultimately, the argument that segregating residential spaces will reduce sexual harassment on campuses doesn’t hold. Segregation by gender in and of itself presumes malice, compromises healthy and organic male-female interactions and undermines trust in the ability of institutional mechanisms to resolve any issues that might arise.

Focusing on students’ residential spaces in this manner – i.e. by applying segregation policies there and not elsewhere – could also serve to hide other locations of harassment from the management – laboratories, field visits, classrooms and virtually every other space on a campus – as well as non-heterosexual instances.

In fact, in places where sexual harassment doesn’t occur, it is not because people couldn’t figure out how to access certain spaces. Consider the recent row at Chandigarh University. Put another way, the idea seems to be that institutions that strictly segregate hostels should have fewer instances of sexual harassment – but *The Wire Science* could find no indication that this is the case.

The Chandigarh University incident also contains a hallmark of hostel authorities’ first response against ‘difficult’ students – to increase security in a top-down manner, often in the name of ‘protecting’ women. One report said that after the scandal came to light, the university had turned into a “fortress”.

In 2015, authorities at the Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi, decided to impose a curfew on female students on campus. The decision sparked nationwide conversations around discriminatory hostel rules for women, eventually resulting in the creation of Pinjra Tod, a students’ collective fighting against increasing surveillance of and mobility restrictions on women students on Indian campuses under the guise of their protection.

In a 2016 online petition to Prakash Javadekar, the then-minister of human resource development, Pinjra Tod argued that despite having been “stared at” by CCTV cameras, “countless cases of stalking and violence have gone completely unaddressed. . . . This attitude of protection has never and will not keep women safe.”

Pinjra Tod got the country’s attention but 2015 wasn’t nearly the first time women raised their voices against unfair and discriminatory hostel rules. Shah recalled an incident from her time at IIT Bombay more than three decades earlier in her book. “There was this seven-foot boundary wall that was proposed after an alleged thief had gained entry into the hostel one night. We resisted because we did not want to be put behind high walls. We reacted against the making of the *pinjra* itself,” she wrote.

‘Saksham’, a 2013 report by the University Grants Commission (UGC) on “measures for ensuring the safety of women and programmes for gender sensitisation on campuses,” also singled out science institutes. It wrote that women here are more vulnerable because of the “enhanced power” of the supervisor.

The report also noted that “the perceived neutrality in teaching practices” in science institutions can make it harder to perceive “social problems and power relations.”

But while ‘Saksham’ recognised that women in science institutions might be working long hours in “relatively isolated conditions”, it specifically advised against measures to restrict their mobility.

The UGC (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal of Sexual Harassment of Women Employees and Students in Higher Educational Institutions) Regulations 2015 require that “concern for the safety of women must not be cited to impose discriminatory rules for women in the hostels as compared to male students.” “Campus safety policies,” the mandate continued, “should not result in securitisation, such as over-monitoring or policing or curtailing the freedom of movement, especially for women employees and students.”

Gowrishankar confirmed to *The Wire Science* that he was aware of these regulations when he proposed increased security and surveillance of students’ residences either with more security guards or “continuous real-time monitoring by CCTV cameras of entrances to hostel wings” as alternatives to gender segregation.

The cost of each of these measures – in every sense – was to be borne by the students.

### **Non-normative genders**

Talk of gender segregation in Indian science institutes is typically talk of segregation across a gender *binary*: i.e. men and women. This leaves out concerns of transgender, gender non-conforming and gender non-binary persons –

constituencies that have been demanding gender non-segregation in India's educational campuses most vocally in the last decade.

In 2020, transgender, gender non-conforming and gender non-binary persons in Indian science institutions told *The Life of Science* that they felt excluded and discriminated against as a result of gender segregation on campuses. One of them, Krish N., said:

“As a non-binary and genderfluid person, I find it really difficult to ‘choose’ between binary options – be it lavatories, hostels or when filling a form. I don’t feel comfortable in spaces exclusive for my assigned gender at birth. Obviously I wouldn’t be allowed to use spaces reserved for the other genders. Any situation, where we will be asked to segregate on the basis of binary gender, is an uneasy state.”

In the matter of *NALSA v. Union of India* (2014), the Supreme Court granted equal citizenship to transgender individuals and recognised that denying education to transgender persons violates of the right to equality before law and equal protection of law. The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2019 also prohibits discrimination against transgender persons in educational institutions.

A year later, the UGC wrote to all higher education institutions in the country asking that institutions create gender non-segregated infrastructure – including washrooms and restrooms – so that transgender students could access these spaces without “fear, stigma or shame”.

Since then, however, affairs seem to have taken a step back. *The Wire Science* obtained records of hostel and washroom infrastructure in several Indian science institutes and Central and state universities. The records paint a grim picture of the lived realities of gender-marginal groups and their equitable access to various spaces in science education institutes.

Only seven out of 45 institutes reported having gender-neutral washrooms. Twenty-five confirmed that they didn’t have gender-neutral toilets. (Two blamed the lack of transgender students among their admissions.) Eight institutes deemed the query inapplicable while information was unavailable or ambiguous in five institutes.

Similarly, only one institute out of 45 – IISER Kolkata – hinted that they had hostels that could accommodate transgender individuals, while 22 did not. Seventeen said the query was inapplicable or cited the lack of transgender students. Five had ambiguous responses or said that the information being sought was unavailable.

At IISER Mohali itself, Raj said that the director had refused to engage with them regarding gender-neutral and transgender-friendly infrastructure despite repeated

requests. But the fact that the wings of their hostel were segregated only on paper eased their stay on campus.

“Before coming here, I was worried about living in a ‘boys’ wing’,” they told *The Wire Science*. “However, pretty soon I realised that the signage may say ‘boys’ wing’, but there wasn’t much restriction with respect to crossing over to other wings.”

“I became quite comfortable,” they added.

But with the sword of gender segregation still dangling over their heads, Raj remains concerned. “This complete segregation – I just cannot handle that. It’s way too much, it induces so much dysphoria. I can’t live in a boys’ hostel.”

### **Segregation and science practice**

Rochan Das, a second-year student at IISER Mohali and a member of the IISER Mohali LGBTQIA+ Collective, told *The Wire Science* that his mental health was affected as a result of the director’s proposal to segregate the hostels by gender.

Given that most of these conversations were happening during a raging pandemic, when students were either at home or away from the institute on internships, Das recollected feeling “helpless”.

He himself was pursuing an internship at the time: “My work at the internship – it slowed down.”

For Raj, the frustration stemmed from a more fundamental mismatch between what they came to IISER Mohali for and what has been occupying most of their time. “We came here to do science,” they said, “but what are we doing now? Here we are, arguing with the director constantly to live in peace.”

When she was at IIT Bombay, Shah said the residents of H10 had to travel all the way across campus to access any student facilities – all of which were closer to the men’s hostels. “You can communicate through geography and design who the campus is meant for,” she told *The Wire Science*. “By segregating people who are not assigned male at birth, who are anyway few in number in science institutions, you are underlining the fact that they are different and they are to be treated differently.”

“The feeling of outsidership continues.”

She said that while gender segregation affects science in insidious rather than overt ways, non-segregation in science institutions is important for the “betterment of the discipline”.

As ‘Saksham’ noted, science often requires its exponents to work in isolated spaces (e.g. laboratories) for many hours at a stretch. Science is also collaborative and requires constant work with one’s supervisor(s), colleagues and peers.

According to Sabhlok, gender non-segregation can lead to positive changes in an institution’s environment and imbibe feelings of camaraderie among students. In her article, she wrote,

“Our experience at IISER Mohali demonstrates that vibrant, socially inclusive and mixed-gender residential spaces may be one way in which students look out for each other when in labs and other isolated spaces (rather than if they only met in work-related spaces).”

Living in non-segregated spaces might also help reduce bullying on campus while altering “gender, caste and regional prejudices,” she added.

### **In university as in society**

Jain, the associate professor at IISER Mohali, stayed in the Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, during her PhD, wherefrom she remembered two hostels: ‘Rohini’ and ‘Bharani’. ‘Rohini’ allowed male students to visit for some hours during the day; ‘Bharani’ was entirely closed off. According to Jain, these choices were reflected in the hostels’ architecture.

‘Bharani’, according to Jain, was built “like a circle” around an open courtyard. So if anyone entered the hostel from one side, they could access that entire floor as well as look above and see the rooms on all the floors of the hostel. This might have been a problem for the residents’ privacy, she speculated.

‘Rohini’ on the other hand had corridors that branched out into different directions. Thus, “there was no common route one could take to access all the rooms,” – affording residents of other wings more privacy when someone visited one wing, she said.

So if we are to make gender non-segregation ubiquitous in India’s science institutes, Jain said, it is important that we architect the living spaces to balance cross-gender access with an individual’s right to their privacy.

Jain also raised a few important but unresolved questions. At IISER Mohali, there is a large population of undergraduate students who have lived with their families and/or relatives most of their lives and are coming to a relatively more liberal centre of study. For them, non-segregated living spaces may seem unsettling at first – but which they could come to appreciate with time and experience.

Jain also noted that most people live in non-segregated spaces outside educational institutions – so gender segregation in educational institutions is “artificial”.

That in turn led to a question: “Given that we don’t live and function in societies that are segregated as male and female, is opt-in the right way to go?”

Instead, she asked if students should consider mandatorily staying in non-segregated spaces for a few months before being given an option to opt-out if the arrangement doesn’t work for them.

Jain’s suggestion is not easy to admit or to dismiss – but it does require further discussion among stakeholders at the institute, especially students. Sabhlok herself expressed belief that students are capable of devising mechanisms that can accommodate diverse needs vis-à-vis their living arrangements.

Sabhlok also wrote that since the offices of the dean of students and the hostel wardens are short-staffed, it has become “relatively complex for them to engage in constant and meaningful dialoguing with all students, which is essential to nourish educational spaces.” Many students and faculty members at the institute have also asked that decisions that impact students’ lives on campuses be taken through “open dialogue” rather than being “thrust upon them from the top”.

Indeed, amid the pall autocratic diktats, there are some glimmers of hope. Gender non-segregated living spaces have already been instituted in the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, and the NALSAR University of Law, Hyderabad.

Even at IISER Mohali, the SRC told *The Wire Science* that during conversations about segregating hostels, “the issue of gender-neutral toilets in hostels and other common buildings like the academic blocks, library, administrative building, and the lecture hall complex has been raised as baby steps towards making the campus more friendly and welcoming for students who don’t identify themselves in the binary genders.”

These conversations are welcome and need to continue.

**Acknowledgements:** *The reporting for this article was supported in parts by a Diversity Reporting Grant from the National Association for Science Writers, USA, and an Early Career Practitioner Grant from the Transforming Education for Sustainable Futures, India, awarded to the author. The author also thanks Shreya Sridhar from Krea University (where the author is a faculty member), Andhra Pradesh, for help analysing responses to the applications filed under the Right to Information Act 2005.*

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<https://science.thewire.in/the-sciences/gendered-segregated-hostels-science-institutes/>



## 23. Delhi University is the new battleground for queer students—stigma, suppression and suicide

*Sonal Matharu / www.theprint.in / December 6, 2022*

At Hindu College, Zakir Husain College, Jesus and Mary College, and Sri Guru Gobind Singh College, the demands of students for a queer collective are met with resistance, ignorance, indifference, and even threats by authorities.

Ankit\* escapes his stifling, homophobic parents, abusive neighbours and school friends for a few hours every day when he goes to his college in Delhi University. That is the only time he gets to dangle beautiful bead necklaces around his neck and wear shiny rings on his slender fingers. He can truly be himself then.

But now, college life is also closing in on him.

Ankit, who identifies as queer, is a second-year student of Sri Guru Gobind Singh College of Commerce (SGGCC). For the last two years, colleges across Delhi University are turning into a battlefield for queer students. At the heart of it is a demand for officially recognised queer collectives, a safe space for ideas, events and conversations – much like women’s studies centre and debating, drama, dance and film societies in colleges.

Many colleges are pushing back. Students’ multiple memorandums to the college administration, protests, and files pushed through the faculty members have been gathering dust at the principals’ offices. Inside campuses, ThePrint has learnt, the demands of queer students in most colleges are met with resistance, ignorance, indifference, and even threats by the college authorities.

“As queer-trans people we have collective trauma of being alienated from the society, from our own family, for not being accepted. So, the entire world seems like an unsafe place for us. We have to constantly hold up our walls to make sure no one is coming to harm us. That is why a queer collective in college, where we don’t have to fight against anything and we can just be ourselves, is needed,” says Geeta\*, a student from Hindu college.

College life, which typically represents freedom and fearlessness for the young, is especially critical for queer students who escape their families and schools for the first time. The campus acts as a portal to a life where they can safely come out and embrace their identities. But harassment, micro-aggressions and even suicides are turning campuses into sites of trauma.

In college canteens and classrooms, in festivals and events, the queer identity is overlooked, neglected, and dismissed by the faculty, peers and the administration, they claim.

Queer students are warding off daily comments on their looks, wrong pronouns, hearing their deadnames (names assigned at birth) and consuming homophobic misinformation on informal social media groups linked to their colleges.

ThePrint reached out to the principals of multiple colleges. Only Jatinder Bir Singh, principal of SGGCC, responded. He explained that there is a moratorium on the new societies (or collectives) since the college already has 40 clubs and societies. None of the other colleges responded to detailed queries sent by ThePrint.

### **The struggle to be seen**

After nearly three months' wait, Arnab Adhikari, a second-year student of Zakir Husain Delhi College, was called for a meeting by the gender sensitisation committee. His memorandum to the principal's office for a queer collective was finally moving forward. He said he felt a tug of hope. But his happiness dissipated as soon as he entered the meeting room.

The attitude of the five faculty members sitting across him could be captured by one word – hostile. They asked him to keep his phone aside, and on silent mode. And a barrage of accusations followed.

“The committee members said that I am polluting the college and bringing a negative impact on its culture by demanding a queer collective. They accused me of spreading propaganda and said that I could be suspended,” said Arnab, the president of the college's unrecognised queer collective.

The committee members allegedly told Arnab that if they acknowledge this “nonsense” (of forming a queer collective), then their college's funding might stop. When Arnab didn't budge from his demand, they allegedly said theirs is a religious minority college and accepting a queer collective might bring backlash from the Muslim community.

A popular student of the college, Arnab, in less than a year, had more than 80 students, across courses and religious minorities, supporting his cause for a queer collective on campus. His proposal to the management was simple: provide a platform to queer students where they can hold seminars and events around queerness.

The rebuttal from the gender sensitisation committee members crushed him. More than half the members supporting him disassociated themselves from the collective for fear of being suspended and their parents finding out.

Arnab's brush with the management, however, didn't end there. On 15 July, the gender sensitisation committee organised a seminar on 'creating awareness on LGBT issue', without any representation of queer persons. And it backfired. It also made Arnab's resolve to get a queer collective on campus stronger.

The presentation described Q in LGBTQ as: "the gender identity is different in some way that is not normal, not heterosexual, something different".

When Arnab objected, he was allegedly asked to keep quiet and leave the room.

"The organisers said they are learning to acknowledge the 'abnormalities' of people. They used wrong pronouns (like using 'she', 'her' for a person born a female, but doesn't align with that identity). When I asked questions after the presentation, they said I am thinking too much," he said.

His last letter to the principal requesting a queer collective, sent in August, has received no response yet. The principal's office of Zakir Husain Delhi College did not respond to questions from ThePrint.

Similar requests for recognising queer collectives in other colleges are also either stonewalled or dismissed entirely.

### **Queerness, a 'threat'**

The queer collective at Jesus and Mary College (JMC) in south campus was started informally in 2018. Students began holding meetings and sharing their experiences, but were allegedly asked to keep it outside the campus.

"The members of the collective were told that they can't do these "political things" in college. They were told that their parents will be called," said Priya\*, a queer student at JMC.

Students were allegedly threatened with detentions, given the similar alibi as Zakir Husain College that it was a religious minority college and were put on a spot with questions like, "do you think your parents would approve of these western ideas? This is against our social structure."

Queerness, students at JMC said, is seen as a threat by the management.

By 2020, the JMC queer collective started demanding recognition from the authorities. But it never heard back. While other societies at JMC, such as the finance cell by the commerce department, were approved around the same time, the queer collective wasn't, students claim.

Unable to understand what they were doing wrong, JMC students reached out to queer collectives across north and south campuses to understand how their proposals can be made stronger. They held a signature campaign on campus and gathered

support from more than 500 students. They submitted a fresh proposal in September to the principal. But that also went into a blackhole.

“Each time we checked, we were told that the principal is busy,” Priya said.

Fed up of the wait, the students decided to silently protest. For two weeks, every day, a group would just sit outside the principal’s office. When the principal finally invited them in, she allegedly said that she has no authority to sanction such a collective, said Priya.

The principal’s office of JMC did not respond to questions from ThePrint.

### **A lonely fight for students**

Two years ago, at SGGCC, when Nikhil\*, then a fresher, reached out to the authorities with the proposal for a queer collective, he was allegedly asked for a list of queer students on campus. Calling it unethical, as many queer people are closeted, he did not submit the list. The second time, the students found a professor to be their collective’s convenor. But that professor was never seen again in college, says Nikhil. Such is the fear.

To mark their protest, the queer students of SGGCC came up with an innovative idea. They left tiny chits of papers in toilets and canteen, saying in Hindi: ‘You can see this tiny piece of paper, but you can’t see the homophobia in college?’

“Everybody saw that chit,” says Ankit.

