

# Young women's perceptions on safety in public spaces of Mumbai:

## negotiating the risk of sexual harassment and challenging patriarchy by transcending victimhood

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***Abstract***

This thesis draws on ten in-depth interviews in order to analyze young and educated, middle-class women's perceptions on public safety in Mumbai, regarding the risk of sexual harassment. It focuses on the ways these women negotiate with risk and the patriarchal norms of women's appropriate behavior in public spaces, further, examines how these women address their oppression and act in order to empower themselves and other women.

The analysis was performed with the Interpretative Phenomenological Approach. The findings were discussed relying on three key notions: the power dynamics of the public space, the asymmetrical socialization of gender roles contributing to women's differential treatment within the Indian society, and the discourse of public safety, that centers on sexual safety and posits women as 'vulnerable victims of attack'.

My findings support previous research done on women's access to public space in the patriarchal society of India. The findings emphasize, that women in Mumbai still lack an uncontested access to public spaces, despite Mumbai's popular image of the 'safest city in India'. Altogether, this study highlights that in order for women to feel an equal level of claim and comfort in public spaces in India, there is a need for a complete top-down and grassroots transformation in order to eradicate the misogynistic mindsets from the state institutions and the society, including the core family.

***Keywords:*** *sexual violence, street harassment, Mumbai, public safety, patriarchy, gender roles*

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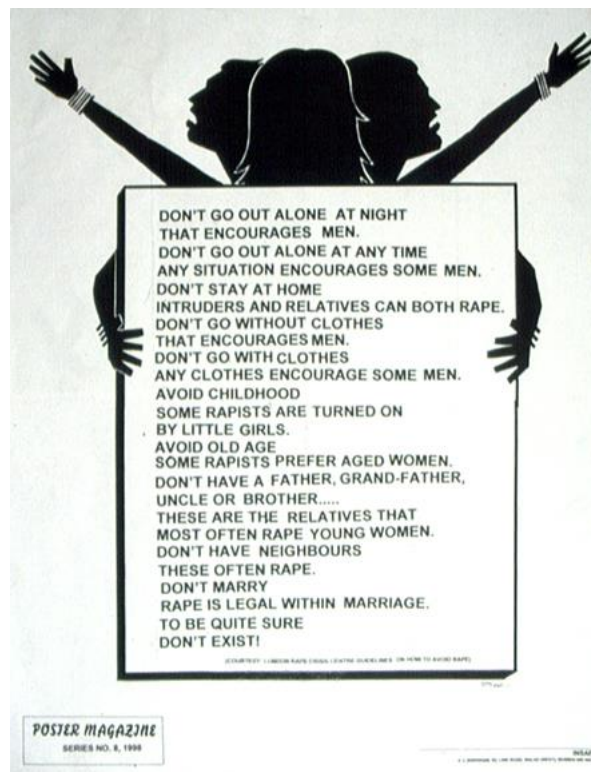
## TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	<b>Introduction</b>	...4
II.	<b>Literature review on sexual harassment of women in India, with a focus on public safety in Mumbai</b>	...7
III.	<b>Theory and concepts</b>	...9
IV.	<b>Field, methodology and ethical considerations</b>	...14
V.	<b>Findings and analysis</b>	...18
	Rating safety: Is Mumbai a safer city for women?	...19
	Negotiating risk in public spaces	...28
	Challenging normative perceptions of Indian womanhood as ‘modern women’	...33
VI.	<b>Discussion and conclusion</b>	...45
VII.	<b>Appendices</b>	...49
	1. Participant profiles	...49
	2. Interview guide	...51
VIII.	<b>References</b>	...56

## LIST OF FIGURES

<b>Image 1.</b>	Don’t go out alone at night	...4
<b>Table 1.</b>	Rating safety in Mumbai	...19

## I. Introduction



**Image 1.** ‘Don’t go out alone at night’<sup>1</sup>

Indian women face constant sexual violence in public spaces and within their homes (Bharucha and Khatri, 2018, p.101). The intensity and cruelty of women’s oppression in India is nothing new: there are examples of rape cases decades back. However, the issue started gaining attention and public demands from the 1970s onwards, spurred by the custodial rape case of a tribal girl called Mathura at a police station in 1972. The court released the perpetrators, accusing Mathura of ‘low morality’ and ‘habituation to sexual intercourse’. The public anger led to the rise of the women’s rights movements in India, and at present there is a visible battle against patriarchy and the violent forms of misogyny that it brings (Dutta and Sircar, 2013, p.296; Roy, 2018, pp.2-4). This thesis finds its motivation and urgency in the aftermath of the Delhi gang rape of 2012, which sparked another wave of protests and demands for greater justice for victims of sexual violence in India (Zietz and Das, 2017, p.2; Madan and Nalla, 2016, p.80). After seven years, and after progressive changes in the Indian Penal Code, regarding stricter punishments for rapists and widening the definition of rape, the Indian National Crime Statistics show that crimes against women are still on the rise (Dhillon and Bakaya, 2014, pp.1-

<sup>1</sup> Source: Insaf, Vikas Adhyayan Kendra, Mumbai, Maharashtra (Retrieved from the Poster Women archives <https://www.posterwomen.org/?p=407>)