The trick was a rage. On Instagram, the reel on these chits had over 10,000 views. But instead of addressing the homophobia on campus, the chits were torn off and the matter hushed up.

SGGCC principal dismissed the need for an independent queer collective. “In other colleges of India, I have found only a few societies doing a multitude of events. For example, NSS can do all social and awareness programmes and one doesn’t need a separate club for doing identified work. Queer group can do events under the umbrella of NSS,” Jatinder Bir Singh said.

NSS, or National Service Scheme, is a public service programme conducted by the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports in colleges. More societies and clubs in the college means more functions and hence more financial requirement, he added.

In many other colleges, the queer students are constantly asked to collaborate with the older, established women’s groups or gender societies, most of which have no representation of queer students or are ignorant about queer issues. The two cannot be easily conflated, students say.

Geeta from the Hindu College told ThePrint that their multiple letters to the principal's office either go missing or the principal doesn't bother to see them.

“Now we have decided to not seek recognition. The queer-trans people in the college are frankly exhausted. They don't have the fighting spirit left. They just want a space where they can relax and feel comfortable and just be there for each other,” she said.

In this fight for inclusivity on campuses, the queer students, unfortunately, are alone. Those who step up to support are penalised in multiple ways.

A professor, speaking on the condition of anonymity, elaborated how the permanent faculty could be alienated and ad hoc teachers could lose their jobs if they are seen supporting the queer collective.

“Teachers who support queer students get pushbacks in other ways. Their projects won't pass through. They will be kept out of certain committees. They might feel as outsiders and won't feel welcomed or included. They are seen from a particular lens,” said the professor.

### **Micro-aggression part of college life**

The demand for independent queer collectives on campuses has risen from incidents of outright homophobia and the subtle ways in which a heteronormative culture is imposed on queer students.

Men wearing jewellery and make-up or women wearing baggy clothes are pointed out by people on campus.

When a queer student at JMC corrected a faculty that she doesn't identify as a female, the latter allegedly said, “If you are different, you have to tell me. You are all girls.”

“People are indifferent to a point that they make you feel neglected. This passive aggression made me so mad when I first joined college. I started questioning – why can't I be myself on this campus?” said Nikhil.

To the students, a wonderful college life is promised by the world where one can live freely as a queer person, says Pooja Nair, consultant therapist, Mariwala Health Initiative, a Mumbai-based queer affirmative organisation for mental health. But when campus diversity isn't acknowledged and celebrated, students get a rude shock.

“The discrimination may not even be big incidents. There is so much of everyday micro aggression. Someone may not like to sit next to them, or nobody wants to be with a queer person on a group project. People make fun of them behind their back

or sometimes to their faces. Queer people may lose friends the minute they come out,” says Nair.

At JMC, an all-girls college, some professors continue to deadname queer students or misgender them despite being corrected multiple times or requested to use gender-neutral terms like students.

When a queer student at JMC tried to explain pronouns in the class, they were labelled as someone who only talks about gender issues all the time.

“I once raised my hand to say something and my teacher snapped, “There is no gender angle here. Keep your hand down”,” said the student, not willing to be identified.

Queer students are often told by fellow students that some jokes can’t be cracked in front of them because they won’t laugh. Or that being a lesbian or a bi-sexual in a girls’ college must be bliss since they are surrounded by girls.

Nair explains that the faculty are immune to queer students’ challenges and don’t even bother attending sensitisation workshops organised in colleges.

“They do not see mental health of queer-trans people as a matter of life and death. They do not understand the gravity of being a queer young student in a college and the kind of struggles they might have to go through. They see it as a fad,” says Nair.

The grievance redressal mechanism in colleges to address homophobia is broken and ill-equipped to deal with it. Such complaints are addressed by the anti-ragging cell and internal complaints committees. But most of the queer students do not take this route because of unresolved past complaints. Or, when abuse happens in virtual spaces like informal WhatsApp and Instagram groups, it falls out of the purview of the college authorities, they claim.

When Priya reported an incident of sexual abuse on campus, the administration allegedly told her that her abuser is suicidal so no action can be taken against her. In Zakir Husain Delhi College, posters put up by the queer collective are often torn and queer students are constantly mocked on their attire, piercings, hair colour and choice of clothes, jewellery or make up.

The abuse in virtual spaces where abusers can hide behind the veil of anonymity is worse, say students.

An Instagram page allegedly started by the Hindu College students called queer persons “brainwashed” and “mentally ill”. In a group of SGGCC students, messages saying “stop this rainbow bullshit” and a photo of a trans person with a caption “what a clown world we are living in” were circulated. Other messages said that queer people are more likely to get HIV-AIDS.

In October, in Zakir Husain College, two Google forms (which are publicly available on the informal queer collective's Instagram page) to join the queer collective were filled by anonymous people. These were full of homophobic slurs mocking and shaming the collective, says Arnab.

In 2020, in an unofficial college WhatsApp group when Nikhil requested members to not use abusive language, he became their soft target.

"I still remember the horror of opening that group and reading the messages. The number 69 was put in different context, with me tagged in a sexually suggestive manner. I became the butt of jokes in a public group of 256 people. I was not even out with my sexuality at that point. I was having borderline panic attacks. This was when I had just entered college. This was a complete shock," says Nikhil.

"Nikhil's complaint went to the women development cell. They said they cannot do anything about it since it's not a women's issue," says Ankit.

Ankit himself was hoping to meet welcoming peers when he joined college. In high school, he would often have mental breakdowns. He would lock himself in his bathroom and cry for hours, tired of the constant bullying in school and neighbourhood. He would change his path and cross dirty, poorly-lit lanes to avoid boys who would tease and harass him.

His home was no comfort to him either. He is not allowed to lock the door of his room or work with his laptop screen sheltered. Last year, a girl from his neighbourhood told his parents that he attended a pride parade. The warning from his father, a policeman in Delhi, was curt.

"We bury 'such people' alive," his father told him, referring to queer persons. His mother told him that she will disown him if he comes out as queer.

He hoped college would be different.

On his first day, he was outed by a friend in a group. When he admitted that he is queer, the boy sitting next to him jumped to his feet and said, "Don't try hitting on me".

"The moment I had the courage to accept myself, a guy came and stomped on it," recalled Ankit.

When Ankit was given the warning from his father, he went into his shell. Nikhil and other queer members of the collective noticed it and helped him come out of his depression.

Ankit and Nikhil then became instrumental in bringing change on campus. As part of the informal collective, they provide strong support to queer students on campus

who are still confused about their identity or afraid to openly come out. Queer students have confided in them personally and on their social media accounts.

Colleges are not mandated to have queer collectives. The guidelines of University Grants Commission (UGC) are also silent about these collectives. The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2019 lays down how educational institutions must be non-discriminatory for transgender persons. Any act that causes mental, physical, or emotional harm to them shall be punishable with imprisonment and fine. But the students tell ThePrint that they do not have the courage or the resources to fight these long legal battles alone.

“We have no one to go to. The most we can do is call the harassers out on our Instagram stories,” says Ankit.

### **A platform**

In colleges across Delhi University, the numbers in the informal queer collectives are swelling. From a handful at the time of initiation, some of them now have over 100 members. Though the queer collectives can’t end homophobia on campuses, they provide a support system to queer students.

For instance, in April, Miranda House queer collective organised a fundraiser to collect Rs 8,000 for a queer student who was struggling from anxiety, depression, and trauma due to a history of abuse at their household. Previously, a similar fundraiser had collected Rs 14,000 for them, which paid for their 14 therapy sessions. Many more such fundraisers are organised by the college’s queer collective.

In collaboration with Hindu College, Miranda House queer collective also organised a workshop last month on the legal capacity of queer-trans students. The discussion covered the rights, options and facilities available to queer persons in educational institutions.

But while Miranda College queer collective is recognised, others conduct their activities without any institutional support. Recognition, they say, will allow them to book amphitheatres and auditoriums on campus and they won’t have to worry about arranging logistics and other equipment. Recognised societies in colleges also get funds from the management and, in some colleges, students get credits and attendance rebate for participating in collectives.

“A lot of students on campus were very excited and enthusiastic to know that there was a queer collective simply because they felt that there was an organisation that represented their wants and needs and interests. Something they can rely on if they face any issues or any difficulty in regards to their gender identity or their sexuality,”

said Mauli Kaushik, senior coordinator, Lady Shri Ram College queer collective, which was officially recognised in February.

The students' body in LSR conducted a large on-campus survey to assess the need for a queer collective and the response they received was overwhelming. Almost 90 % of the students felt that the college needs a queer cell. While 21 % students identify themselves as part of the LGBTQIA+ community, more than 52 % showed interest in participating with the collective. 68 % students believed that they or someone they know would feel more included if the campus has a queer collective.

“Now that we are recognised, we can simply fill a form to get a venue booked, get speakers. We now have a budget approved. Had we not had it, we would have faced serious setbacks,” says Vanshika Gur, senior coordinator, LSR queer collective.

In colleges where queer collectives are recognised, the sensitisation about queer issues has improved, students claim.

Miranda House in north campus was one of the first colleges to have a recognised queer collective in 2018. At orientation and fests, they get to present themselves just like other societies.

But everyday otherising continues nevertheless.

“Sometimes we get looks from people from the administration department when we go there for the collective's work. There are hush-hush conversations. This makes us uncomfortable,” says Shreya Srikoti, treasurer, Miranda House queer collective.

The credit for colleges slowly moving toward inclusivity goes to queer students on campus, says the south campus professor.

“Five years ago, it was impossible to invite certain kinds of people on the campus, or to hold certain kinds of events. That has changed now. It is all due to the energies the students have spent, their struggles, and the pain that they have gone through,” says the professor.

Once the queer collectives are functioning, talk of deepening the diversity by acknowledging intersectionality has begun too.

“Once I proposed that there should be two presidents and one should be from a marginalised caste. The collective members could not understand why we needed it. But like any other collective, it will take time for the queer collectives to be more refined,” says Osheen Dahiwalé, head of study and discussion vertical, Miranda House queer collective.

## **A tragic end**

On 5 April, Jesus and Mary College lost its pioneer of queer rights—Sam, 20.

Sam was shunned by his family. He lived alone in a room in the north campus, slept only a few hours at night, and did odd jobs to make enough to survive. A week before his tragic end, he could barely push himself out of bed to brush and bathe. His mental health had visibly deteriorated. But, his friends allege, Sam's professors turned a blind eye to this.

"He had asked for an extension for an assignment. He was in no mental state to write it. But it was not granted to him," said Sam's friend from JMC. His unwelcoming family was perhaps the trigger, the friend suspects.

Sam's death not just scattered the queer community in JMC, it rattled his friends across Delhi University.

"He had no money to eat, but he was the first one to help others. He would foster people's pets, organise fund raisers for needy students and wanted to establish a south campus queer collective," said Sam's friend.

But the community failed Sam. His identity was held invalid by his family, society, and his educational institution.

"The faculty of the department where Sam studied did not step out of their rooms for a week. One teacher broke down in class and asked students how she could help. But were they ever approachable when Sam needed them?" says one of Sam's friends, angry.

When the students at JMC wanted to organise a memorial for Sam and hold a meeting later, the principal called them and allegedly asked them to only keep the memorial.

On a small pin board, Sam's friends left notes around his smiling photos. "I am so ashamed of myself. We failed you," said one note.

Posters in neon colours on the pin-board was another attempt by queer students at the campus at being heard – "Stop misgendering deadnaming", "All women's institutions don't mean we're all girls" "Gender sensitisation for faculty and students body".

But the faculty from the department where Sam was enrolled did not even attend it.

*Note: Names of students with an asterisk (\*) next to them have been changed on request to protect their identity.*

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<https://theprint.in/feature/delhi-university-is-the-new-battleground-for-queer-students-stigma-suppression-and-suicide/1249976/>



## 24. I'm a transman and I need a gynaecologist

*Priya M Menon / The Times of India / October 21, 2022*

An SC Verdict Says ‘Woman’ Includes persons, other than cis-gender women, who need access to medical termination of pregnancy. So, why are some unhappy?

When Bharat visited a gynaecologist a few years ago, the doctor was initially confused why a bearded young man was approaching her for a pelvic exam. It took some time to explain to her that he was a trans man who had retained his female reproductive organs though he had undergone hormone replacement therapy (HRT).

“I had undergone a mastectomy but the doctor advised me to wait till I was 35 before I had a hysterectomy. So I need to visit gynaecologists for my check-ups but many of them are surprised. Some though are judgmental and treat me like I am abnormal so I feel alienated and don’t feel like going for appointments,” says 28-year-old Bharat.

This is just one of the numerous healthcare issues faced by trans men. That’s why the Supreme Court’s recent landmark judgment, providing clarity over the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act and Rules (MTP Act), is a significant one for the rainbow community. It stated that the term ‘woman’ in the judgment would include “persons other than cis-gender women who may require access to safe medical termination of their pregnancies”, recognising the healthcare and reproductive rights and needs of the trans and queer community – not just the right to safe abortions but also medical screenings and gynaecological care.

“People assume that when transmasculine people take HRT, their periods automatically stop, but that’s not always the case,” says Tarun, a Chennai-based man of trans experience and LGBTQIA+ affirmative counsellor. “It varies from person to person and depends on genetics and family history. They can get abdominal cramps, etc and need to reach out to a gynaecologist. But not all doctors are affirmative (acknowledging the existence of diversities in gender identities).”

Taking testosterone can also cause vaginal dryness, making intercourse painful, says the trans activist. “Some may want to have sex and carry a baby to term. Whether it’s for pregnancy or abortion, care is often not available to transmasculine people,” says Tarun, adding that many suffer from pelvic inflammatory diseases, vaginal itching or atrophy, sexually transmitted infections, atrophy of ovaries when it has been retained after hysterectomy, and abdominal cramps. “Often, people end up self-medicating, putting themselves at risk.”

Some community members like Tarun are not happy with the judgment, as it clubs transmen with cis women. “Grouping people of other identities as women is dysphoric,” he says.

Advocate Sudha Ramalingam feels that the judgment is a welcome step forward. “It is much needed, especially as trans people are often not seen as persons who are worthy enough. I am glad the courts are now addressing this issue and any shortcoming it has can be addressed later.”

Other members of the community, like Mumbai-based transman Mridul, say the SC verdict is very heartening. “For the first time, the court has recognised the difference between cis and transgender people. Also, not all trans people transition medically. Many are forced into marriages and give birth,” he says. “And even if people opt for HRT, not all may do a hysterectomy. All of them need medical and gynaecological care, as doctors ask for regular screenings if they have a family history of cysts or ovarian cancer.”

However, gynaecological care is often not accessible, says the trans activist. “Though there are many campaigns on menstrual hygiene, they target only cis women, trans men are not on the radar,” says Mridul.

A visit to a gynaecologist can be a scary experience for even cis women but for a trans man, it can trigger dysphoria. “Most doctors assume the person walking in identifies as a woman, so even the way they talk or pronouns they use are not right,” he says.

Very few trans men can afford a hysterectomy. “They often come from underprivileged backgrounds, have no steady job or income, and are disowned by their families,” says Tarun.

The ones who do opt for a hysterectomy face a new set of challenges. “My doctor was very understanding but since I had a beard and looked like a man, he didn’t know which ward to put me in as cis women may feel uncomfortable with a man in their midst,” says Mridul.

Chennai-based gynaecologist Dr Prabha Swaminathan, who has been working with the trans community, says transmasculine people also need gynaecological care. “Sometimes, instead of breast removal, they have only the fat sucked out, if so they need mammograms as cancer develops in the ducts. They also need access to contraception, correct information about it, access to the HPV vaccine, which prevents cervical cancer; screening for STIs, as well as pap smears and support if they need abortions,” says Dr Swaminathan. “Taking testosterone also increases the libido, so they can suffer from depression if they are unable to find a partner who is sensitive to their needs.”

There is also a need for more awareness and sensitisation among the medical community, she says. “That’s why the National Medical Commission released an advisory regarding the LGBTQIA+ community and the necessary changes in the competencies of its competency-based medical education curriculum. The body also ordered publishers and medical schools to edit textbooks and curricula to exclude discriminatory and unscientific portrayals of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex people,” she says. “Definitive questions about it also need to be included in question papers so students read up and are tested on it.”

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<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chennai/im-a-trans-man-and-i-need-a-gynaecologist/articleshow/95000525.cms>



## 25. Violence, torture, sexual assault: What it's like to be trans in an Indian prison

*Shikha Sharma* / [www.youthkiawaaz.com](http://www.youthkiawaaz.com) / December 30, 2022

When Shakti\*, a transman, informed officials that he had undergone an upper body operation and was on a monthly dose of testosterone, he was ridiculed. *“The lady doctor asked me to strip, and when I refused, two prison officials forcefully undressed me. Everyone kept staring at my private parts and made fun of the stitches on my chest,”* he recalls.

Kamala\*, a transwoman, found herself in a male prison, where she was constantly raped by male inmates. *“I was threatened to keep quiet by the other prisoners, and they kept asking me for sexual gratification. I had severe haemorrhoids with infection and puss, to an extent that I was unable to walk. I was taken to a doctor and then kept in an isolation ward,”* she talks of her experience of incarceration.

When 19-year-old Ishu\*, another transwoman, was incarcerated in Bengaluru Central Prison, she developed a serious infection in her silicone implants. When she told the prison medical officer about it, she was taken lightly and put on generic painkillers. She was only sent to an outside hospital after a legal advocacy team intervened in her case.