3; National Crime Records Bureau, 2017). More than that, the judicial system continues to fail in providing women the justice they are guaranteed by the law (Dhillon and Bakaya, 2014, p.1; Singh and Kumar, 2019, p.20). Rape has become a constant factor in daily news, and what is continuous and omnipresent is the daily sexual abuse and harassment that women face in the public spaces of India. As Bharucha and Khatri state, sexual harassment in public spaces is a deep-rooted problem, to the extent that it has become normalized in the society (2018, p.104). The overarching mindset that the presence of a woman in the public space or in any space at all invites trouble is well illustrated by the poster from *Insaf* (see Image 1). According to traditional gender roles in India, women belong to the private sphere, the area of patriarchal protection, whereas the public space is seen as inherently dangerous and belonging to the men (Dhillon and Bakaya 2014, p.3).

Importantly, the gradual change in gender roles and the academic as well as professional empowerment of women has led to their increased participation in the public spaces of India. Yet, this has not translated into women's greater access to and safety in public spaces (Dhillon and Bakaya, 2014, p.3; Phadke, 2012, pp.54, 55). India has multiple metropolitan cities out of which Mumbai is the largest in population (Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, 2019). Moreover, in popular and public discourse, Mumbai has been awarded as the 'safest city for women in India', as stated by an article in *Business Today* (Phadke, 2005, p.43). However, according to crime statistics, and as explained by scholars and women who live in Mumbai themselves, the reality is not as such (National Crime Records Bureau, 2017; Bharucha and Khatri, 2018; Phadke, 2005, 2007 and 2012). My interest in studying public safety of women in Mumbai was driven by an event that happened to me and my female friend in January 2015 in Colaba, a posh area in South Mumbai. We came out of a movie theatre around 9:30 pm and thought of walking back to our hotel since it was not that far. Soon we noticed a man walking behind us, making weird sounds. He reached to us and started pushing next to us, while holding a phone in his hand and aiming for us to see the content on the screen. To our surprise it was porn, and he was shoving the phone to our faces and making suggestions that we should go with him. We got scared and ran away to catch the first cab that was possible, unwilling to believe what had just happened.

To mention, I have travelled across India, stayed in states like Bihar that are considered some of the least safe and spent a remarkable amount of time in Delhi, which is named as the 'rape capital of India' (Bhattacharyya, 2015, p.1345). Yet, the worst incident of street harassment that occurred to me was in Mumbai. It created a sense of disbelief: I was supposed to be in the safest city of India, then why am I feeling so vulnerable each time I walk out? My

negative experiences on the streets of Mumbai did not limit to one occasion – I would face catcalling and staring every day and men would sing songs while walking beside me. Most of the forms of street harassment seem innocent and usually do not escalate, yet they disturb you constantly on an emotional level and reduce your sense of comfort and freedom. It feels like being attacked from every direction. This results in the desire to look as unnoticeable as possible, to cover up and to keep a serious and angry look on your face. If you look pretty and smile too much, the man who just walked by might take that as an invitation.

How does my study step in? I wish to illuminate some of the dark spaces that still exist within the discussion of sexual harassment in India. I wish to bring out a realistic description of the challenges young women face in their daily lives in India, even in a more liberal and global city like Mumbai. As Phadke remarks, the absence of violence is not a sufficient determinant of public safety. In order to feel safe in a space that a person inhabits, there has to be a sense of claim, comfort and active belonging. The knowledge that one is noticed and respected as an equal citizen (2005, pp.57-58; 2007, p.1511; 2012, p.56). Furthermore, as Dhillon and Bakaya write,

‘There is a continuing need to understand how women interpret their experiences of street harassment, particularly in the face of contradictions of modernity and tradition that shape the lives of women in Indian cities and transformations being witnessed by India’s urban hubs.’ (2014, p.3)

With this on mind, I conducted my fieldwork in Mumbai in affiliation with the Tata Institute of Social Sciences. I conducted ten interviews with ten young women, between the ages 23 and 35, my research questions being:

1. *How do young women who live, work and study in Mumbai perceive the safety of public spaces in the city, regarding the risk of sexual harassment?*
2. *How do they navigate moving in public spaces and negotiate risks in their daily lives?*
3. *To which extent does their choice of mobility, lifestyle, and response to risk in public spaces challenge the dominant patriarchal gender order, and amount to women’s ‘space claiming’ as well as a new sense of empowerment, that transcends victimhood?*

My analysis will proceed as follows. First, I am engaging with the previous academic literature and debate on sexual harassment of women in India, with a focus on the safety of public spaces

in Mumbai. Thereafter, I am presenting the theoretical framework that supports the analysis of the findings, following with the methodology and ethical considerations, then the findings and analysis and ending with the discussion of results and conclusion.