The experiences of the three trans persons aren't just one-off incidents, but the lived realities of hundreds of transgender people incarcerated in Indian prisons presently. While the very nature of prisons makes prisoners a vulnerable category on their own, transgender persons in India's prison systems remain the most invisible among all vulnerable groups, and at a greater risk of both physical and sexual abuse from prison officials, as well as medical negligence.

According to studies, transgender prisoners also experience an amplification of trauma underpinned due to lack of legal gender recognition, inability to gender-affirm, discrimination, transphobia, gender maltreatment and violence by other prisoners and prison staff.

### **What Data Says**

Just how invisible transgender persons are in the Indian prison system can be gauged from the near absence of data about them. For example, the National Crime Records Bureau's Prison Statistics still reports data of prisoners in the male-female binary.

A study conducted by Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) and University of Dundee, found that just 9 out of 34 Indian states and union territories – recorded data on prisoners outside of male and female binary

While others like Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Chhattisgarh, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Chandigarh, and Andaman & Nicobar Islands did not record data of Transgender inmates separately at all, in states like Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, New Delhi, West Bengal etc., it was found that there was no internal uniformity in jail record-keeping.

The absence of a proper mechanism or uniformity in the maintenance of data at the national and state level means it is difficult to estimate their exact numbers. According to data, 214 transgender persons are recorded to be imprisoned in different prisons throughout the country, but experts say that this number is likely to be much higher.

The absence of a proper mechanism also means that they are prone to misgendering – something that has a direct consequence on their treatment by prison officials during their admission to prisons.

While Model Prison Manual Rules (MPM) dictate that specific admission process with respect to recording prisoner information, physical search, medical examination of inmates and allocation of wards, transgender persons face specific problems with respect to these procedures.

Particularly problematic is the issue of body searches. While prison rules call for male prisoners being searched by male staff, and female prisoners by females, currently there exists no policy on search procedures for transgender prisoners. Due to this, procedures like strip search and superficial checking can be very invasive and affect the individual's dignity.

Medical examination of the individuals and their placement within prisons are the two other aspects that require careful consideration. For example, the CHRI report that gathered data on this found that presently there is no uniform policy across states for placement of transgender prisoners. In absence of a uniform policy, different states follow different procedures, with some placing prisoners as per gender mentioned in court warrants, or on the basis of a medical officer's advice.

*“This reduces both gender and gender identity to genitalia, which is violative to the experience of transgender persons. Further, this determination of gender identity through an inspection of genitalia, removes scope for negotiations of safety and comfort that the transgender person could avail through the self- determination of gender identity,”* scholars Arijit Ghosh and Sai Bouroythu say.

## **When Law Is Not Enough**

Indian courts have repeatedly upheld the right of trans people for government's recognition on their own terms, without mandatory recognition or discrimination. In 2014, in its landmark National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) versus Union of India judgement, the Supreme Court of India had ruled that transgender people should be recognised as a third gender.

Amongst its directions, the court had backed transgender persons right to self-determination of gender identity, legal recognition of the transgender identity, establishment of transgender welfare boards, and direction to governments at the central and state level to devise policies for inclusion of the community.

Unfortunately, the implementation of the judgment has been found lacking, with prejudice against the community, still reflecting through colonial era laws, as well as a new set of policies set out by the government. A case in point is the The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, that was enacted in 2019, but several sections of which have been challenged in the Supreme Court of India, with trans activists saying that some of the rules of the act violate the provisions of the Act itself.

For example, while the NALSA judgment allowed self-determination of gender, the 2019 Act gives the district magistrate power to recognize a person as trans. It also specifies that to identify as male or as female, a proof of surgery be supplied to the magistrate – something that goes against the idea of self-determination.

Activists say that the 2019 Act also institutionalizes legal discrimination since it makes sexual abuse against transgender people by just “6 months of imprisonment and fine”, which is much less than the punishment for rape against women that is punishable by seven years, but that may also be for life or for a term extending to ten years, and also liable for fine.

## **Way Forward**

While India has taken its first steps to enable legal provisions with respect to transgender people, just recognition of the community's rights are not enough. It is important for the process to go beyond, and gather data on the experience of the community within the prison system and focus on specific vulnerabilities faced by them.

To begin with, state governments and prison systems need to make facilities for inmates to be able to self-identify as transgender. They also need to review their existing acts and rules to ensure recognition of third gender as a special category in documentation, special search procedures, as well as placement criteria with emphasis on 'identity-based placement' instead of it being genitalia based.

Specific issues that require action include violence experienced by the community based on gender identity, as well as devising measures that take into account specific medical needs of transgender people.

*“Prison administrators must provide all transgender persons adequate access to medical care and counselling, including with regard to reproductive health, access to HIV/ AIDS information and access to hormonal or other therapy as well as to gender reassignment treatments where desired”,* said the CHRI report.

Lastly, it is essential that any laws passed with relation to the community have the community’s consultation. Any efforts to bring in reforms without talking to the community first will only lead to botched policymaking and further resistance from the community due to the same.

*\*names changed*

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<https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/2022/12/violence-torture-sexual-assault-what-its-like-to-be-trans-in-an-indian-prison>



## **BREAKING BOUNDARIES: EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH SPORTS**

In every corner of India, the spirit of empowerment thrives through the stories of young women breaking free from gender norms, societal disapproval, and economic challenges, all through their involvement in sports. From the bustling streets of Kolkata to the serene landscapes of Assam's Bodoland and the dusty grounds of Phoolia Kalan in Bhilwara, these narratives reflect the transformative power of sports in empowering women and challenging traditional roles. The resilience of teenage girls in Kolkata, the transformative impact of Khomlainai wrestling in Assam, and the passion for hockey that has flourished in Phoolia Kalan are compellingly captured by **Paromita Chatterjee**, **Sayantani Deb**, and **Kanaram Mundiari**. These stories of young women's passion, determination, and resilience, challenge societal norms inspiring others to pursue their dreams beyond traditional roles, making for riveting reading.

## 26. Open Field

*Paromita Chatterjee / The Caravan / April 1, 2022*

In the early morning fog, a group of teenage girls in jerseys and fluorescent yellow socks stand in an open field. In the foreground lies a grimy ball and a goal post—its makeshift net newly fixed. In the distance, the girls stand in a line, spaced unevenly, some with hands clasped, seeming unsure about what is to happen, yet leaning in intently. Many are about to play football for the first time in their lives.

This was the scene at the Park Circus grounds in Kolkata when the photographer Paromita Chatterjee visited one morning in 2018. The girls were being taught football as part of a training camp organised by the non-profit Shreeja India, which aims to empower women from marginalised communities. Elsewhere on the field, boys played cricket, others jogged. But the crowds gathered to watch the girls.

What intrigued Chatterjee most was the reaction of onlookers to the idea of girls playing football. She heard disparaging comments from the public—“this must be some commercial”—and saw bewildered, smug expressions. When Chatterjee spoke to the girls on the field, a starkly different narrative emerged. She was struck by their enthusiasm and zeal, “the way they were ready to come to practice early in the morning.” Chatterjee said the contrast between the determination of the girls and the disdain from onlookers compelled her to pursue this as a photography project.

Tecoma flowers, which the girls carried with them, lie on the field after a game. While football is especially popular in West Bengal, it is traditionally imagined as a masculine sport.

Several sports have add-on expenses related to gear and equipment. However, football is a cost-effective and affordable game. “All you need are footballs and a space to practise,” Shib Shankar Dasgupta, the founder of Shreeja India, told Chatterjee.

Many of the participants come from underprivileged communities—some are school dropouts faced with poverty, others have dealt with physical abuse. The camps attempt to inculcate team spirit and give them a new collective identity.

Since 2018, Chatterjee has visited Shreeja India’s football training camps in three districts in West Bengal—urban Kolkata, and the rural areas of Birbhum and East Bardhaman. Her resulting photo project, titled “Dribbling Past Patriarchy,” explores what it means for women to be playing football in a society that continues to constrict them. Her images probe gender, identity and the public gaze. The photographs depict intimate moments such as folding a team jersey after a game, or

lying on bare grass, dead beat but uninhibited. Yet, they also make visible external power dynamics, placing the women in a large open field that becomes a metaphor for their story. The field is both constraining and freeing, a place where they are watched and judged, and yet a place that gradually becomes a site of liberation.

Football is especially popular in West Bengal—it is customary to see boys in local neighbourhoods kicking a ball in the open, out in the afternoon sun. But societal norms more routinely keep women indoors. In many ways, this is what makes girls playing football a small act of subversion and defiance. Chatterjee said football was “unimaginable” for the girls before they began playing. Collectively, her images attempt to normalise this seemingly incongruous act.

Manju Baskey, a 14-year-old resident of Belkuli village in the East Bardhaman district, has faced physical and mental abuse from her step father. She was also forced to drop out of school for two years. When she joined the football camp, she was able to leave behind her struggles at home and focus on the game. She is gradually becoming one of the best players at the camp.

Most of the camps’ participants come from underprivileged backgrounds—some have dropped out of school because their parents could not afford the fees or chose to educate their boys over the girls, others have been forced to stay home and be confined to household chores, still others have dealt with physical abuse. In many cases, parents were initially resistant and refused to send their daughters to the football camps. The non-profit had to often intervene and convince the families. Chatterjee recounted a common refrain that the girls heard from family members and neighbours. “Who is going to marry you if you play a boys’ game?” Chatterjee said the girls were asked. “If you get hurt, or get a scar on your face, who is going to marry you? This is a man’s game.”

The non-profit provided the teams with jerseys, shorts and shoes in some camps, where funding made it possible. In other instances, the girls played in their regular clothes, and sometimes barefoot. People often criticised the shorts that the girls wore during the game. Chatterjee recalled the story of Sonia Khatoon, an 18-year-old girl she met at the Bardhaman camp. “She broke down in front of me,” Chatterjee said. Khatoon had been ridiculed by her neighbours for “showing skin,” but what upset Khatoon was when her mother criticised her shorts too. “It didn’t hurt me when others said it, but it hurt me most when my mother also did,” Chatterjee said Khatoon told her.

Because of such complaints, some girls would only change into their football gear at the field site. That too came with its challenges. Referring to a camp in the Rajnagar block in Birbhum district, Chatterjee said, “They didn’t have a proper changing room.” She continued, “There was a little forest, they would go behind the

bushes in a forest, one would guard the other and they would change into the jerseys and shorts.”

The reactions the girls faced from society often went beyond how they dressed, questioning even their identities. “I love wearing lipstick,” Chatterjee said one of the players told her. “When I went to a marriage function, they would say, ‘In the day you’re going out and playing football and at night you’re wearing lipstick, so what are you, a girl or a man or somewhere in between?’”

Participants from the Rajnagar block in Birbhum district, a predominantly tribal area, gather before a game. Many of them are first-generation learners who are playing football for the first time in their lives.

Women in sports face various psychological, social and cultural constraints. Such barriers prevent them from regular training and staying involved in the game.

As she heard the girls’ stories, Chatterjee found that she could relate. Suddenly, the parallels between their seemingly disparate lives became evident to her. She remembered her struggles as a photographer in what is traditionally seen as a male space. Chatterjee recounted how a male mentor she looked up to had told her to erase her femininity.

“When you’re out in the field, you should be manly, you shouldn’t do girly things, you shouldn’t be feminine while working in the field,” Chatterjee said her mentor constantly told her. “The person would tell me to man up and not be womanly.” Initially, Chatterjee tried to follow his advice even though it left her confused. She said she never wore eyeliner or lipstick in the field. “Then I realised someday that I am not being myself, I am becoming him,” she continued. “It was disturbing.” It was a struggle to rid herself of those early influences, but Chatterjee said she gradually learnt how to express herself through her work. She found her calling when she began focusing on women’s issues.

Referring to the girls, she added, “I identified with what they are facing.” Soon, a symbiotic relationship emerged. “When I started interacting with these girls being myself, they opened up to me more,” Chatterjee said. “They also related to my story.”

Savitri Hembram, a ninth-grade student, at the Birbhum camp. Her parents work as farmers and her brother is an agricultural labourer. She hopes to graduate from school and pursue football professionally. She said the game inspires her to be a better version of herself.

When Oli Marandi joined the training camp at Birbhum, she was reticent and hesitated to speak up. A year later, she had grown into a successful player and student, scoring among the highest marks in school. She also teaches young children

in a programme meant to educate first-generation girls from indigenous communities. In future, she hopes to be a footballer and a teacher.

Khushnumah, a 15-year-old player at the Kolkata camp, spoke of how her neighbours would mock her for wearing shorts. “They questioned our need to learn a sport meant for boys,” Khushnumah told Chatterjee. In the end, Khushnumah’s mother protested and stood up for her, insisting that boys and girls are equal. “She is my girl and I want her to play football,” Khushnumah’s mother told the neighbours.

For the girls, seeing a woman as a photographer was a new experience. “They have seen a cameraman, they didn’t know something like a camerawoman can exist,” she said. “Some would call me ‘Cameraman *didi*.’”—Cameraman sister. “They would be very curious that being a woman I am out alone and shooting them, and they would tell me you are brave. I would tell them so are you.” Through these conversations, Chatterjee said, the girls helped her find a part of herself that she had lost.

“When people call me a woman photographer, I say I am a photographer,” Chatterjee said. “Similarly, this game does not depend on which gender is playing it. The girls would tell me the same thing, that ‘This is a game we love, it does not describe our gender.’”

Chatterjee’s photographs challenge these fixed identities. In some images, the viewer is compelled to recognise gender—the femininity of the players is foregrounded. In these photographs, the women are seen unabashedly being women, their hair open in the wind even as they play. In other images, the tactile objects of the sport supersede the players—the ball, the net, the knee-high socks, the jerseys and the open field itself are photographed dwarfing the individual. Traditionally, these are the totems of a masculine game. Yet in Chatterjee’s photographs, they are dispossessed of their masculinity. These everyday sport objects are imbued with a deeper meaning—in a sense, they transcend gender, they are the instruments with which these girls are confronting power structures. They become the insignia of a newer, more complex and nuanced identity.

When the girls play in an open field, many people stop to watch them. Some are disparaging and condescending. A few others, mostly women, are sometimes inspired and intrigued. For most people, however, watching women play football is a peculiar experience.

The girls take a break during football practice. Their ages range from eight to 18. Shreeja India provides the girls with nutrition before games.

Shanti Murmu, Puja Murmu and Anjana Hembram, members of the Santhal indigenous community in Birbhum district, look at a world map for the first time in

their lives. In addition to field training, Shreeja India also conducts theory workshops to introduce the girls to the wider world.

Chatterjee's work grapples with a paradox at the heart of gender realities: the liberty to be forthrightly a woman, to not have to hide or subdue your womanhood, nor be compelled to lose its visible markers, and yet to not be defined by it, or reduced to it—to inhabit that often elusive space where one is truly freed.

It is this search for freedom and self-expression that Chatterjee said drives the girls to football. "I love the way men express themselves after they win a goal, they take off their shirt and run facing the sky. It gives me a lot of happiness looking at it," Chatterjee said one of the girls told her. "When I score a goal, I can't take off my shirt, but when I run facing the sky, I feel I did it, I feel I can do anything."

At their homes, things are often bleak—the girls are mistreated, faced with poverty, or restricted to household work. But on the field, the game frees them. "They are celebrating life in a way they can't at home," Chatterjee said. The sport gives the girls a sense of belonging, confidence, and a new collective identity. "They are patting each other's back, having that high five, running without limit facing the sky, that gives them the motivation to come back tomorrow morning."

As women watched the girls play at the Bardhaman camp, it seemed to motivate them. "Whatever has been done in our lives we cannot change," Chatterjee said the women told her. "But our children can do much better. Seeing the girls playing the game is very inspiring, we feel so free."

Sonali Soren, an eleventh-grade student and a resident of the East Bardhaman district, is among the best players at the camp. She has won state-level tournaments and is currently being considered for the national Indian women's football team, to play in the 2024 Women's World Cup. Sonali's father is a marginal farmer with a small landholding. She hopes to one day represent India as a footballer.

Sonia Khatoon, an eleventh-grade student, faced ridicule from those in her community and her family for wearing shorts. She challenged their preconceptions about gender and sport, and continued to play. She has now inspired her six-year-old sister, who also wants to grow up and play football.

Sometimes, watching the girls motivates other women too. In one photo, a group of three women are seen in the foreground looking at the girls playing in the distance. Two are holding young children. The image emphasises the act of looking outward even as the onlookers are sitting stagnant. "Whatever has been done in our lives, we cannot change," Chatterjee said the women onlookers told her. "But our children can do much better. Seeing the girls playing the game is very inspiring, we feel so free."

Chatterjee visited the camp in Birbhum twice, once in early 2019, when it had just begun, and then again at the end of the year. At first, the girls were reticent, shy, and could not speak to a stranger. On her second trip, only nine months later, she found that they had developed inter-personal skills and were playing fiercely.

In addition to football coaching, which is the primary purpose of the camps, Shreeja India helps the girls enrol in school. It also conducts workshops to introduce the girls to the wider world. Many of them had never seen professional footballers or women sportspersons, or had women role models. They are shown “clippings of some great footballers, speeches of leaders, other women sportsmen who have achieved something, to show that ‘this is also possible by women,’” Chatterjee said.

The sports attire gave the girls a new team identity. Often, neighbours and family members criticised the way they dressed. Because of such complaints, many girls changed at the field site, and not at home. In some camps, where there was no changing room, they often went into the forest.

While the football camps have instilled a sense of passion in many girls, Chatterjee said it comes with its own internal dilemmas. She said the idea that women must be limited to the domestic arena had been ingrained in the girls. “I am a girl, I have to do household work, I know I can’t avoid it,” Chatterjee said Khatoon told her. “But I want to become a footballer one day because I want to stand on my own feet and earn my bread.”

In one of Chatterjee’s images, three young girls are sitting side by side, looking upward, their eyes wide. The image does not show us what they are looking at, yet their gaze seems to extend beyond the photo itself, as if reaching outside the confines of the frame. The girls were looking at a world map for the first time in their lives, searching for their village on it, realising in awe that their home was a tiny dot, and much lay beyond—an untrodden open field.

Sometimes, the girls played in regular clothes and barefoot. However, where funding made it possible, the non-profit provided the teams with jerseys, shorts and shoes.

Soni Sharma, a 15-year-old player, enjoys a relaxed and uninhibited moment at the Kolkata camp. While it is customary to see boys playing football outdoors, girls are more routinely confined indoors. Playing football then becomes an act of defiance for the girls. In many ways, the game frees them.

Paromita Chatterjee, a visual artist and documentary photographer based in Kolkata, has a decade of experience in the field. She has been featured in various prestigious publications like Tehelka, The Wire, BBC, among others, and is an advocate for changing photography culture as a member of Diversify Photo.



## 27. Through Khomlainai, girls in Assam find strength and fortune on the wrestling mat

*Sayantani Deb / www.101reporters.com / October 27, 2022*



The traditional Bodo wrestling helps girls from remote corners of the State put food on the table by beating rivals at competitions

Guwahati, Assam: Indira Daimary pedals for an hour to attend khomlainai classes at the Dao Hari Coaching Centre in Udalguri every morning. A traditional form of Bodo wrestling, khomlainai is not simply a sport or passion for Daimary, but a way to put food on the table. Thanks to the sport, several girls in Assam's Bodoland are now leading a decent life.

Born and brought up in a lower-middle-class family in Sarubhengra village of Udalguri, Daimary's only wish since childhood was to support her parents. "Being the eldest daughter of daily wage labourers, I have experienced poverty all my life. Managing everything, from food to clothing and education, has been difficult for my parents," says Daimary, now in her 20s.

Daimary learnt about khomlainai during a social gathering in late 2016, and entered the professional arena the very next year. There has been no looking back since then. The game not only helps her maintain physical fitness, but also brings in money through championship wins.

“I could not complete my studies due to financial constraints, but I want to at least fulfil the aspirations of my three sisters. One of them wishes to pursue nursing and work in a reputed hospital, so I plan to send her to Hyderabad for further studies,” says Daimary, the sole breadwinner of the family. With her earnings, she also renovated her house.

For teenager Sangita Kisko of Garubhasha village in Chirang, khomlainai surprised her when she least expected it. Narrating her story, Kisko shares, “I started learning Khomlainai around the age of 10. Everything was going well until my father, a government servant, decided to live separately. My mother could not make ends meet with her meagre salary as an ASHA worker.”

“I was then studying in a private English medium school that charged a good amount for admission. For Class 10, which requires a re-admission process, I decided against going there as my mother could not afford the fee.”

*Indira Daimary (left) and Sangita Kisku have both seen their lives change drastically since they started taking part in khomlainai competitions (Photos: Mijing Narzary)*

That was when she got the opportunity to participate in a khomlainai competition quite unexpectedly and register a win, earning Rs 5,000 as prize money. “It helped me to take admission in the same school,” she says.

“For me, khomlainai is everything. It has shown the path, giving me the confidence to continue with both the sport and studies braving all adversities.”

### **An age-old practice**

Khomlainai showcases the rich culture and tradition of the Bodo people, who lived in jungles until a few centuries ago. During that time, it evolved as a self-defence mechanism to protect themselves from wild animals.

Similar to kushti, khomlainai participants are identified on the basis of their aranai (traditional Bodo scarf tied around the waist), which is either in red or green colour. The red player is called agor, while green player is matha. All the words used in the game are in the Bodo language, such as khulum sewa (salute), juri (start), aobha (stop), sangrang (ready), su-bijitgiri (referee), bijitgiri (judge), khomlaigra (wrestler/player) and derhasa (winner).

During the Bhaokhungri festival held in Kokrajhar every April, a grand khomlainai competition is organised by the Government of Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), with a mission to take the traditional sport to the world and to bridge the gap between communities in the Bodoland region.

Not only Bodos and Adivasis of the BTR, even Nepali, Gorkhali, Rajbonshi Bengali, Bihari and Assamese people have taken to the game, a sure-shot way to promote harmony.

### **Finances play a key role**

All Assam Khomlainai Association general secretary Guno Shankar Wary informs that money is still a cause for concern in promoting the game.

“The Sports and Youth Welfare Department of the Government of BTR grants Rs 10 lakh annually to popularise khomlainai, along with other indigenous games. Presently, the association organises an open khomlainai championship (where everyone can participate, irrespective of age). However, it is necessary to organise sub-junior, junior and senior (both men and women) championships at a large scale. For that, we need more financial support,” he asserts.

He says organising seminars and training for coaches, judges and referees have become a problem, “A substantial increase in grants is the need of the hour. Assam Government should support us financially.”

*A grand khomlainai competition is organised by the Government of Bodoland Territorial Region each year with the motive to promote the traditional sport and bridge the gap between the communities in the Bodoland region (Photo: Mijing Narzary)*

“Fortunately, we have a handful of well-wishers from every stratum of society (businesspersons, local leaders, intellectuals, sports lovers and NGOs), who sponsor the uniforms of players or bear the cost of refreshments, accommodation and transportation. The villagers who cannot support us financially, donate rice, vegetables, fruits and eggs from their farms.”

According to Mijing Narzary, a khomlainai coach at Kokrajhar centre of the Sports Authority of India (SAI), the three winners at an inter-district khomlainai championship will get Rs 20,000, Rs 10,000, and Rs 5,000, respectively. On the other hand, an open contest will earn them Rs 70,000, Rs 60,000, and Rs 50,000, respectively. Match judges earn Rs 2,000 to 3,000 per day.

Pointing to the increasing popularity of the game, Narzary says new coaching centres have sprung up across Assam. Besides, Bodoland Territorial Areas Districts (BTAD) khomlainai training centres are mushrooming in other districts such as Goalpara, Sonitpur and Karbi-Anglong. “In residential centres, food is provided by

the authority. However, in normal centres, trainees either bring their own food or they cook.”

According to him, there are around 20 registered training centres, of which three are residential. Girls and boys in the seven to 25 years age group get trained here.

### **Road to recognition**

The big breakthrough for the game came in 2013 when Khomlainai was included in the Indigenous Games and Martial Arts (IGMA) Scheme under the Sports Authority of India. Archery, kabaddi, kalaripayattu, mukna, thang-ta, silambam, malkhamb and gatka were also part of the scheme.

“The recognition changed the way people perceived khomlainai. At first, the SAI selected 10 boys and 10 girls below the age of 14, and provided them with coaching, shoes, uniforms and an annual scholarship of Rs 6,000. This got more and more children interested,” explains Narzary.

*“We need better accommodations and female coaches to attract more girls into the sport,” says Nigita Narzary, a veteran khomlainai player and coach (Photo: Mijing Narzary)*

“If the Government of India organised khomlainai competitions at the national level, a day will come when these players can join paramilitary forces, police and Army,” Narzary says, adding that all women, irrespective of their age, should learn the sport as it is great for self-defence.

Everyone associated with the game wants a dedicated khomlainai stadium to come up in Assam. Despite feeling empowered, female players think there is room for improvement. “We need better accommodation. During tournaments, we are put up mostly in schools with untidy floors and washrooms. In addition, we need an official female coach to attract more girls into the sport,” says Nigita Narzary, a veteran khomlainai player and coach.

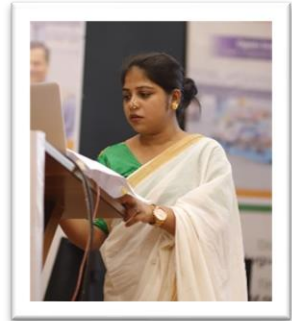
Winding up her conversation, Indira Daimary says, “I am trying in every possible way to create awareness about the game among the youth.” Meanwhile, Guno Shankar Wary dreams of a day when khomlainai is recognised by the Indian Olympic Association and will be played by people across the world.

*Edited by Rekha Pulinnoli*

*This story is part of our series on Rural Sports where we explore an exciting arena of untraversed stories. The cover photo, sourced by Mijing Narzary, shows two female players participating in a local khomlainai competition.*

Sayantani Deb, currently serving as Assistant Editor at Meadows Marketing and Communication Agency in Guwahati, has held diverse roles ranging from a staff reporter to a media consultant at various esteemed platforms including 'Eastern Chronicle,' Eclectic Northeast, Northeast Today, Assam Chief Minister's (IT Cell), and Ministry of Ayush.

[https://101reporters.com/article/society/Through\\_Khomlainai\\_girls\\_in\\_Assam\\_find\\_strength\\_and\\_fortune\\_on\\_the\\_wrestling\\_mat](https://101reporters.com/article/society/Through_Khomlainai_girls_in_Assam_find_strength_and_fortune_on_the_wrestling_mat)



## **28. Daughters' pride: Phoolia Kalan's daughters are amazing, touching the sky in hockey every year (Translated from Hindi)**

*KanaRam Mundiyyar / Rajasthan Patrika Pvt Ltd / October 14, 2022*

- **Amazing passion towards the national game - the flag is flying at the state and national level.**
- **Amidst lack of facilities, 300 girl students are practicing for 3 hours a day on the village playgrounds.**

In many villages of Phoolia Kalan tehsil of the district, a unique passion to connect daughters with the national game hockey is visible. For the last two decades, the daughters here have been performing brilliantly in state and national level competitions. Every year in the state level competition, the hockey team of Bhilwara district is being given first and second place by the players and students from the villages of Phulia region.

Rajasthan Patrika team went to the playground of Government Higher Secondary School of Hukampura Panchayat of Phoolia Kalan area and learned about the passion of hockey from the student players and physical teacher Omprakash Sen. Every year, 80 percent of the Bhilwara district team that prepares for the state level hockey competitions for 14, 17 and 19 years is being selected from Phoolia Kalan, Hukampura, Taswaria Bansa, Singari, Deoria, Doharia panchayats of this area.

Lack of facilities, yet the field is being won. More than 300 girl students in these panchayats are practicing hockey for 3 hours every day. There is a lack of facilities here, but their passion is amazing. Players Vishnukumari, Komal Jat, Karma, Neetu Choudhary, Neetu Gurjar and Vidya said that they are making their family and village proud by their good performance at the national level. According to physical teachers Omprakash Sen and Chandraprakash Vaishnav, the credit for instilling the passion for hockey in Phoolia Kalan goes to physical teacher Ratanlal Verma, who started hockey here in the year 1983.

### **Flag of Bhilwara team in Rajasthan-**

Bhilwara district has won titles every year in girls' hockey in the annual school games of the Education Department. In the 14 years from 2012 to 2021, Bhilwara was the winner 5 times, runner-up twice and stood third once in girls' hockey. Winner twice, runner-up once and third position twice in 17 years of girls' hockey.

### **This is also the reason behind the passion-**

- Keeping the performance of Bhilwara district top in state level sports.
- Getting a job as a teacher by entering B.P.Ed. and D.P.Ed.
- Preference in other government jobs under sports quota.

### **Students also top in hockey-**

Along with girl hockey, Phoolia Kalan area of the district is also flying the flag in the student field. According to educational teachers, more than 2500 students have performed in the hockey game in the last 20 years. 75 students have played hockey at the national level.

### **Phoolia Kalan: A look at girls' hockey-**

40 girl students have played at the national level in the last 15 years

700 girl students have played at the state level in the last 15 years

300 girl students are currently practicing, 80 percent of them are from Phoolia Kalan area in the team of Bhilwara district.

More than 50 PTIs have been formed from this area in the last 40 years.

KanaRam Mundiya, the Editorial Incharge at Rajasthan Patrika, Bhilwara Edition, Rajasthan, is a recognized journalist renowned for his investigative reporting skills. He has been honored with national awards by prominent figures like the former Maharaja Gaj Singh of Jodhpur and Rajasthan Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot.



## MAKING WOMEN COUNT

India, with its diverse cultural mosaic, grapples with intricate challenges hindering women's pursuit of economic independence, political representation, and environmental sustainability. Despite commendable strides towards gender equality, the intricate interplay of factors such as deep-rooted patriarchy, cultural norms, and economic disparities persistently obstruct women's progress. This section illuminates the multifaceted struggles experienced by women in various sectors and regions of India, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive policies to address these challenges.

**Aishwarya Mohanty** exposes how Odisha's annual fishing bans, aimed at conserving fish and protecting olive ridley turtles, have left women involved in allied fishing activities without compensation and livelihoods. Despite repeated demands to include women in compensation schemes, their contributions to fishing communities remain unrecognised, highlighting the need for policy changes to support their economic stability.

Climate change-induced uncertainties in rainfall and rising temperatures disproportionately affect women. **Jyoti Thakur's** article focuses on the narrative of Hausabai Jhole and others who embark on daily treks for water, emphasizing the gendered impact of water scarcity on women's education, work, and overall well-being.

The declining workforce participation rate in India is a cause for concern. **Shadab Nazmi** highlights a significant downturn in women actively seeking jobs between 2017 and 2022, resulting in a drop in the labor participation rate. Factors such as unpaid domestic work, limited mobility, and safety concerns contribute to women's reluctance to join the workforce, with crimes against women displaying a negative correlation with their employment choices.

**Rajiv Kumar Pandey** brings to the forefront the plight of domestic workers, sharing findings from a survey in Jharkhand that reveals alarming conditions, including low wages, minimal leave, and poor living conditions. Despite their education, these workers continue to face challenges in seeking help from authorities.

**Hengam Riba** underscores the paradox in Arunachal Pradesh, which, despite being matrilineal, continues to discriminate against its women. The state grapples with entrenched patriarchy, resulting in limited political representation for women. Familialism in politics and a scarcity of female leaders in student bodies further compound the issue, necessitating attention to dismantle these barriers and create a more inclusive political landscape.

**Shikha Sharma** highlights how despite rapid internet growth, only 33% of Indian women have used the internet, compared to 57% of men. Factors contributing to this disparity include rural-urban divides, income-based barriers, and regressive social norms. Addressing digital discrimination requires policies promoting digital literacy, challenging social norms, and integrating empowerment initiatives with technological innovation efforts.

The collective struggles faced by women across different regions of India underscore the imperative for intersectional policies that address economic disparities, political underrepresentation, and the gendered impact of climate change. Only through comprehensive efforts can India achieve genuine gender equality, fostering a society where women can thrive in all facets of life.

## 29. Marine fishing ban in Odisha leads to loss of income for women involved in allied activities

Aishwarya Mohanty | [india.mongabay.com](http://india.mongabay.com) | September 26, 2022

- *Annually, two types of fishing bans are imposed on Odisha's 480 km long coastline; one is a nationwide ban for two months, the other is on a 170-kilometre stretch for seven months to conserve olive ridley turtles.*
- *Of the 518,000 fishers in the marine villages of the state, around 14,000 are compensated for the livelihood loss during the seven-month fishing ban.*
- *Women involved in allied activities related to fishing, however, face economic insecurities due to the ban. Some groups have started looking for alternate occupations.*
- *Women play a key role in bringing incomes to their families in the fishing communities and argue for their work to be considered as a component at the time of compensation.*

The eastern coastal state of Odisha, with a 480-kilometre long coastline, has been imposing two fishing bans annually for over two decades in order to conserve the fish population and protect the vulnerable olive ridley sea turtles (*Lepidochelys olivacea*).

A one-time compensation is provided to the affected families for the loss of livelihood caused to the fishermen at sea, during the second ban. However, the women who are involved in allied jobs, who also play a vital role in the supply chain, mostly as retail traders at their local markets, are left to fend for themselves.

### **A dual ban for fish and turtle conservation**

Annually, two different types of fishing bans are imposed along the coast of Odisha, in accordance with Sections 2, 7 and 4 of Orissa Marine Fishing Regulation Act (OMFRA), 1982, and provisions of Wildlife Protection Act of 1972. The ban applies to all kinds of trawlers and mechanised motor boats longer than 8.5 metres.

The first ban is a seasonal nationwide fishing ban that runs from April 15 to June 14, to help with breeding of fish. The second one is a seven-month long turtle conservation ban from November 1 to May 31, in specific areas. Odisha is home to three turtle nesting sites, the Gahirmatha beach and the mouths of rivers Rushikulya and Devi, that altogether cover a coastline of 170 kilometres.

In 2010, the state introduced a seasonal ban on fishing within 20 kilometres from the seashore at these sites. While Gahirmatha has been declared as a marine sanctuary, at the other two sites, only artisanal fishing with sails and oars is permitted in limited numbers. Small mechanised and non-motorised fishing boats less than 8.5 metres long are also allowed.

A view of the Rishikulya river from the Ganjam fort. Odisha is home to three turtle nesting sites, the Gahirmatha beach and the mouths of rivers Rushikulya and Devi, that altogether cover a coastline of 170 kilometres. Photo by Sidsahu/Wikimedia Commons.

For the seven-month ban, the state government extends a one-time livelihood assistance of Rs. 7,500 to the affected fisher families. During the two-month nationwide ban, a compensation of Rs. 4,500 is provided. However, this compensation can only be availed by the families of fishers after they deposit Rs. 1,500 each. The remaining amount of Rs. 3,000 is divided amongst the Centre and the state. Additionally, the compensation is only provided to a single member of the family.