## II. Literature review on sexual harassment of women in India, with a focus on public safety in Mumbai

The continuous discrimination that Indian women face in public spaces and in the privacy of their homes has raised a remarkable amount of scholarly attention within the past decades. India is known for its brutal rape cases, but it should be equally notified that sexual harassment has reached endemic levels on streets (Kanekar, 2007, p.114). According to Kapur, Indian women are ‘ogled, pawed and groped’ the moment they enter a public space (2014, p.10). Importantly, unforeseen cases of street harassment may evolve into brutal rape cases, such as with the Delhi Gang Rape of 2012 (Kohli, 2012, p.14). Due to its wide prevalence as well as traumatizing and demeaning effect, street harassment must be recognized as a significant social problem (Hutson and Krueger, 2018, pp.4, 18). Indian national crime statistics show that a woman is raped every 22 minutes and harassed every 51 minutes (Bhattacharyya, 2015, p. 1345). Delhi has the highest rate of crimes committed against women, including rape cases and sexual assaults. Yet, in reported cases of sexual assaults and sexual harassment, Mumbai comes second, despite its label of the ‘safest city for women in India’ (National Crime Records Bureau, 2017). With this in mind, this literature review will look at the general characteristics and determinants of sexual harassment in India, discuss Mumbai as a case study and examine further research prospects.

As Talboys et al. (2017) explain, ‘eve teasing’ is a term that has been commonly used to describe sexual harassment in public spaces in the South Asian context. However, feminists find this term highly problematic, since it proposes that presence of women in the public space is provocative in itself (p.1). According to Dhillon and Bakaya (2014) the word ‘eve’ presents women as ‘tempresses who provoke men’, while ‘teasing’ connotes that the whole act is playful despite its criminal nature. Furthermore, Indian popular culture, especially Bollywood cinema, often portrays scenes of sexual harassment as fun romantic pursuing, rather than violence (p.2). As Talboys et al. assert, this attitude to the phenomenon has contributed to normalizing and escalating violence against women in public spaces (2017, p.1). However, ‘eve teasing’ is not a legal term in India. The Indian Penal Code Section 509 defines sexual harassment as a “word, gesture or act intended to insult the modesty of a woman”. Sexual harassment may also fall under section 294; punishment for obscene acts and songs, and section

354, assault to woman with the intention to “outrage her modesty”. Section 354 has been further divided into four subsections: sexual harassment, assault or use of criminal force with the intention to disrobe, voyeurism and stalking (Natarajan, 2016, p.3). As the UN Women (2011) definition of sexual harassment emphasizes, an important aspect of the definition is that the harassment has been done without the consent of the person targeted. Harassment in itself can occur in any form of unwelcome sexual comments, attention, actions or gestures (p.4). Indeed, there are multiple definitions of what constitutes sexual harassment; however, the target’s subjective experience of the event is a key determinant of whether it will be interpreted as harassment or not (Hutson and Krueger, 2018, p.4).

Following, there is no legal definition for public spaces in most countries (Zietz and Das, 2017, p.2). The UN women (2011) defines public spaces as including streets and other neighborhood spaces, public spaces of work such as markets and water distribution sites, public transportation, routes to and from schools and educational institutions, festivals, parks, sports facilities and other public recreational spaces and key public facilities such as toilets among others (p.4). These are all sites in which sexual harassment may commonly occur. When it comes to Mumbai, the study conducted by Bharucha and Khatri reported women experiencing harassment at multiple occasions, different times of day and even in their own neighborhoods (2018, p.106). This study also revealed that the around 300 Mumbai women who participated in the survey, experienced railway stations, the areas surrounding stations, street markets, local buses and dimly lit areas as the least safe.

There are multiple reasons for which sexual harassment and violence towards women in public spaces should not be taken lightly. As Zietz and Das explain, experience of gender-based violence in childhood and adolescence can result in health inequalities throughout the individual’s lifetime, including depression, alcohol and drug use, HIV and other STDs, unwanted pregnancy and pregnancy complications. Furthermore, Indian women who have been harassed suffer a great deal socially. Due to fear of revenge from the perpetrator and the fear of victim blaming and losing family reputation, majority of women prefer not to report their assault to the police (2017, pp.2, 3). Altogether, the rough treatment from the police towards victims and their families, lengthy legal procedures and low conviction rates result in a general ‘culture of impunity’. In general, the police are not seen as effective in the primary or secondary prevention of sexual harassment (Dhillon and Bakaya, 2014, p.1). The common lack of recourse only enhances the power of these acts and perpetuates gender inequality in the public space (Hutson and Krueger, 2018, p.18).



Phadke has studied risk in relation to women's access to public spaces in Mumbai. She argues that studying public safety in Mumbai is important especially for the reason that it is considered as the women's 'standard' of access to public spaces in India, yet her research shows that in reality there are relatively few women out on the streets, never more than 28 percent at a time. In addition, the growing presence of young women in public spaces of Mumbai through higher education and/or employment makes it an important case study for sexual violence (Zietz and Das, 2017, p.4). Furthermore, the results of scholarly observations and studies of safety in Mumbai contradict the proposed image of Mumbai as the most female friendly city in India. Bharucha and Khatri's (2018) study of around 300 working women in Mumbai revealed that 91 of the respondents worry about their safety all the time and that 57 percent of the participants experienced Mumbai as 'somewhat safe' whereas 44 percent as 'unsafe'. Bharucha and Khatri argue that sexual harassment has become normalized in Mumbai. Importantly, the study highlights that women experience street harassment regardless of their socioeconomic status (pp.102-107).