### **Reduced fishing days lead to poor socio-economic conditions**

According to the Marine Fisheries Census 2016, Odisha has 739 marine fishing villages with a population of 5.18 lakh (518,000) fishers. An annual report by the Odisha Fisheries and Animal Resources Development Department states that 10,228 fishers were compensated for the two-month ban in 2021-22, and 14,178 fishers were compensated for the seven-month ban in the same period.

“The prohibitions imposed under the ban particularly affects the traditional and small-scale fishing operations as the area available for fishing reduces. The number of fishing days are also curtailed, impacting the overall well-being of the fishermen families,” the State President of Odisha Traditional Fish Workers’ Union (OTFWU), Prasanna Behera said.

Prior to the ban, fish catch varied from 200-1,000 kilograms/day with an income ranging from Rs. 5,000 to Rs. 10,000, according to a 2014 study conducted by researchers at the Central Institute Of Freshwater Aquaculture, Odisha. The catch reduced to 25-100 kgs within 10 years of the ban, with incomes varying from Rs. 500 to Rs. 1,000 per day, the study stated.

The reduction in fish catch and the accompanying loss of income has amounted to declining socio-economic conditions of the fishing communities, in the absence of any other livelihood alternatives, according to Behera. Within the communities, the most vulnerable have been women.

## Women take up allied work to generate income

The women of the Gokharakuda village in Ganjam district leave home at six in the morning to be at the landing site, where fishermen arrive with their daily catch. The women wait for hours, at times till noon.

The fish is auctioned at these sites but the daily rates vary depending on the quantity of fish caught and the number of buyers at the site. The best quality fishes are mostly bought by traders, leaving the rest for the women buyers.

After buying fish from the landing site, the women segregate them. The good quality fish are sold in the market while the next grade of fish are washed in salt and dried to be sold as *sukhua* (dry fish) or used to make pickles.

To sell the daily catch, they cover an area in the radius of 15 kilometres, either on foot or in shared autos. The women return home in the evening with an earning of Rs. 250-350 a day. On a good sale day, a minimum income of Rs. 250 is ensured. On lean days, they are forced to sell the fish at low prices, in the absence of cold storage, earning a meagre Rs. 50-100 a day.

Aishwarya Mohanty, an independent journalist hailing from Odisha, specializes in reporting on gender, rural issues, social justice, and environmental matters.

<https://india.mongabay.com/2022/09/marine-fishing-ban-in-odisha-leads-to-loss-of-income-for-women-involved-in-allied-activities/>



## 30. Pipelines reach more homes, but as climate changes, India's women still make long marches for water

*Jyoti Thakur / www.article-14.com / August 1, 2022*

A viral video from the arid interiors of India's richest state brought water to one village, but a half century of water-supply programmes have largely failed to store rainfall and recharge groundwater. More than half—and four times as many as in 2014—of India's 191 million households now have a working water tap, according to government data. But as climate change makes rainfall more uncertain and temperatures soar, the long walks millions of Indian women make will become longer and hotter.

**Nashik district (Maharashtra):** Hausabai Jhole's routine of years was to wake up at 5 am and, before her morning gargle or tea, set off on a 2.5-km journey with other women to fetch water.

In March 2022, they did this earlier than ever to beat unseasonal and unprecedented heat, as temperatures here in this northwestern Maharashtra district soared to 35 deg C. March and April this year were the hottest on record in India.

That their lives were becoming more difficult could be attributed, in part, to the fact that local effects of climate change predicted for central India included higher temperatures and heavier, more uneven rainfall, as a January 2022 study noted.

Indeed, Nashik reported copious rainfall by June, but that did not change the lives of the women of Mahadarwaja Pada, a hamlet that is part of the village of Metghar, home to Jhole and her friends. The monsoon, as we explain later, is a period that makes water more difficult to access in these tribal-dominated, poverty stricken parts of India's most prosperous state by gross domestic product.

The journey to a public well—the scanty but only source of water until recently—was downhill and relatively easy. To return home to Mahadarwaja Pada was not as easy because it is 200 m higher than the well, which meant an arduous uphill climb in increasing heat at around 10 am, with two pots of water balanced one atop the other on their heads.

Jhole is a slight, shy woman in her 30s, dressed in a turquoise saree smeared with mud. She said she wore her sarees for up to four days without washing because water was in such short supply.

Jhole said she had been making these journeys for water even before the age of 10, when she got married. The most challenging part, she added, was to descend 35 ft

into the well, using stone handholds built into the wall, without a ladder or rope, the water levels plunging when the heat rose.

This descent and ascent of the women of Mahadarwaja Pada into the well gained local and national prominence when a video went viral in March 2022.

While the video prompted immediate corrective action, it brought to public attention, yet again, to how women bear the brunt of water of the failure of the government to address Maharashtra's water shortages, despite thousands of crores spent on hundreds of dams and a series of government programmes over half a century.

Maharashtra's failure to provide safe drinking water is echoed nationwide. A June 2018 report from the NITI Aayog, the government's think tank, said nearly 600 million people across the country faced "high to extreme water stress". A United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) India report that same year said that less than half of Indians had access to safe drinking water.

Climate change is likely to make water harder to find, with some trends already evident.

On 27 July 2022, the ministry of earth sciences informed Parliament that five states—Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Meghalaya and Nagaland— "have shown significant decreasing trends in southwest monsoon rainfall during the recent 30 years period (1989-2018)".

More than 400 million people, or more than the population of the US and Italy combined, live in these five states. But increased water stresses are emerging elsewhere. The ministry said there were also "many districts in the country, which show significant changes in southwest monsoon and annual rainfall".

Like the rest of the world, India is growing hotter, which means walks for water will be harder. The country experienced its hottest March ever in 2022, the ministry of earth sciences told Parliament, releasing another data set on 27 July.

In 2022, India reported 203 "heatwave days", five times more than the previous year. As the weather becomes more uncertain, so, too, will life for Indian women who fetch water for their families.

### **'My Entire Life Has Been Spent Fetching Water'**

"Who is not scared of heights?" said Jhole, referring to the descent into the notorious well from which she fetched water for years.

***“The well either dries up with the onset of summer or the water can be found at the bottom of the well,” said Jhole. “So, if I did not go down, someone else would have and I would not get water for the day.”***

She cited another challenge in collecting water when the heat was at its worst: to spend hours, sometimes, waiting inside the well for groundwater to seep out of the well’s dry floor and collect it in small containers.

Whether the challenge of waiting for water at the bottom of the well in the summertime or the somewhat easier four-hour journey to and fro in better weather, the task of fetching water falls to Jhole and her two sister-in-laws for the family of 10. It is what most able-bodied village women, in her village of about 300 households, must do.

*“Maza sampurn ayushya he gharatil jevayla baslela astana tambya madhe pani bharnyat gela ahe. Ani gharatil lokansathi pani dokyavarun vahun aananyasathi gela ahe* (My entire life has been spent either pouring water into a lota when my husband eats or filling and fetching the heavy pots of water for drinking, cleaning and every other activity that requires water),” said Jhole.

Women play a primary role in providing families with water, especially in rural India where 833 million people live. The length of Jhole’s daily journey for water is the Indian average for women in rural areas: 2.5 km and between three to four hours every day, according to the last such estimation available in a 2005 report by the National Commission for Women (NCW).

Such villages, in government parlance, are called “no-source” or “problem” villages, and close to 93.4 million households across India’s 649,481 villages do not have access to tap water, the minister of state for jal shakti or water resources, Prahlad Singh Patel, told Parliament in February 2022.

### **National Plan Unfolds, But No Water a Year After Pipeline**

The government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has said that its Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) will provide a household water tap to all of India’s 191 million households by 2024.

***The number of households with functional drinking water taps grew from 22 million to 40 million over six years to 2019-20 to about 80 million in August 2021 to 99 million in July 2002, according to the JJM dashboard.***

In 2022, the Mission is likely to fall 60% short of its targets, the *Business Standard* reported in March.

There was no evidence of the Mission in Metghar, although pipelines, some laid before and some after the JJM, reached 58.96% and 100% of households in the neighbouring villages of Rohile and Brahamanwade by April 2020, according to the Jal Jeevan Mission dashboard.

No water has ever flowed in those taps though.

“It’s been more than a year since a pipeline was laid in my house,” said Pratiksha Gangurde, 17, from Bhramanwade, who passed her 10th-standard in 2018 and does nothing currently except household chores, including fetching water. “We even got a tap, but no water ever came from it.”

**Article 14** sought comment from Gangadharan Devarajan, the Nashik district collector. “I will not talk, sorry,” he said.

“It is raining non stop here,” said Gangurde. “But my mother, like everybody, still goes to a well at the outskirts of the village to fill water even for drinking.”

Since 1951, the Indian government has spent Rs 183,362 crore or \$28 billion on rural drinking water programmes, noted a 2017 evaluation of the National Rural Drinking Water Programme, now subsumed into the Jal Jeevan Mission, by the Safe Water Network, a global nonprofit and consultancy.

The evaluation, prepared in consultation with the ministry of drinking water and sanitation, warned that India faced growing water contamination, over-reliance on depleted groundwater sources, “inadequate” operations and maintenance process and habitations with “slip backs”, jargon for getting but losing water supply.

*Despite progress, the burden of finding and fetching drinking water still falls on millions of women. Every year, women in rural India trek for more than 14,000 km, according to the NCW study. That is more than the distance from India to the US.*

### **A Viral Video Fixes a Local Problem**

The situation for Jhole’s hamlet changed in April when their death-defying descent and ascent was reported by Vikas Kajale, a local reporter, and gained state and national attention.

“I was equally stunned that women from Mahadarwaja hamlet of Metghar village in Trimbakeshwar, Nashik were risking their lives and descending into a well for a single pot of water,” Maharashtra’s then environment and climate change minister Aaditya Thackeray tweeted.

Water tankers were dispatched to Mahadarwaja Pada and, a few days later, Thackeray visited the hamlet, after which government workers installed a motor

pump that drew water through a 1.2-km pipeline from a newly dug well and brought it to new blue and white storage tanks.

Although Jhole's daily routine of house and farm work left her without enough time to rest during the day, she expressed some relief. She gets water from the new tanks now, a couple of minutes' walk from her home.

"At least I will be able to peacefully sleep now," she said.

### **Overflowing Dams, But Little Water**

Viral videos may have brought some succour to the women of Mahadarwaja Pada, but there is little relief for thousands of others across Nashik district, which contains within its borders 24 large and medium dams and received rainfall heavy enough this monsoon to cause nine of these dams to overflow.

So, why do women make those long walks to fetch water?

One reason: uneven rainfall in a state that has witnessed widespread corruption and mismanagement of its water resources. Some experts also blamed an ambitious six-year-old Maharashtra government programme to build ponds for those who needed them as being responsible for an increased cornering of water resources by rich landlords.

An expert at a nonprofit called WOTR or Watershed Organisation Trust, which works in 5,200 villages in nine states, said the region's rocky hills cause rainfall to flow away, with "insignificant recharge" of aquifers because of impervious basalt.

"So, obviously the terrain doesn't let the water percolate through, and groundwater remains bereft of required recharge, in spite of the incessant downpours that the district witnesses," said Eshwar Kale, a senior researcher with a PhD in water policy and governance, at WOTR's Centre for Resilience Studies in Pune.

To address Maharashtra's continued state of water scarcity, then chief minister (and currently deputy chief minister) Devendra Fadnavis of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) announced in 2016 a programme that would construct farm ponds. Popularly known as "*Magel Tyala Shet Tale*" or whoever asks will get a pond, the plan was to be implemented through the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), simultaneously providing rural jobs.

*Another programme that Fadnavis introduced, the Jalyukt Shivar Abhiyan (JSA), was supposed to make Maharashtra drought-free by 2019. While it found some success, the benefits were largely cornered by richer farmers, as IndiaSpend reported in 2016.*

The JSA aimed to irrigate 19,059 of 40,000 villages in Maharashtra in 22 drought-affected districts by 2019. As many as 41,000 of proposed 0.14 million watershed projects were completed in one year, according to the government.

In 2020, a report from the government auditor, the Comptroller and Auditor General, said that Rs 9,674 cr had been spent on the JSA with a "lack of transparency" with "little impact" on groundwater levels.

The JSA and the pond programme were not the first attempts to address Maharashtra's perennial water crisis. The first employment guarantee scheme in Maharashtra was launched half a century ago in 1972, when a crippling drought forced even rich farmers to work as farm labourers.

### **Govt Plan Leads to Privatisation of Water**

"The idea behind the introduction of the farm ponds, which are getting constructed at a fast rate, was to collect rainwater that would otherwise have flowed out of the field," said Kale. "

"However, the problem really began with the privatisation of water," said Kale. "Many big and resource-rich landholders started heavily extracting the groundwater and storing that in their personal ponds."

The pond programme was primarily conceived to provide water for cash crops, such as grapes, pomegranates and sugarcane. Nashik, touted as India's grape heartland, with its vineyards and wineries, accounts for 80% of Maharashtra's grapes, which require a lot of water.

A 2017 commentary by Kale said the programme had failed to harvest rain water, and farm ponds accentuated the water crisis by using impervious plastic as lining, which stopped the recharge of groundwater.

"In practice, it is impossible to find a functioning farm pond where rainwater is collected and stored," wrote Kale in the 2017 commentary, published in the *Economic and Political Weekly*.

"In fact, in direct contradiction to the purpose of building such ponds, most of the farm pond owners still extract groundwater from dug wells and borewells and then store it in the same farm ponds," wrote Kale. "Therefore, farm ponds have become the new way for groundwater extraction and have increased the competition amongst farmers to further extract groundwater."

## The Videos That Made No Difference

During a particularly severe drought in 2019, the Maharashtra government sent more tankers into rural parts than it ever had. Indeed, across India, water tankers continue to be a lifeline for parched villages.

*But Jhole's hamlet of Mahadarwaja Pada, one of many tribal-dominated areas of Trimbakeshwar taluka, has never received a tanker, even during the peak drought season.*

"Nobody knew that we also existed before that video went viral, forcing the (environment) minister to come to our village," said Sampat Chale, a rice farmer with a three-acre farm. "But that doesn't mean we were not running here and there to get a water connection to our village."

Chale, who lives in Metghar village, recalled repeatedly raising the issue of water scarcity at the village council but with no success.

"I myself had made several videos (one of them is here) of women walking and going down the well to get water and uploaded them on Facebook hoping that someone would notice and try to resolve our issue," said Chale.

Locals alleged hostility from village council officials and those from the government who visited their hamlet in April 2022.

"They started questioning the women, asking them why they did not use a nearby well (instead of making the 2.5-km trek)," said Manabai Jhole, from Mahadarwaja Pada. "We didn't because a cow's dead body was lying inside. Then the officials asked us, 'where are the bones?' That's how they have always talked with us."

The block development officer at the time, Sarika Bari, admitted she had made those comments.

"I asked the villagers because there was a well 100 m away from their village," Bari told **Article 14**. "But they said a dead wild animal's body was there. When we lab tested the water sample from that well, the report said it was drinkable."

## Landless Dalits, Tribals Left to Work the Land

Kale of the WOTR said most landholding farmers, mainly those who grew cash crops, had either moved to farmhouses or nearby cities, such as Nashik, and towns. "So who remains in the villages?" said Kale. "It's the poor, landless Dalits and tribals, whose voices are never heard."

Of the 1,000 people who live in Mahadarwaja Pada barely 10 are farmers who work their own land. The others are either agricultural labourers on grape and vegetable farms or are forced to migrate to neighbouring villages or cities in search of jobs.

“We only manage to earn Rs 30,000 to 35,000 from our land and we are dependent on that meagre income for the entire year,” said farmer Manabai Jhole, one of those who owns land and has remained, growing some rice and ragi (finger millet).

But the owners of small patches of land like Manabhai Jhole—she has a quarter acre, but half is barren—have no access to irrigation, so they primarily rely on the monsoon rains and can only grow only one crop a year, usually rice or millet.

This also explains why there is little demand for farm ponds from western Nashik’s tribal areas even though, as the *Times of India* reported in 2016, the district had the highest demand for ponds: 14,500 bookings compared to the government target of 2,500.

Even if the aftermath of the viral video provided some relief to the women of Mahadarwaja Pada, their long treks continued because, as Manabai Jhole, sitting along with the other women of her hamlet outside her house, said there was much else for which they walked.

“Whenever anybody falls ill in our area, we have to carry the person on our shoulder and walk for 4–5 km to reach a bus stand,” she said. “We also travel for around 10 km if we have to buy *atta* (flour) or medicines.”

### **Why The Monsoon Makes Water Scarcer**

A month after the video of Jhole descending the well had gone viral, similar videos (here, here and here) of women from Rohile and other neighbouring villages surfaced.

But they did not attract similar government attention.

“We were not that lucky to get the same attention,” said Hirabai Tathe, 62, who has spent more than 50 years fetching water from wells. “And so neither the minister visited our village, nor did we get any relief from fetching water.”

Now, Tathe’s two daughter-in-laws have taken over that responsibility, which is not what she wants for her three grand-daughters, one a widow, the others single. Tathe would like them to marry in the city, “where they won’t have to carry water on their heads because they will have water coming from taps”.

“Otherwise,” she said, “They will face the same fate as I did.”

Unlike the popular notion that monsoon rain resolves the water crisis, it makes matters worse. With no organised storage of rainwater, women must still make those long treks, only now it is more dangerous.