There are several gaps in the studies done regarding sexual harassment of women in the public spaces of India. One of the ongoing dilemmas as pointed out by Phadke is the sexual surveillance of women. Phadke asks: 'How to assure safety through surveillance while rejecting the sexual surveillance of women?'. The concern here is of a woman's freedom and entitlement to feel comfort and belonging in a public space, without the need to alter her behavior according to societal and patriarchal notions of appropriate behavior (2005, p.56). Furthermore, Natarajan points out the need to study the effectiveness of the routine precautions that Indian women take in order to avoid sexual harassment on the streets. She argues that there is scarcity of information on the costs and benefits of precautions. Further, she remarks that attention should be paid to changing patterns of harassment, such as stalking with mobile phones, candid shooting and threatening with inappropriate images (2016, pp.6-9). Additionally, Hutson and Krueger write that there is a lack of studies that would examine how 'race, ability, gender, sexuality, religion, nationality, class and occupation affect the experience of street harassment (2018, p.19). Therefore, case studies that perform an intersectional analysis of women's subjective experiences of sexual harassment would be useful in bringing new insights to field.

### III. Theory and concepts

#### **Theoretical framework**

##### **The inherent spatiality of power**

When examining women's experiences of sexual harassment in public spaces one has to be aware of the power dynamics that infiltrate each situation and interaction within the public sphere. According to Gilbert (1998),

‘No spatiality is inherently with or without power – we need to analyze how mobility and immobility are related to power in particular contexts for different social groups.’ (p.598)

Further, Allen (2003) illustrates the co-existences and juxtapositions of power that characterize places:

‘Spatiality is constitutive of power relations not only in general, but also in particular ways in which, say, seduction takes advantage of existing attitudes and expectations to reach an audience or domination works to constrain a disparate population – power relations have long been experienced through a variety of different modes and they have always been spatial.’ (pp.9-10).

While engaging in the analysis of my data, I will pay close attention to the different nodes of power and power dynamics that seek to dictate women's behavior in public spaces, as well as the ways in which my participants negotiate, challenge and defy these. As Bhattacharyya states, this ‘physiography of power’ displays itself in daily interactions and pressurizes Indian women to remain on the background, in the private sphere. Bhattacharyya emphasizes the fact that the cultural determinants of space play a role in normalizing street harassment in India. She quotes Lefebvre, according to whom “social space is a byproduct of social practices”. In India, public spaces are a male domain and suffer greatly from hegemonic patriarchy and power (2014, p.1344). Thus, as Kohli writes, the control of women is seen as natural and is the result of the ‘continuous articulation of patriarchal ideals that determine the normative aspects of women's sexual character’ (2012, p.15). Altogether, while subordination of women is the root cause of street harassment; street harassment further legitimizes the subordination as natural, normal and desirable (Hutson and Krueger, 2018, p.13).

### **The socialization of gender roles**

The values and norms of the surrounding culture and society play a central role in determining and inculcating normative and acceptable behavior as well as gender ideologies (Levant, 2011, p.767, 768). Chattopadhyay (2018) discusses the process of gender socialization and adopting gender roles in the Indian context. He writes that patriarchal values have a great impact on the nature of the social conditioning that leads to distinct behavioral patterns in Indian men and women.

‘Gender socialization is the process through which domination of the male gender in society is represented and legitimized through various means of religion, culture and social norms dictated by the patriarchy.’ (pp.66,67)

Importantly, the process of gender socialization starts from an early age, as Chattopadhyay states, even before the birth of the child. The social surrounding of a pregnant woman expects her to carry a male fetus, and she is ‘provoked and inspired’ to hope for the same. Further, the formation of gender identity occurs in tune with the stereotyped sex roles and the acquisition of the role of father or mother, legitimizing the given gender ideology of a society (pp.65, 69). While conducting the analysis, I acknowledge the role that the patriarchal values instilled in both men and women, starting from childhood, play in normalizing the gender inequality and oppressive and misogynistic practices, including sexual violence, that women face in their daily lives in India. These do not need to be big events, but also more importantly the subtle and simple ways in which women are made to feel that they are second class citizens, such as denying access to a certain pleasure or locality or appreciating the value of a woman’s work contribution less.

### **The rhetorical construction of public sphere and everyday negotiations of gender ideology**

Following, as Singh and Kumar explain, gender ideologies and patriarchy become validated in daily lived experience through the rhetorical processes that take place in the Indian public sphere, translate themselves into social practices and further penetrate the daily interactions within the public space (2019, p.10). Public space is only a part of the larger construction of public sphere, that includes the state and civil society, the roles and public institutions that have been produced over time and which shape the economy and polity (Singh and Kumar, 2019, p.12; Phadke, 2012, p.53). As Phadke importantly remarks, each space is an ongoing process, constantly shaped by the socio-political processes, cultural norms and institutional arrangements (2012, p.53). When it comes to the processes of discourse formation, Singh and Kumar argue:

‘Only certain rhetorical practices get translated into social practice – in the Indian case, the ones that support patriarchy, and the oppositional discourses of excluded groups, especially women, do not transform themselves into reality’ (2019, p.10)

The reason for why it matters considering the phenomenon of sexual harassment in public and in general, is that the whole structure of justice in India itself is infiltrated by the patriarchal

values which prevent the formation of a counter-hegemonic discourse, while delay and deny justice from the victims of sexual violence. The agencies of the society, such as the police and court, are highly misogynistic and exclusive in their practices: lawmaking follows a patriarchal frame, while the police is instrumental in mistreating and neglecting cases of sexual violence, even taking an advantage of the victims (Singh and Kumar, 2019, pp.12, 18-19). Therefore, while observing the phenomenon of sexual harassment in public spaces, it is crucial to keep in mind how the overarching power structure and the rhetorical processes of the public sphere interact with the daily experiences of danger and safety of women, as well as the women's perceptions of their agency and citizenship.

### **Conceptualizing sexual harassment in public spaces, Indian middle-class women and public safety**

Before proceeding with to the analysis, I wish to clarify my choice of concepts and what I mean with the central terms that are employed throughout the analysis. Due to its problematic colonial origin and misogynistic connotations, as mentioned previously in the literature review<sup>2</sup>, I have decided not to use the term 'eve-teasing' and instead refer to 'sexual harassment in public spaces'. Furthermore, since the center of focus of my study are young, to some extent privileged middle-class women, it is important to clarify my conception of the middle-class in the Indian context. In the beginning of the interviews, I asked my participants to define the social class which they belong to. All ten of them perceived themselves as part of middle-class, two upper and one lower. When it comes to the definition of middle-class, I acknowledge that the Indian middle-class is a large and varying group with multiple levels, the boundaries and content of which are fluctuating and constantly changing. As Fernandes and Heller (2006) put it, the middle-class has always been a concept that 'defies definition' and especially in the Indian context, it's even more of an 'elusive object'. The scholars suggest, that instead of looking at economic indicators only, one has to focus on the actual mechanism through which structure and agency are linked, thus the ways in which this particular group aligns its economic and political interests (p.499).

When it comes to the term 'Indian middle-class woman', I see that this category is more defined by the aspirational lifestyle that these women lead. I see middle-class women as evolving projects, since as the definition of middle-class evolves and changes so do the subjects who constitute it. What is now considered to be a middle-class lifestyle was different ten years

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<sup>2</sup> See section '2. Definitions' of the literature review

ago and will most likely change in the years to come. When it comes to scholarly definitions of a middle-class woman in India, these are mostly centered on notions of what middle-class women can do, say, and also importantly wear, as opposed to other less-privileged women. As Phadke writes, being a middle-class woman in India is the produce of multiple things, including your lifestyle choices, your clothing choices, your privileged access to education as well as ‘middle-class spaces’, such as cafes, malls and other places of recreational activities. These are spaces in which the presence and class performance of a certain kind of woman is a marker of modernity, and the city’s claim to its global status. However, the important distinction is that these places are not ‘public’; they are private spaces which appear to be public yet have an implicit system of regulation and exclusion (2007, p.1514).

Finally, my approach to examine the concept and phenomenon of public safety and on the other hand lack of safety are aligned with Shilpa Phadke’s concept of ‘claim’ and her theorization of the discourse of public safety that centers on the desirability of middle-class women as active participants in the public space. When it comes to her concept of ‘claim’, she writes,

‘Safety, I argue, is linked directly to the level of claim that one feels to a space. It is more than the promise of not being physically harmed, it includes the knowledge that should one be harmed one’s presence will not be looked at askance. It is this lack of claim that contributes to women’s sense of anxiety and lack of safety as much as the fear of assault.’ (2007, p.1511)

Correspondingly, Fenster (2005) argues that patriarchal power relations abuse women’s right to the city by limiting women’s feelings of belonging. She refers to the daily processes by which urban spaces become used and claimed by different groups as part of the “construction of belonging” (p.223). Accordingly, while discussing my participants’ perceptions of public safety in Mumbai, I will focus on the level of claim and lack of claim in these women’s experiences in specific contexts. I will also pay attention to the ways in which these women made conscious efforts to ‘reclaim’ public spaces and challenge the surrounding public discourse of patriarchy that seeks to limit women’s movement.

Furthermore, the discourse of public safety in India, as Phadke writes, is articulated in the form of gendered safety and posits the middle-class women as central subjects to portray the image of honor and tradition while representing aspiration and modernity. This is a paradox in itself, as much as the notion that ‘women are expected simultaneously to demonstrate their sexual desirability while ensuring their sexual safety’. Additionally, the discourse posits women as the ‘vulnerable victims of attack’ and builds on binaries of ‘respectable’ vs. ‘non-

respectable', 'controlled' vs. 'loose' and 'good' vs. 'bad' etc. The importance here is that while the presence of middle-class women in the public space is highly desirable, public spaces are still seen as inherently dangerous for women (2005, p.48; 2007, pp.1511, 1513). Examining how my participants engage with these contradictions in their daily lives is crucial in shedding more light to the overarching discourse of public sphere as the space of patriarchal domination, and how the narratives of these young women living in Mumbai reflect it as well as interact with it.

#### IV. Field, methodology and ethical considerations

##### **Method of analysis**

For the method of analysis, I selected the interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) as described by Smith and Osborn (2009). As they explain, 'IPA is a suitable approach when one is trying to find out how individuals are perceiving the particular situations they are facing, how they are making sense of their personal and social world' (p.55). This fits the goal of my research, since I am interested in the subjective experiences of my participants, their thinking processes and how narratives are produced around each topic and situation. The IPA analysis allows me to deal with complexity and process while drawing comparisons within the data and with the existing literature, and thematizing the subject matter. The general procedure of an IPA consists of a flexible data collection instrument, such as semi-structured interviews, and is organized around the analysis of themes (pp.57, 69-76).