***“During the rainy season it gets harder to fetch water because we have to take muddy and slippery paths,” said Tathe of Rohile. “If we slip and fracture our hands or legs, no one is responsible for us. The farming season has begun. If a woman gets injured, who will work in the field?”***

Locals said they often have no choice but to drink rain water, which they collect from roof overflows with pots on days when the rain does not let up.

There isn't much thought about the quality of water that they do fetch, said the women we spoke to. “It's difficult to even get water here, so we don't really know whether it's clean or not,” said Lalita Khoatre, 32, as others around her agreed. “The best we can do is boil the water.”

### **Walks for Water Hindering Girls' Education**

“Getting late for school becomes quite a routine no matter how early we leave to fetch water,” said Monika, who re-enrolled herself in 12th standard after dropping out midway through 2021.

A 2016 UNICEF report titled ‘*Collecting water is often a colossal waste of time for women and girls*’, said women and girls globally spend 200 million hours just fetching water.

A local 2018 survey by a Nashik-based NGO, Abhivyakti Media for Development, called ‘*Shodhini Action Research*’ reported that 58% of girls in 25 Trimbakeshwar villages, including Rohile and Brahmanwade, had no choice but to fetch water every day.

Gangurde of Brahmanwade, who couldn't study beyond the 10th standard, said that her two best friends also dropped out, after the 12th standard.

“I couldn't get to complete my assignments and homework because along with fetching water twice a day, I also had to do household chores, while my mother worked in the field,” said Gangurde.

The Abhivyakti Media for Development survey also noted that 43% dropped out of school because of housework and 7% specifically reported the drudgery of filling water as a reason: 20% of those who were in school said they could not find enough time to study because so much of their day was occupied by water duties. The absence of secondary schools and colleges and transport also hindered their education.

Tathe's granddaughter Monika has grown up helping her mother and grandmother in every task, from housework to farmwork. She hoped to enroll in a nursing programme, but feared three obstacles: money, marriage, and the seemingly unending responsibility of fetching water.

"I don't want to end up like my mother and grandmother," she said. "Filling water."

Jyoti Thakur, an independent journalist based in Delhi, is committed to covering a wide array of topics including gender, environment, politics, and social justice.

<https://article-14.com/post/pipelines-reach-more-homes-but-as-climate-changes-india-s-women-still-make-long-marches-for-water-62e71442785cc>



## **31. Why are women shrinking from the Indian workforce (Translated from Hindi)**

*Shadab Nazmi / www.bbc.com / May 1, 2022*

Women in India aren't looking for jobs. Unlike previous years, the number of women actively seeking jobs has plummeted. And that's a big concern.

### **How many women exited the workforce?**

Between 2017 and 2022, nearly 21 million women permanently made an exit from the workforce. That means, they are either unemployed or not seeking jobs at all.

And, that has contributed to the major fall to overall labor participation. From 46% in 2017 to 40% in 2022, the latest CMIE report suggests a whopping 6% drop in the country's labor force participation rate in the last 5 years.

However, these figures aren't a big surprise. As the data suggests, the trend of women participating in the labor force has been slowing down for years. In the year 2004-05, the labor force participation rate (LFPR) of young (15-29) rural women was 42.8%. It has made a downfall ever since and as of 2018-19, it has dropped to 15.8%.

### **Unpaid and unemployed**

Did you know how many hours do women in India spend doing unpaid domestic work?

Women in India spend nearly 4 hours every day doing unpaid domestic services for household members. That includes taking care of children, elderly members, cooking and cleaning. And, the maximum share of those working hours go to looking after children.

Men, in comparison, spend just 25 minutes doing unpaid activities according to a 2019 report by the Ministry of Statistics. Men spend most of their day in employment and related activities.

One of the primary reasons for women not stepping out to work is strict involvement within the households. And the pandemic may have completely put a halt on the prospect of rejoining the workforce.

According to the Periodic Labor Force Survey (PLFS), in 2018-19, the unemployment rate among young urban women (15-29) was 25.7%. Compared with men of similar age group, the unemployment rate was 18.7%.

The latest figures from CMIE are even more alarming. In Jan-April 2016, around 28 million women were unemployed and willing to work. By December 2021, it came down to just 8 million.

In rural areas, less women are unemployed compared to men but that shouldn't be considered a silver lining. The rate of unemployment has been on a rise for both men and women in rural areas. In urban areas, the rise in unemployment rate has been more consistent among women workers.

### **Mobility**

“I do not have a husband or father to take me and drop me. If there is a vehicle/bus, we will go in it. When it's not there, how should we travel?” says Balamma, an Anganwadi worker from Telangana, who was amongst many frontline workers during Covid-19.

According to a paper focused on Bihar and Telangana from Azim Premji University, most married Anganwadi and Asha workers relied on their husbands or father-in-law to move around for their work.

Half of urban women are regular wage or salaried workers and mobility is one amongst many roadblocks. No social security benefit and pay gap catalyzes the issue of going out and working.

### **Crime and women**

Do crimes against women deter women from stepping out of their homes and work?

A research conducted by Initiative for What Works to Advance Women and Girls in the Economy (IWWAGE) argues that the states with lower female participation in the labor force had higher crimes against women and girls.

Analyzing NCRB states' level crime data of the year 2011 and 2017, states like Bihar and Delhi saw marginal increase in crimes against women and at the same time, its women labor force participation dropped. Although there is no concrete evidence and this research just provides a negative correlation between crime and labor force, the crime against women is found to be amongst many other roadblocks which can affect women to not step out and work.

## Rural-urban divide

Average female employment in urban India in 2021 was found to be 6.9 % lower in 2020. Worse if compared to the pre-pandemic year. In 2019, 22.1% more women were employed than in 2021. The trend doesn't seem to align with rural women. In fact, the employment of rural women in 2021 was just 0.1% lower than 2019. These figures suggest that urban women have been worst affected in rejoining the workforce after the pandemic.

9.52 million women actively searched for jobs every month in 2019, this number declined to 8.32 million in 2020 and only 6.52 million in 2021. For men, the pattern is different. The number of male workers actively looking for jobs actually went up in 2021 compared to 2019.

The data suggests, after the pandemic, not only fewer women are employed but even fewer are looking for jobs.

Shadab Nazmi, senior data journalist at BBC News in Delhi, collaborates with multiple Indian and South Asian language services, focusing on elections and data-driven investigations. Nominated for "Young Data Journalist of the Year" in 2017 for his work on Delhi's air pollution. He received the Posit Opportunity Scholar in Chicago this year and was a fellow at Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute in Boston in 2018.

<https://www.bbc.com/hindi/india-61287356>



## **32. The condition of domestic workers is bad, no leave and no proper wages. (Translated from Hindi)**

**Rajiv Kumar Pandey / PRABHAT KHABAR / May 8, 2022**

### **Survey report of Jharkhand Anti Trafficking Network and Spark**

In Jharkhand, 70% of the domestic workers get only Rs 3,000 per month and 10% get a maximum salary of Rs 4,000. The remaining 20% workers are forced to work even for Rs 2000. 40.9% of domestic workers are educated. This figure has been found in the survey conducted by Jharkhand Anti Trafficking Network and Spark Ranchi on 'Condition of Domestic Workers of Jharkhand'.

68.6% get four days leave in a month: The report states that out of 40.9%, 13.1 know how to read and write, while 22.6% have completed up to fifth standard, 3.6% have completed matriculation and 1.5% have completed intermediate. Despite being low paid and educated, 68.6% get only four days leave in a month. Others take weekly leave and leave as per agreement. More than 50% of domestic workers eat lunch (taken by them) at their employers' homes, but do not use any of the dishes there. They also have to eat food sitting on the floor. Some people eat under the stairs of the apartment. If we talk about their economic aspect, then about 85% of the houses of the workers have kutchra houses and do not have a separate kitchen. Apart from this, they have to depend on well water for drinking. Their working time has also been assessed, in which 47.6% are not able to rest.

### **67% have a bicycle and 10% have a television.**

According to the report, the property of domestic workers is also not satisfactory. 67 percent have bicycles, 8 percent have pressure cookers, 34 percent have radio, 10 percent have television and about 6 percent have electric fans. Their social condition is also not better. Fuel, electricity and toilet facilities are also not available properly. Their income is 81.8 percent from labor and 10.2 percent from agriculture. Whereas 1.5 percent have business and 6.6 percent have other sources of income.

### **Discussion on the situation of domestic workers of Jharkhand**

'Condition of Domestic Workers of Jharkhand' was discussed by Jharkhand Anti Trafficking Network and Spark Ranchi. In this program organized at Hotel Coral Grand, Kantatoli, social worker Taramani Sahu said that government and non-government institutions will have to work together for the upliftment of Scheduled Castes and Tribes. Sapna Surin of Oxfam India said that when domestic workers approach the police with their problems. Or when they go to government

institutions, they have to face many problems and many times their own character is questioned. Senior journalist Madhukar said that he needs help.

Rajiv Kumar Pandey, currently serving as the Chief Reporter at Prabhat Khabar in Ranchi, previously worked at Amar Ujala, Aligarh, and served as a Stringer at Liveindia News Channel in Kushinagar, U.P.

<https://epaper.prabhatkhabar.com/3427465/RANCHI-City/City#page/3/1>



### 33. Participation of women in politics

*Hengam Riba / The Arunachal Times / Feb 22, 2022*

Historically, tribal societies are termed as egalitarian. The concept of an egalitarian society is equity for all, regardless of their gender. When one discusses the rights given to women in India, the very first notion about the Northeast is that it is an egalitarian society. The matrilineal society of Meghalaya is provided as an example of the status of women in the Northeast. However, patriarchy in the northeastern tribal society is rooted, which has not been addressed.

Although anthropologist Verrier Elwin considered these community institutions democratic, women's representation in these bodies was negligible. The political participation of women in Arunachal is concerning. The hegemony of males had always been there. Women till today share a maximum of 6.6 percent of the legislative seats. No women MP for the Lok Sabha till date. In a state with the highest female sex ratio of 1,084 women per 1,000 males, the representation of women in the legislative assembly remains as low as 6.6 percent. Out of the 60 MLAs in the state, only four are females. We are more than 50 percent of the population, but our representation is hardly 1/20th of the total seats. Not to mention that Arunachal Pradesh, the largest state in the Northeast, is yet to have its first woman chief minister. One of the four women representatives is Dasanglu Pul, the widow of former chief minister late Kalilkho Pul. Mentioning her name was necessary as one must understand how familialism is a massive part of Arunachal politics. Women belonging to the underprivileged class have no right to contest in an election. Another woman MLA, Jummum Ete Deori, is the daughter-in-law of a former Rajya Sabha member from the state, Omem Moyong Deori. Also, Gum Tayeng, the third sitting woman MLA, is the widow of late Joimin Tayeng, who was also a sitting member of the legislative assembly when he passed away in 2013. Chakat Aboh is the legislator from Khonsa west. She is the widow of late Tirong Aboh, who was killed by unknown militants in 2019. Another MLA has family political backing, or I may call it political hegemony. All four women representatives have political backing and are somehow a part of familialism in politics.

The representation of women in the most prominent student body, the All Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union (AAPSU), is merely low. The age-old student union still lacks a woman president or a woman general secretary. Although there is no website to learn more about the AAPSU's representatives (which is a threat to the body's transparency), a member informed that there are only three female executives. The irony is that all three posts are reserved for women. The same pattern is visible in district student unions.

Diverse political and socio-cultural factors have been termed as reasons behind the poor representation of women in the political sphere. Some are country-specific, whereas some are universal and gender-specific. The question arises: how can a woman from the most marginalized community participate in politics? Will Arunachal be getting its own Mayawati or Mamata someday? The state, which has more female voters than men (according to the 2019 election voter list, 4,01,601 women voters and 3,92,561 men) is still biding its time to get its first woman chief minister to work towards an egalitarian tribal society. Women in Arunachal Pradesh have been present in the social sphere compared to women from other regions, but when it comes to politics, it's a clear-cut dominance of male counterparts.

Hengam Riba, a grassroots educator at a Non-Profit Organization in Arunachal Pradesh and an alumna of TISS, specializes in Tribal Studies, Women in Politics, and Intersectional feminism. She actively promotes education access and has experience in gender advocacy, social media campaigns, and filmmaking addressing racial and gender issues.

<https://arunachaltimes.in/index.php/2022/02/22/participation-of-women-in-politics/>



## **34. In the push for digitalization, Indian women get left behind**

*Shikha Sharma / [www.youthkiawaaz.com](http://www.youthkiawaaz.com) / December 30, 2022*

As the pandemic spread, governments across the world-imposed lockdowns that forced people to go digital. The world digitized faster than it had before, with adoption of digital technologies escalating by five years in just two months in 2020.

India, that aims to be a US \$1 trillion digital economy by 2025, registered a fivefold growth in uptake of digital technology, with the pandemic propelling a 500 percent increase in tele-health consultations, online shopping reaching 95 percent of districts, education moving entirely online and digital payments touching the 100 million transactions per day mark.

Yet, even as Covid-19 led to a cultural shift with respect to people's digital consumption, it amplified another trend: the gendered digital divide, increasing the gap or inequalities between women and men with respect to access and adoption of digital technologies.

### **Impact of Digital Revolution On Gender Divide**

Digital inequality manifests in three ways: firstly, a skills divide related to how individuals handle technologies and internet to access information; secondly, an economic opportunity divide resulting from people's inability to participate in Internet-based education, training, and employment opportunities; and third, a democratic divide due to the inability to engage in e-government and the economy.

Despite rapid advancements in internet access in India, particularly via mobile internet use, which has nearly doubled from 2018-2020, India's digital transformation has excluded its women. Presently, the country accounts for half of the world's gendered digital divide.

The National Family Health Survey-5 data that assessed men's and women's internet use for the first time found that just 33 percent Indian women have ever used the internet, compared to 57 percent men. What is more, Indian women are 27 percent less likely than men to access the Internet – with just 8.4 percent being online, compared to 11.6 percent Indian men.

With respect to mobile phone usage, India has one of the worst gender gaps in the world, with women 20 percent less likely than men to own a phone. 54 percent Indian women own a mobile phone in India, compared to 79 percent men. Indian women are 50 percent less likely to use mobile internet, compared to Indian men, research shows.

Rural India faces an even more pronounced digital divide, with 49 percent having used the internet compared to 25 percent women. Interestingly, while household phone ownership in rural areas was only slightly lower than in urban areas (91% rural vs 93% urban) rural women's access to mobile phones was far lower than their urban counterparts (42% rural vs 63% urban).

Research also points to education and income as being two important determinants with respect to adoption of digital technology. As per Census 2011, 66 percent Indian women are literate compared to 82 percent men, with the gender gap in education contributing directly to the ICT gender gap. More than 72% of women with over 12 years of education have used the internet, compared to just 8% of women who had studied until grade. Younger women were more likely to use the internet than older ones, and those in the highest wealth quintile were more likely to have used the internet than those in the lower quintiles, as per NHFS-5.

### **Why There Are Too Few Women Online**

Researchers say that India's gender gap is a result of three factors. First, the rural-urban digital divide, which translates to women in rural areas being less likely to own mobile phones, due to lower broadband penetration in rural areas.

Second, is the income based digital divide between households, that prevents equal access to digital technologies. For example, each GB of data costs low-income households (earning less than US\$2/day) in the country 3 percent of their monthly income versus 0.2 percent for middle-income households (earning US \$10–\$20 per day).

Lastly, regressive social norms, and discrimination at the household level, that prevents women from enjoying equitable access to digital devices, and technology, and that further exacerbates the gender divide. For example, while some rural communities have banned women's mobile phone usage, others view internet use as 'immoral'. This can be corroborated from another report by C3India and Digital Empowerment Foundation, which found that 611 girls out of the 2,600 indicated that the "protective nature" of the family limited their free access to the phone. Parents offered reasons such as "phones are not safe", "waste of time", "may harm her eyes", or that the daughter "may misuse it".<sup>5</sup> Girls were allowed the phone only to attend online classes whereas no such restrictions were imposed on the boys.

A confluence of these factors has meant women being excluded from the digital economy, especially in relation to accessing schooling, skilling, entrepreneurship and work.

## Leaving No Woman Behind

As phones increase in availability, women's mobile phone access, which remains higher than internet access, can be explored as an entry point to digital access. While some research points to ownership of a mobile phone may necessarily aiding women's empowerment, it can definitely help reduce information poverty, help expand support networks, as well as access to different services, for them to effectively participate in the economy.

According to a report by the International Monetary Fund, female workers in low-skill clerical, and sales jobs are at the most risk of being replaced by automation in the developed world. In India, automation of housework and emergence of the 'gig' economy can further marginalise women workers in India. With automation giving rise to a new class of jobs that require digital literacy, it is important that India develops proper skill development programmes targeted to women to be able to get these jobs. Digital literacy should therefore be a priority for policymakers in order to end digital discrimination based on gender.

It is also important to implement policies that overcome prevailing socio-cultural norms for technology to be a tool for empowerment.

*"The gender gap in education, burden of housework, lack of decision-making powers and restrictions to mobility, hinder women's digital, financial and labor market inclusion. Women must already be empowered with basic education, freedom of movement, and rights to be able to access and engage productively with technology,"* scholars Anita Gurusurthy and Nandini Chami say.

Finally, policy measures aimed at women's empowerment, and those aimed at technological innovation must not operate within silos. At present, policy around digitalization tends to be fragmented. In order to be effective, it is important that policy interventions be linked with other aspects for financial inclusion, social welfare and protection.

Shikha Sharma is a consulting editor at Youth Ki Awaaz, recognized as an award-winning journalist, photographer, and advocate specializing in gender, development, and climate change.