##### **Data collection**

As a method of data collection, I conducted semi-structured interviews as according to Bryman's criteria (2012, p.471). My sample consists of ten young women, who live in Mumbai. Conducting semi-structured interviews allowed the interviews to proceed in the form of in-depth conversations with a certain extent of flexibility. I used an interview guide (see appendices) with a fixed set of questions but gave my participants room to reply freely and at times altered the order of questions to avoid repetition, in case my participant already provided the answer. I asked the same questions from each participant with a similar wording. Occasionally, I asked my participants to specify on a subject they mentioned. The length of the interviews ranged between 32 minutes and an hour. After having conducted all the interviews, I transcribed them word by word. Thereafter, I began drawing themes out of the interviews, looked for connections between them and clustered them together into a list of themes that I

later formulated into the subsections of my ‘Findings and analysis’ chapter. After having subtracted the themes from the interviews, I started comparing my participants’ answers to the pre-existing research and academic literature in order to build an analysis which functions as a dialogue between those two. The interviews that I conducted provided me with enough data to trace patterns, commonalities and differences in the narratives of women, and to compare these to the academic as well as public discussion on these matters.

### **Participant selection**

I used purposive sampling<sup>3</sup> for participant selection. I was looking for young, independent, middle-class, working or studying women between the ages of 20 and 35. I was hoping to find opinionated women who felt something for the subject. Before the interviews, I had a brief conversation of the topic with each participant. This helped me to distinguish their motivation for participating in the research. As my method for finding participants, I used snowball sampling (Bryman, 2012, p.424). I found the participants through my previous connections in Mumbai and through networking with people at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, where I was affiliated, and during leisure activities. As I aspired, my participants are active, independent, working or studying young women who move around the city on a daily basis and use public transport and other local services. This means, that they constantly expose themselves to potential situations in which sexual harassment may occur and that require taking precautions and employing coping mechanisms. My participants come from different ethnic and religious backgrounds and from different parts of India. All of them possess a higher degree of education and categorize themselves as belonging to middle-class.

I selected middle-class women in order to delve into the middle-class discourse of public safety, as previously explained in the theory section. I am aware that Indian middle-class women’s interests only represent a small section of the society and neglect the disparities of caste, class, language and education (Batra, 2016, p.850). However, acknowledging the important role that Indian middle-class women play as the ‘markers of aspiration and modernity’ and ‘the ones possessing a privileged access to public space’, I agree on the necessity to focus on the perceptions of this particular group. As Phadke points out, having a profound look into the ways in which Indian middle-class women negotiate risk and safety in their daily lives in public spaces, can provide an insight about the fact that even as being ‘the

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<sup>3</sup> ‘The goal of purposive sampling is to sample cases/participants in a strategic way, so that those sampled are relevant to the research questions being posed’ (Bryman, 2012, p.418).

most desirable urban subjects', this privilege does not guarantee safety or unconditional access to public space' (2007, pp.1510-1513).

Finally, the reason for which I chose to focus on young women is first of all their youth representing the new generation and the face of modernity, but also their youth making them explicitly sexual subjects in the public space. As Phadke explains, older women are seen as asexual in the Indian context, including in Mumbai. They have greater access to public space and have less of a need to produce sexual respectability in contrast to young women, who experience significant sexual surveillance (2010, p.57, 58).

### **Triangulation and validity**

In order to support the data retrieved from the in-depth interviews, I refer to a wide number of academic articles that discuss sexual harassment in the public spaces of India. This involves understanding the background of the situation. Furthermore, I refer to timely initiatives that fight to change gender attitudes and sexual harassment towards women. Also, I have kept a field diary that includes observations from specific situations, deepening my understanding of young women's safety and behavior in public spaces of Mumbai. These observations were used in order to provide a context for the interviews and the research questions. With these methods and procedures, I can increase the validity of my data and bridge the interview findings to the pre-existing and current scholarly and public discussion on sexual harassment in India.

### **Ethical considerations**

Sexual harassment is a sensitive and largely stigmatized topic, that has a grave impact on the lives of the victims. While conducting interviews, I made sure that my participants felt safe and confident about their anonymity and were fully aware about the purpose of the study. I did not pressurize women to participate and gave the freedom to withdraw from the study in case they felt discomfort. While conducting the interviews, I followed the Swedish Research Council's guidelines (Swedish Research Council, 2017) when it comes to informed consent and protection of anonymity. I received consultation on participant selection from my supervisor Vibhuti Patel at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences. Importantly, the public discussion on sexual harassment has become more and more prevalent and open within the past few years in India. Having opinions on sexual harassment and discussing how to manage risks related to it is not controversial within the Indian society. However, with the awareness that discussing personal experiences may be highly controversial, I did not inquire my participants about these. Yet, some of the participants wanted to share their personal experiences and gave their consent for



me to use them for the benefit of my study. While using any sensitive experience for my research, I have changed all details that could be used to uncover the identity of the respondents.