<https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/2022/12/in-the-push-for-digitalization-indian-women-get-left-behind>



# ADVERTISING, BOOKS, FILM AWARD WINNERS

LAADLI GRAND PRIX

BBDO

ARIEL | SEE THE SIGNS & #SHARETHELOAD



Ariel's #ShareTheLoad campaign depicts the impact of unequal household chores on relationships. This insightful film goes beyond mere advertising, addressing a hidden truth in society. By highlighting the emotional toll of unequal responsibilities and advocating for shared responsibilities, the ad initiates much-needed conversations on gender equality within relationships. Backed by research and a poignant narrative, it urges societal change, resonating with its audience.

SPECIAL DAY AD

TALENTED

TANISHQ | THE SUPERWOMAN



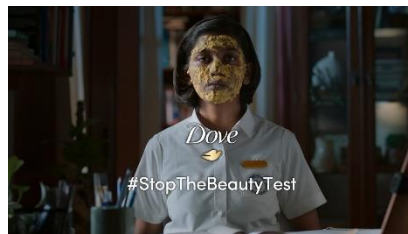
Tanishq's 'The Superwoman' campaign while portraying a protagonist juggling various roles seamlessly, takes a bold turn by acknowledging the internal struggles, weariness, and vulnerability beneath the facade of perfection. This narrative skillfully addresses the unrealistic expectations placed on women, emphasizing the importance of acknowledging their humanity.

DIGITAL INNOVATION  
LEO BURNETT  
JOSH | SAFE SWIPE



#SafeSwipe campaign is an innovative app that empowers women during night commutes. By seamlessly integrating short, semi-interactive videos into users' social media routines, Josh tactfully addresses the safety concerns of women travelling alone at night. The campaign's focus on over 50 real-life scenarios ensures a comprehensive understanding of potential risks, making it both relatable and impactful. Josh also uses its tech stack to map out unsafe areas and proactively notify women.

PRODUCT  
OGILVY MUMBAI - RUNNER UP  
DOVE | THE BEAUTY REPORT CARD #STOPTHEBEAUTYTEST



Dove's ad 'Beauty Report Card' sheds light on the unfortunate societal pressures young school girls face in India, diverting their attention from education to unnecessary beauty tests. Through a heartfelt poem derived from real experiences, the commercial skillfully conveys the emotional toll of subjecting these girls to beauty tests for early marriage preparedness. The ad urges parents and others to desist from judging people by their looks and let them be.

## PRODUCT

**P SE PICTURE – RUNNER UP**

SABHYATA DIWALI '22 | #REDEFININGCELEBRATION



The ad, Sabhyata #RedefiningCelebration, apart from highlighting the bias pregnant women face while seeking employment, also brings to the fore the importance of having inclusive organisations with women in senior positions to bring in greater gender sensitivity.

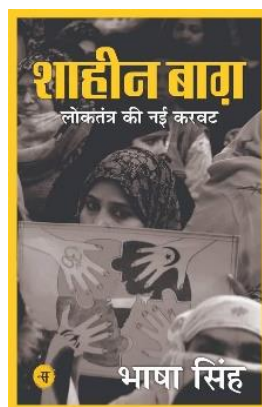
## BOOKS

BOOK | HINDI | NON-FICTION

**BHASHA SINGH**

SHAHEEN BAGH: LOKTANTRA KI NAI KARVAT  
| RAJKAMAL PRAKASHAN PVT. LTD.

Bhasha Singh's "Shaheen Bagh: Loktantra ki Nai Karvat" authentically portrays the transformative leadership of Indian Muslim women in the monumental Shaheen Bagh movement. Singh's meticulous reporting captures their resolute spirit of challenging societal norms, advocating for the community, echoing Ambedkar's ideals, and revitalising democratic values. The book offers firsthand accounts, marking a significant post-independence mass movement.

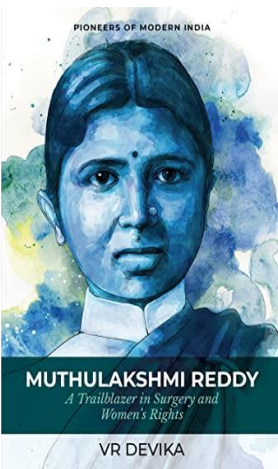
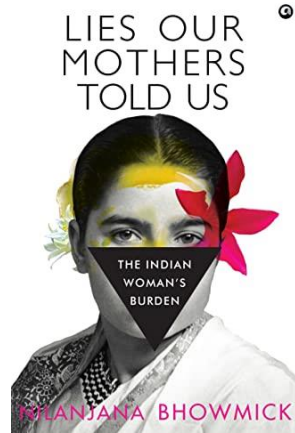


BOOK | ENGLISH | NON-FICTION

**NILANJANA BHOWMICK**

LIES OUR MOTHERS TOLD US THE INDIAN WOMAN'S BURDEN | ALEPH BOOK COMPANY

Nilanjana Bhowmick's "Lies Our Mothers Told Us: The Indian Woman's Burden" portrays the societal pressure on women to embody a 'superwoman' persona, often at the expense of their mental and physical well-being. Drawing from exhaustive research and interviews with over 200 women, Bhowmick exposes the harsh realities faced by Indian women, revealing the toll of pursuing an ideal of 'having it all.'



BOOK | ENGLISH | NON-FICTION

**VR DEVIKA**

MUTHULAKSHMI REDDY: A TRAILBLAZER IN SURGERY AND WOMEN RIGHTS | NIYOGI BOOKS PVT LTD

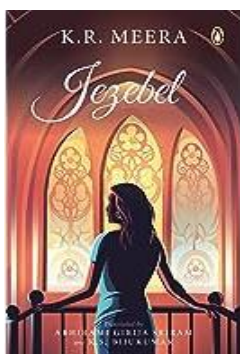
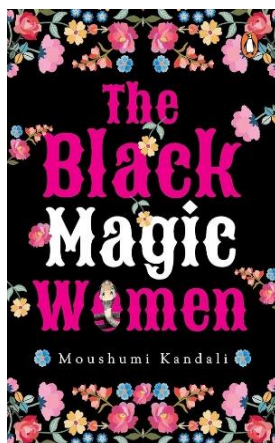
VR Devika's book, "Muthulakshmi Reddy: A Trailblazer in Surgery and Women's Rights," intricately chronicles the life of India's pioneering woman surgeon and women's rights advocate, Muthulakshmi Reddy. Detailing her impactful milestones, including founding Chennai's Cancer Institute and Avvai Home for Girls, Devika's narrative eloquently blends triumphs and struggles, creating an emotionally engaging read that captivates until the last page.

BOOK | ENGLISH | TRANSLATION | SHORT STORIES

**MOUSHUMI KANDALI**

BLACK MAGIC WOMEN (STORIES FROM NORTH-EAST INDIA) | PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE INDIA

Moushumi Kandali's "The Black Magic Women (Stories from North-east India)" examines Assamese women's struggles within India's broader cultural milieu. Through evocative storytelling, Kandali exposes societal challenges such as racial biases, the entertainment industry's politics, and sexual harassment. Interweaving fables and metaphors, her narratives provoke readers, urging reflection on societal norms and beliefs.



BOOK | ENGLISH | TRANSLATION | NOVEL

**KR MEERA**

JEZEBEL | PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE INDIA

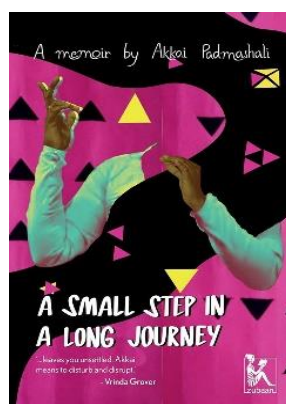
K.R. Meera's 'Jezebel' artfully delves into the life of a Kerala-based doctor, Jezebel, navigating societal norms. It provokes essential dialogues on gender, identity, and autonomy, weaving a poignant narrative on the complexities of a woman's existence.

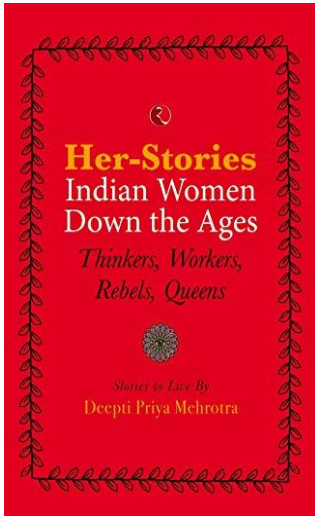
BOOK | ENGLISH | AUTOBIOGRAPHY

**AKKAI PADMASHALI**

A SMALL STEP IN A LONG JOURNEY | ZUBAAN BOOKS

Akkai Padmashali's 'A Small Step in a Long Journey' stands as a compelling testimony to the trials and victories of a trans rights activist. Her narrative intertwines personal and political realms, demanding societal recognition while uncovering harsh realities. It is a poignant call for compassion, advocating for societal change and a more inclusive future.





BOOK | ENGLISH | JURY APPRECIATION  
CITATION

**DR. DEEPTI PRIYA MEHROTRA**

HER STORIES INDIAN WOMEN DOWN THE  
AGES: THINKERS, WORKERS, REBELS  
QUEENS | RUPA PUBLICATION INDIA PVT  
LTD

Dr Deepti Priya Mehrotra's 'Her Stories: Indian Women Down the Ages: Thinkers, Workers, Rebels, Queens' meticulously reveals the resilience and contributions of unsung heroines, spanning poets, warriors, activists, and diverse trailblazers. Beyond typical historical accounts, her narrative focuses on ordinary women's extraordinary journeys, reinvigorating forgotten tales and igniting contemporary gender discussions.

FEATURE FILM - OTT RELEASE

**SIRF EK BANDAA KAAFI HAI**

ZEE5 | HINDI | APOORV SINGH KARKI

Sirf Ek Bandaa Kaafi Hai - based on the story of a self-proclaimed Godman, convicted in a case involving the rape of a minor girl - is a powerful reminder of how pervasive sexual offences against children are in society and the role of law in bringing the perpetrators to account.





FEATURE FILM  
**BLUE SUNSHINE**  
TAMIL | SAMYUKTHA VIJAYAN

Many years ago, as a young collegian, Samyuktha Vijayan made a tryst with herself to excel at whatever she did to shut up people who judged her and said mean things. With her film Blue Sunshine - which sits on the cusp of gender, sexuality, and class intersectionality - she does exactly that. While following the trajectory of the travails of Aravind, a high school teacher in a South Indian small town, transitioning from male to female, the film holds a mirror to society's bigotry.

Despite being blessed with supportive parents, as a transwoman, Samyuktha was no stranger to mockery and humiliation at school and from her extended family. As a respected techie and dancer, her struggle for a dignified life meant staying steadfastly unfazed and courageous. But not everyone has what it takes to get there. In writing, directing, producing, and acting in Blue Sunshine which talks about the daily struggles of a transwoman pitted against a conservative ecosystem, she has been able to create a healthy debate about societal and infrastructural changes needed to help members of the trans community lead a mainstream, dignified life.

WEB SERIES  
**SWEET KAARAM COFFEE**  
TAMIL | RESHMA GHATALA

Sweet Karam Coffee centres on the journey of three generations of women who decide to take an unexpected road trip to break up the monotony of their daily lives. This touching, cross-generational investigation of friendships, relationships, and personal development highlights the challenges women encounter daily. The value of self-discovery, second chances, and forgiveness is emphasised throughout the series, which addresses social taboos and promotes candid discussions about subjects deemed delicate.



## **SPECIAL AWARD WINNERS**

### ***LAADLI OF THE CENTURY AWARD***

#### **VIMLA PATIL**



Vimla Patil, the trailblazing editor of Femina, pioneered the Femina Miss India pageant, using it to advocate for women's rights and challenge societal norms. Patil has fearlessly fought against gender discrimination, reshaping mindsets and policies. Her visionary leadership and unwavering dedication have left an indelible mark, inspiring a more equitable society. Her relentless efforts in advancing women's empowerment, especially when concepts like 'women's liberation' faced resistance, reshaped mindsets and policies, catalysing a profound societal shift.

# **LAADLI LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD**

## **ARUNA RAJE PATIL**



Celebrated writer, filmmaker and producer Ms. Aruna Rajé Patil's strong women-centric themed body of work highlights gender-just and gender-equal relationships based on mutual love and respect. She's also written on sex workers, in verse form in her 'Red-light Verses.'

As a film educator, she has taught Screenwriting, Direction, Editing and Production in many film schools including FTII, Pune and Whistling Woods International Film School, Mumbai where she headed the Academics and Direction departments. A strong voice for documentaries, she's headed the Indian Documentary Producers association twice.

Her documentaries, Mallika Sarabhai, A New Paradigm, and Behind the Glass Wall, have earned her six national awards. To her credit, this first female film editor to graduate from FTII has made Gehrayee, Shaque, Rihaee, and Bhairavi. Additionally, she's edited Vamsha Vriksha, Giddh, Masoom, and Phaniyamma. Ms. Rajé, who has won multiple state honours, has been on Filmfare, Screen, and the National Film Awards juries.

Her films have been screened and praised globally.

This life coach and motivational speaker's inspirational autobiography 'FREEDOM – My story' brings hope and optimism.

## **LAADLI WOMAN BEHIND THE SCREEN**

### **KONKONA SEN SHARMA**



For her remarkable journey as an actor and filmmaker, Konkona Sen Sharma stands as a testament to inherited talent and individual brilliance. Her diverse choice of roles and directorial ventures, often infused with a distinct assertiveness, reflect her versatile skills and willingness to tread independent paths. Stepping into the director's shoes, her works like "Death in the Gunj" and "The Mirror" in "Lust Stories 2" showcase her directorial prowess and garnered international acclaim, including the prestigious Cannes recognition.

## **LAADLI ICONIC RURAL FEMINIST AWARD**

### **BHANWARI DEVI**

Bhanwari Devi, a fighter for justice and women's rights, embodies resilience and determination in the face of adversity. Her landmark legal struggle, despite personal setbacks and no convictions in her case, laid the groundwork for India's crucial sexual harassment protection laws. Her courage and unwavering commitment have significantly shaped the nation's legal landscape and galvanised women's movements.



## **LAADLI EXTRAORDINAIRE AWARD**

### **WOMEN IN CINEMA COLLECTIVE**

Founded post #MeToo, WCC courageously confronts issues of sexual exploitation and gender discrimination, petitioning authorities for inquiries, ensuring the implementation of protective workplace laws, and advocating for gender-neutral practices in Malayalam cinema. Their impactful initiatives include the establishment of Internal Complaints Committees, awareness campaigns addressing workplace exploitation, and celebrating female representation through awards based on the Bechdel Test. WCC's advocacy for formalised wage structures, welfare schemes, and increased opportunities for women in film production is commendable.



## **LAADLI GENDER CHAMPION AWARD**

### **THE NETWORK OF WOMEN IN MEDIA, INDIA**



With a membership of over 650 women across diverse media platforms, the Network of Women in Media, India (NWMI) serves as a crucial forum, fostering collaboration, advocating for journalists' rights, and championing ethical media practices. Their proactive stance on gender equality, safety, and justice and unwavering support for colleagues facing challenges stand as a beacon of solidarity and empowerment.

## ***LAADLI THEATRE AWARD***

### **NADIRA BABBAR**



Renowned theatre personality Nadira Babbar, a 1971 National School of Drama graduate, skillfully blends Grotowski and Brook's theatre theories in Ekjute's 60+ plays, amplifying Indian sociocultural contexts. Her portrayal of empowered female characters resonates while her silver screen outings reinforce her versatile talent.

## **SOUTH ASIA WINNERS**



**SHARMIN SHAMS**

**BENGALI | CONSISTENT REPORTING ON GENDER ISSUES | BANGLADESH**

Sharmin Shams’ pioneering online Bengali feminist magazine “Feminist Factor” has provided an inclusive platform for women’s narratives since 2020. Through her journalism, filmmaking and writing, Shams has incisively examined patriarchal norms and spotlighted women’s struggles across mediums. Her prolific career has confronted stereotypes and empowered women’s voices, including through Shantibari, the innovative community space she co-founded, which supports women’s well-being and empowerment.



**ISRAT ZAHAN URMI**

**BENGALI | CONSISTENT REPORTING ON GENDER ISSUES | BANGLADESH**

Distinguished DBC News foreign affairs journalist Israt Zahan Urmi receives the South Asia Laadli Media Award for her nuanced coverage of global events centred on amplifying women’s narratives and examining issues through an inclusive, feminist lens. Her reporting provides critical insight into the gendered impacts of international affairs.



**BIDHYA RAI**

**NEPALI | CONSISTENT REPORTING ON GENDER ISSUES | NEPAL**

Nepali investigative journalist Bidhya Rai uplifts marginalised voices and drives social change through courageous data-driven reporting. Her in-depth stories spotlight indigenous women’s lives, human rights issues, climate crises, and corruption. As her influential career with Kantipur progressed, Rai consistently provided multidimensional perspectives on women’s issues across mediums.



### **BHRIKUTI RAI**

**NEPALI | CONSISTENT REPORTING ON GENDER ISSUES  
| NEPAL**

Acclaimed Nepali journalist Bhrikuti Rai is a fearless investigator of gender inequality, amplifying women's narratives over her decade-long journalism career. As co-creator of Nepal's groundbreaking feminist podcast "Boju Bajai," she spotlights taboo issues through authentic women's voices, catalysing change.