### **Reflexivity and positionality**

Reflexivity in research is one of the keys to conducting ethical research. This means engaging in a constant reflection of oneself as the researcher, the research process and the power relations and politics influencing the research process (Farhana, 2007, pp.376-377). I am aware of the possible biases my position as a Western, white young woman with a European academic background can bring to my research. I do not seek to present myself as judgmental when it comes to discussing sexual harassment, patriarchy and gender roles in India. Neither do I seek to compare the Indian society to the Western parallels or propose for solutions that seem intelligible from my own perspective. As Smith and Osborn (2009) mention, the process of conducting an IPA analysis involves a double hermeneutic, since the researcher has to engage in an interpretative activity, using one's own conceptions to make sense of the participants' personal world (p.53). Therefore, while conducting the interviews and analyzing the results I engaged in constant self-reflection in order to perceive the positionalities I was taking and trace the possible biases that could impact my interpretations of the participants' narratives. This included acknowledging how my personal background, knowledge and experience impact the way in which I perceive the narratives of my participants and the research topic in general. Recognizing that fieldwork is always 'contextual, relational, embodied and politicized' (Farhana, 2007, p.382), I sought to address the biases and present the issues on my participants terms, as well as in light of the prevalent academic discussion on sexual harassment in the public spaces of India.

### **Research value**

While undertaking a research project, one should be concerned of the value of the knowledge produced, as well as the social contributions of the study (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, p.62). Sexual harassment in public spaces is an extremely relevant concern when it comes to gender justice and women's rights. It limits women's safety and free movement in public and causes trauma, social stigma and feelings of shame and humiliation for the victim. According to Bhattacharyya (2015), it has reached endemic levels in India; a woman cannot enter a public space without being disturbed sooner or later. For these reasons, it is crucial to increase the understanding on how women experience the daily moments of threat to their integrity while facing the risk of sexual harassment. In addition, understanding how young women in Mumbai challenge the patriarchal notions of normative femininity is important in the light of gender

equality, women's emancipation and Indian feminist movements. Hopingly, this study can also provide insight into the ways in which women's safety could be improved in public places. With the research done for my master's thesis, I hope to increase awareness on the sexual harassment that young women face in public places in India, especially in cities like Mumbai which are considered to be 'safer'.

### **Risks and delimitations**

I made sure to ensure the anonymity of the participants and that participating in this study did not cause them any harm. I will further make sure that the data will remain private and anonymous. I kept a low profile as a researcher and discussed the topic selectively. The locations for the interviews were chosen according to my participants wishes, so that they could talk in privacy without the risk of being watched or overheard by unwanted persons.

The main challenges and limitations of this study are the limitations regarding time, the selection of participants and representativeness of the study. Since my study involves only ten participants, it is clear that the results are not representative of all the young women in Mumbai and are largely impacted by the background and experiences of the participants. Also, it could be that my participants spoke selectively and altered the answers in order to provide a certain image that was not objective. Altogether, these interviews are unlikely cover the whole range of my participants' experiences, rather provide a glimpse to them. Initially, I thought the social stigma surrounding sexual harassment might have an impact on my participants' responses, but to my surprise all the women felt empowered to discuss the matter spontaneously, even provide personal answers.

## **V. Findings and analysis**

While discussing the content of the interviews I conducted with my participants, I seek to understand the everyday lived experiences and negotiations these women have when they inhabit the public spaces in Mumbai. Looking at women's relationships with the city in Fenster's terms as processes of 'construction of belonging'; rather than as events, enables visualizing the constant interplay of values, social norms, risk and safety as well as individual coping and adaptation mechanisms (2005, p.223). In the following paragraphs, I will address my participants' narratives from this point of view as well as delve into the interconnections between the related academic literature and phenomena.

## Rating safety - is Mumbai a safer city for women?

Mumbai has been considered relatively safe in comparison to other Indian cities due to the fact that it has a large workforce of women, history of social reform and a relatively well-developed system of public transport, and structure wise, a mix of residential and commercial areas (Phadke, 2007, p. 1510). Yet, my participants' accounts reveal, that the experience of 'safety'<sup>4</sup> and the extent to which my participants feel comfortable in public spaces is far from ideal, largely context dependent and fluctuating. In order to have a general understanding of the level of fear my participants have in public spaces of Mumbai, I asked my participants to rate their fear of sexual harassment on a scale from one to ten, ten representing the most extreme sensation of fear.

**Table 1.** Rating safety in Mumbai

<b>Name of participant</b>	<b>Fear of sexual harassment in public spaces on a scale from 1-10</b> (1 – no fear at all, 10 – extreme sensation of fear)
Anushka	3
Sumedha	3
Kareena	5
Saanvi	0
Veera	3
Ardika	9
Suman	6
Pushpa	0
Jovita	7
Ruchi	1
	Average: 3.7 Standard deviation: 3.02 Coefficient of variation: 1.22 CV>1 – high variance

<sup>4</sup> In academic and popular discussion, there are multiple perceptions of what 'safety' consists of, as was the case with my participants' definitions of safety. For the purpose of the analysis, I take Phadke's perception of safety: 'a sense of physical, intellectual and emotional lack of threat at the individual level'. Further, safety in relation to public space would mean 'not merely the absence of violence but also the feeling of comfort in a public space' (2012, p.55).