### **SUNANDA HETTIARACHCHI**

**SINHALA | CONSISTENT REPORTING ON GENDER  
ISSUES | SRI LANKA**

Acclaimed Sri Lankan media trailblazer Sunanada Damayanthi Hettiarachchi has championed feminist perspectives within national broadcasting over her pioneering 38-year career. As a producer, presenter, and executive, she has helmed groundbreaking Sinhala programming that spotlights women's narratives and forges spaces for inclusive dialogues across mediums.



### **VINEETHA MATHTHAKA GAMAGE**

**SINHALA | CONSISTENT REPORTING ON GENDER  
ISSUES | SRI LANKA**

Award-winning senior Sri Lankan print journalist Vineetha has passionately brought to the readers the narratives of marginalised communities over her three-decade career marked by compassionate storytelling and taboo-smashing reporting from a feminist lens. Her work continues to pave the way for inclusive, progressive journalism across mediums.



### **FATANA BAYAT**

PERSIAN | CONSISTENT REPORTING ON GENDER ISSUES | AFGHANISTAN

Afghan documentarian Fatana Bayat has doggedly upheld women’s protest narratives since 2010 despite Taliban assaults, threats, and arrests. Her collective archiving initiatives memorialise women’s resilience amid rights crackdowns for global audiences.



### **MEENA HABIB**

PERSIAN | CONSISTENT REPORTING ON GENDER ISSUES | AFGHANISTAN

Afghan woman journalist Meena Habib perseveres in investigative reporting on women’s rights despite Taliban arrests and threats since 2006. Her establishment of the woman-led Event News underscores a remarkable commitment to ethical journalism against intensifying challenges.



### **FATIMA NAZISH**

URDU | CONSISTENT REPORTING ON GENDER ISSUES | PAKISTAN

Fatima Nazish is an exceptional digital storyteller committed to amplifying inclusive narratives and diverse women’s voices. Her creative and innovative talents shine through the compelling tales she weaves, enlightening global audiences and driving positive social change through her content. Nazish is a trailblazer in digital media.



### **AISHATH NAZUHA**

**DHIVEHI | CONSISTENT REPORTING ON GENDER ISSUES | MALDIVES**

Political journalist Aishath Nuzuha has uplifted women’s voices across Maldivian media since 2020 despite immense personal and professional challenges. Her intrepid reporting and advocacy have empowered women nationally and confronted systemic bias head-on.



### **AMINATH KHALISA**

**DHIVEHI | CONSISTENT REPORTING ON GENDER ISSUES | MALDIVES**

Maldivian journalist Khalisa has highlighted women’s narratives across the nation’s southern atolls since 2013 through prolific freelance writing and courageous local radio reporting while surmounting immense personal and societal challenges. Her work has catalysed women’s empowerment dialogue and positive change.

## JURY PROFILES

1. AKHILESHWARI RAMAGOUD - Journalist with 30 years at Deccan Herald, celebrated for reporting as a Washington-based Foreign Correspondent and honoured as Telangana Government's Best Woman Journalist.
2. AMBI PARMESHWARAN – Brand strategist, CEO coach, best-selling author, TEDx speaker, and accomplished leader with over 40 years in advertising and brand building.
3. ANAND MADHAB - Development Professional and Media Marketing Expert in CSR leadership, gender empowerment, and development campaigns with a rich background in journalism and management.
4. ANJUM RAJABALI- Veteran Indian screenwriter, actor, teacher, and activist for screenwriters' rights
5. ANUJA GULATI - Program Management Specialist, UNFPA.
6. ANURADHA BHASIN- Internationally published journalist, author, Executive Editor, Kashmir Time, Commonwealth Fellow 2016, and peace activist.
7. DOLLY THAKORE – Television Newscaster, veteran commentator, columnist, communication and public relations consultant, author, associate publisher, editor, casting director, and actor.
8. DR. AARTHI P — Director of the School of Gender Studies at Mahatma Gandhi University, specializing in public health law, gender justice, and feminist research methodology. Actively engaged with grassroots women's organisations and marginalised gender groups.
9. DR. DAYA KRISHNA MANGAL - MD, with 40+ years of expertise in public health, spanning academia, government, and international organisations, Currently an Adjunct Professor at Johns Hopkins University, Bloomberg School of Public Health, USA.
10. DR. MALTI MEHTA - Teaches Mass Communication, Communication Skills, Development Communication, and Film production, Documentary & Short Film Maker.
11. DR. MINAXI SHUKLA - Co-founder of CHETNA, Ahmedabad, is a child rights and early childhood education consultant with government and civil society contributions. Recent role as a State Consultant for UNICEF and the Government of Bihar.
12. DR PAM RAJPUT: Indian academic and feminist activist, influential in gender equity discourse, former Chair of the Government of India High-Level Committee on the Status of Women, honoured with the Padma Shri for extensive work in women's rights and empowerment.

13. GAUHAR GEELANI- Journalist-author with over 15 years of global and regional media experience, known for his acclaimed book "Kashmir: Rage and Reason." He's a South Asian Journalism Programme (SAJP) Scholar, Chevening Fellow, and Munich Young Leader, contributing to esteemed publications like BBC, DW, and The Telegraph.
14. GITA ARAVAMUDAN- Journalist and author celebrated for her diverse works, including "Disappearing Daughters" and "Baby Makers." Renowned for her pioneering writing on surrogacy and female foeticide and her bestseller, for which she was a co-author, "ISRO: A Personal History."
15. GITA CHADHA - Visiting Professor at Azim Premji University and the Obaid Siddiqui Chair at NCBS, Bangalore, formerly a faculty member at the Department of Sociology, University of Mumbai, has extensive contributions to science studies, feminist theories, and postcolonial studies.
16. GITALI VINAYAK - Chief Editor, Miloon Saryajani, a Marathi magazine and a social activist.
17. GOKUL KRISHNAMOORTHY - Independent Marketing Consultant and Columnist; Co-founder and Group Consulting Editor, Uplift MediaNews4u; Editor, The Free Press Journal BrandSutra.
18. GOVIND CHATURVEDI - A veteran journalist was associated with Dainik Navjyoti, UNI, Rajasthan Patrika, and more.
19. INDU CAPOOR - Founder Director of Centre for Health, Education, Training and Nutrition Awareness (CHETNA).
20. JYOTSNA KAUR HABIBULLAH - Social entrepreneur, and philanthropist. Associated with FICCI FLO Kanpur Chapter as Member, National Governing Body on Women
21. K LALITA - Researcher, author, and co-founder of the Progressive Organisation of Women and Stree Shakti Sanghatana, renowned for her contributions to feminist historiography.
22. KANKSHI NETRI - Founder of NETRI Foundation, a pioneering women-centric political incubator, and policy researcher. Recognized for championing women's rights and driving technology-based political opportunities in India.
23. KG SURESH - Vice Chancellor at Makhanlal Chaturvedi National University of Journalism & Communication, the former Director General of the Indian Institute of Mass Communication and Senior Consulting Editor with Doordarshan News.
24. KIRAN MANRAL - Author, TEDx speaker, and podcaster is celebrated for her contributions to literature and recognised with awards like the

International Women's Day Award in 2018 and being named one of the 75 Iconic Indian Women in STEAM in 2022.

25. KULDEEP KAUR - Retired vice principal of G.N. Khalsa College of arts, science, and commerce, Mumbai, a visiting faculty at Tata Institute of Social Sciences, dialect coach.
26. KUSUM TRIPATHI - Professor at Dr. B.R. University of Social Science Mhow, Author.
27. K V Sridhar - Marketing and advertising veteran, Founder and Chief Creative Officer of Hyper Collective, is a Global Chief Creative Officer at Nihilent Limited and ASCI Board Member.
28. LAD KUMARI JAIN - Academic and former Chairperson of the Rajasthan State Commission for Women with significant contributions to political science, gender issues, and human rights
29. LAKSHMI LINGAM - Former Dean and Professor at Tata Institute of Social Sciences, specialising in gender research, with recent studies on 'Gender Issues in Bollywood' and 'Gender and Social Norm Change among Women's Self-help Groups.
30. LEENA PUJARI - A feminist sociologist and Head of Sociology at K C College, specialises in Gender Studies, feminist pedagogy, and jurisprudence. Her contributions span research, lectures, and advocacy for gender-sensitive initiatives in education and society.
31. M- ADV. AUDREY FLAVIA MAJLIS - Director at Majlis, leads the Gender and Law program, providing legal support for victims of domestic and sexual violence, empowering marginalised women and children to access justice.
32. MADHURI DASAGRNATHI - AGM of corporate communication at MEIL, journalist formerly associated with Sakshi TV, Metro India, and Telengana Today., classical musician.
33. MIRA K DESAI - Researcher working across three academic disciplines-gender, development and media studies for over three decades. She has contributed to India television studies, media education and development communication.
34. MEENA KARNIK - Senior independent journalist, film critic, author, translator, Co-editor Akshar, author of 'Gautam, jury at international film festivals.
35. MOHAMMED KHAN: A legend in Indian advertising, he set up some of the country's best agencies, including Contract and Rediffusion, as well as Enterprise Nexus.

36. NANDINI DIAS: Former CEO of Lodestar UM, Hon Secretary International Advertising Association, Governing Board Member Mumbai First, a sports enthusiast, and a national-level badminton player.
37. PIYUSH JHA - Film director, author, and co-founder of Talkietive Content Creators Pvt. Ltd. His diverse portfolio spans film, literature, and television, making a significant impact on contemporary storytelling.
38. PREETA MATHUR - Head of Ank Theatre Group, a podcaster and media contributor on theatre.
39. RAJAN MAHAN - Director and Dean, HJU, Jaipur and a veteran Journalist with NDTV.
40. RAJENDRA TIWARI - A senior journalist with 30+ years of experience, including leadership roles at Prabhat Khabar, Amar Ujala, Dainik Bhaskar, Hindustan, and Rashtriya Sahara. Renowned for content strategy, journalist training, and digital innovations.
41. RANJANA DAS - Development consultant with 12+ years of experience, specialising in gender, livelihood, and health. Formerly with Oxfam India, holding degrees in economics and development studies, including a Humphrey Hubert Fulbright Fellowship at Cornell University.
42. RANJONA BANERJI - Independent journalist, currently a Consulting Editor with MxMIndia.com.
43. RATNA BHARALI TALUKDAR - She is an acclaimed journalist and writer who brings Northeastern India to life through extensive fieldwork. She boasts numerous accolades, including the Ram Nath Goenka Award, and has authored three short story collections, two novels, and an unpublished children's book.
44. REVATHI SIVAKUMARA - writer and journalist with 13 years of experience at The Times of India and Deccan Herald, transitioned to digital media. Holding a master's degree in Literature, she excels in analysing developmental, social, and human rights issues and is working on publishing novels.
45. RICHA S MUKHERJEE – Award-winning author, former journalist, advertising professional, TEDx speaker, blogger, travel writer, and mentor.
46. RICHARD KANIEWSKI – Ex-Dresden Council member, political advisor, now Deputy Country Director at Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung India, specialising in South Asian Peace & Security.
47. R. GOPALAKRISHNAN – Professional with 53 years in management, 32 years in board roles, author of 16 books, prolific keynote speaker, and management columnist.
48. R. HARIHARAN- Indian film director

49. RUPA MEHTA - A seasoned media professional and women's activist with a 32-year career at Doordarshan, is now a trustee of AWAG and Vikas Gruh. She holds prestigious fellowships, awards, and extensive contributions to literature and media.
50. SHAMANTHA DS - Author, Multimedia Professional, Founder and Director of Sarthi Organisation.
51. SAMEERA KHAN - An independent journalist and author of "Why Loiter," brings over 30 years of journalism experience, specialising in gender issues and media training for sensitive reporting. She earned the National Laadli Media Award for Gender Sensitivity in 2020.
52. SAMPAD MAHAPATRA - Former Editor of 'The Sambad' and Founder Editor of 'The Nitidin', former Odisha Bureau Chief of NDTV.
53. SANDEEP SAHU - Multilingual journalist associated with the BBC World Service from Odisha, OTV, Outlook magazine, thequint.com, news18.com, and others.
54. SATHYA SARAN – Consulting Editor with Penguin Random House India, former Editor of Femina, author. Teaches fashion journalism at NIFT, a stage actor and curator, 'The Spaces Between Words.'
55. SATYAVATHI KONDAVEETI - Women's rights activist and founder Editor of the first feminist magazine in Andhra Pradesh – 'Streevada Patrika' – Bhumika in 1993.
56. SAUMYA BAIJAL- Feminist, bilingual writer, ad woman, storyteller, poet, guest lecturer, radio presenter, theatre person, activist.
57. SHAHINA KK - Associate Editor of the news portal 'The Federal', winner of the International Press Freedom Award of 2023.
58. SHEFALI CHATURVEDI - Shefali Chaturvedi, an award-winning audio professional and communication consultant, holds two decades of experience in media, humanitarian response, and community engagement. She has led initiatives across Asia and worked with WHO, BBC Media Action, and more.
59. SHOMA CHATTERJEE – Independent journalist, author, film scholar, and veteran film critic. She has authored 32 books, of which eight are on gender issues.
60. SUDHA ARORA – A leading feminist writer in Hindi, editor of books, playwright, scriptwriter, and author
61. SUDHIR MISHRA - Currently serves as Resident Editor at Navbharat Times, Delhi, with over 25 years of journalism experience at renowned publications like Dainik Jagran and Dainik Bhaskar.
62. SUNEETA RAO - Suneeta Rao, the Indipop icon behind the hit "Paree Hoon Main," has a 40-year career in music and theatre, with five Indipop

albums. She's a "LAADLI" spokesperson and a prominent figure in Indian entertainment.

63. SUNIL JHA - Sunil Jha, journalist with over 25 years of experience, specialises in political news and its societal impacts. He has held editorial and managerial roles in print, electronic media, TV, radio, news agencies, newspapers, and digital, effectively leveraging social media for news dissemination.
64. TERESA REHMAN - An award-winning journalist, author, and media educator based in northeast India.
65. TK RAJALAKSHMI - TK Rajalakshmi, Chief of Bureau at Frontline, Delhi, with 25+ years of journalistic experience, specialising in the social sector, including gender, health, education, labour, population policies, and press freedom.
66. VANAJA C - Award-winning journalist, TV presenter, and filmmaker.
67. VASANTHA LAKSHMI - A retired journalist with 40 years of experience in Telugu newspapers, continues her work as a human rights activist in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, and also served as the former Publications Editor of Human Rights Forum.
68. VIKRANT PANDE: Translator of 12 Marathi classics into English, author of award-winning books, and former corporate professional with expertise in Indian brand leadership and consumer insights.
69. VINTA NANDA - Filmmaker and writer. Editor of The Daily Eye, Creative Director at ACEE.
70. YASIM SAIT - Author, Counsellor, and Life Purpose Coach on a mission to empower women at different stages of their life.

## SAWM JURY

1. DILRUKSHI HANDUNNETTI: (Srilanka) Award-winning investigative journalist, editor, trainer, lawyer, and co-founder of the Center for Investigative Reporting (CIR) in Colombo, actively involved in regional human rights organisations, with a focus on freedom of expression and gender rights.
2. KRESHMA FAKHRI: (Afghanistan) Afghan journalist with 14+ years' experience, Fact-check Journalist at Zan Times, known for investigative reporting and contributions to international media like Al Jazeera.
3. NAMRATA SHARMA: (Nepal)journalist and human rights advocate, first female Editor of The Independent in Nepal, inaugural President of CIJ Nepal, with 25+ years' experience across multiple countries, focusing on cross-border trafficking.

4. NYEMA ZANGMO (Bhutan) Founder & CEO of Samuh, Bhutan's first OTT Platform, recognized for leadership and multiple awards in promoting Bhutanese creative content globally."
5. ROZINA ISLAM: (Bangladesh) Special Correspondent & Head of Crime Reporting at Prothom Alo, honoured with the 'Anti-Corruption Champions Award' by the US State Department, included in the Coalition for Women in Journalism's list of 20 women journalist heroes for courageous reporting.
6. SHIMLA AHMED(Maldives): Educator, award-winning journalist, Founder & CEO of AO NEWS in Maldives, recognized for leadership in media and empowerment initiatives, recipient of prestigious Rehendhi and Presidential awards.
7. UMA SUDHIR(India): Executive Editor at NDTV India, honoured with Chameli Devi Jain Award, Ramnath Goenka Award for Excellence in Journalism, IPI Award for Excellence in Journalism presented by President Abdul Kalam and multiple UNFPA Laadli Awards.
8. XARI JALIL: (Pakistan) Journalist with 20+ years' experience at The News International & Dawn, IVLP Fellow, Global Investigative Journalists Network Fellow, Co-founder & Content Editor at Voicepk.net.

## **AFAA JURY**

1. SARMAD ALI: Visionary media leader with over 30 years' experience, Managing Director at Jang Media Group, Secretary General of APNS, and recipient of prestigious awards including the Sitara-i-Imtiaz.
2. UJAYA SHAKYA: Founder of Outreach Nepal, branding expert, author of 'Brandsutra', and recognized marketing leader with accolades including the Flame Leadership Award and 'Asia's Most Admired Marketing Leader Award'.





**"Dive into the compelling world of 'Bold Bylines,' where committed journalists dissect the complexities of gender discrimination, violence, and entrenched societal norms. This collection of articles, both inspiring and unsettling, initiates crucial conversations around these issues. As you journey through the riveting narratives, you'll discover the power of media to pave the way for a more inclusive world, offering hope for a brighter future for women and the marginalized. 'Bold Bylines' is not just a book; it's journalism at its best."**

**DR. A. L. SHARADA**