The result was very interesting, since there were stark differences in the perceptions of each person, ranging from zero to nine. On top of the general numbers, two of the women further gave situational ratings, such as the amount of fear in different modes of public transport. According to Sumedha, the general compartment in the local train of Mumbai represents number 9, thus extremely risky. Furthermore, Suman gave descriptions on the amount of fear according to the time: day time represented number 2, after 9 p.m. 7 to 8 and post 12 a.m. 10. This confirms that for my participants, the perceived safety and comfort in a public space is highly situational and depends on multiple factors. Among all my participants, Ardika gave the highest rating for fear in public spaces. Experiencing fear had become a pattern for her:

‘I do fear, you know being molested or eve-teased on a daily basis – it’s just become like a part of society for me – so there’s not a day that I’m not eve-teased or looked at or stared at. Every time that happens – a little chilling, it is a horrible experience, but it’s become mundane – any kind of commute, so if you’re walking or you’re on the bus – anything – they’re like all there, out there, so it’s really hard to get rid of such people.’

Accordingly, the quantitative study of Macmillan, Nierobisz and Welsh (2000) found out that the more experiences a woman had of sexual harassment in public, the more fearful she felt in public (pp.314, 318). Furthermore, Ardika had a very negative image on safety in Mumbai as a whole:

‘We are heading to be the worst city in India, because a lot of rapes happen and they are all girls, who are literally on their way to college or work, get abducted and raped – last week the newspaper had an incident where the girl was raped in a moving autorickshaw. Basically, like the trust factor in people used to be there, but now – we are so self-prepared for defense mode, that you suspect everyone for being a potential rapist, molester...or just a goon.’

On the whole, my participant’s perceptions on safety in Mumbai reveal that fear is prevalent in most of these women’s lives. Whether this fear is imagined or an actual threat, it still has an impact on the level of comfort that these women feel in public spaces, increasing their feelings of anxiety and the need to engage in self-regulation of behavior in order to protect oneself.

### **Types of harassment in Mumbai**

The types of sexual harassment my participants have witnessed in public spaces of Mumbai range from groping, stares, singing and commenting to molestation and attempt to rape. Groping and touching are seen to be most common. Ruchi said she had often witnessed men trying to rub themselves against women in trains or other crowded places. The time of the day

was also seen to be an important factor in determining the nature of the harassment. Anushka explained that ‘during the day, harassment is almost funny – but in the night time, the scary kind’. Veera said that some places are always dangerous, but in general harassment is more likely to occur early morning or late in the evening. Ruchi argued that some places might be ‘absolutely safe during daytime but in the evening, they are not’. Altogether, when discussing experiences of safety in Mumbai my participants felt that using public transport is one of the biggest risk factors. The main modes of transport used in Mumbai include the local train and buses, the metro, the local black taxis, the autorickshaws and the private taxis Uber and Ola. Local train and buses are perceived as least pleasant due to the crowd and the increased possibilities that they provide for groping. My participants told they in general prefer Uber or autorickshaws, especially late in the night. Each time my participants travel, they employ certain coping mechanisms and select the mode of transport according to the route, time of the day and whether they travel alone or with company.

‘When I’m with a group of larger friends, I choose the local, but I try to take Uber or the autorickshaw, most of the time. Yes, when I’m alone. Because that keeps a navigation on where I’m going.’ – Suman

‘I especially choose taxi, which has high security system. For example, like Ola. This Ola had OTP<sup>5</sup>. So, somewhere I felt that they are tracking.’ – Jovita

‘If you haven’t been able to get into the ladies’ compartment, then it’s very difficult. So, I prefer getting into the ladies’ compartment, or traveling with my friend’s or colleagues.’ – Saanvi

‘Every time – instead of being on the phone – I have been when I’m travelling, looking at the driver, looking around if someone is trying to get in to the rickshaw, looking that he’s not trying to mislead the route.’ – Ardika

As my participants’ narratives reveal, moving around the city creates multiple anxieties for women in Mumbai. My participants are very conscious about the risk of sexual assault, and this automatically causes them to alter their behavior. According to Kohli, this has to do with internalized, culturally determined morality principles that Indian women follow in order to protect themselves from sexual assault (2012, p.14). Crucially, my participant’s negotiations of using transportation in Mumbai portray the juxtaposition of risk and safety, and how these women actively take part in evaluating the potential risk and producing their own safety through various techniques, such as traveling with friends or using a tracking system.

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<sup>5</sup> A one-time password, that identifies the passenger uniquely to the driver.

### Intersectional determinants of harassment

Phadke points out to the need of looking at safety and risk from an intersectional perspective. She writes that class, caste, ethnicity and religion all play a role in an individual's articulation of safety and risk (2005, p.45). With my participants, this was visible in the narratives of Suman and Jovita, who come from the Northeastern states of India. They both feel an increased sense of discomfort in the public space due to their different looks. Suman says she gets stared at due to her facial features. Jovita feels anxious due to certain comments she gets:

‘So, many times whenever I go – automatically I have some kind of a fear in my mind. I mean like, how people will look at me. Many times, what happens – we are from Northeastern states – and they can easily make out that we look different and we are from outside. The way of looking at us is a little different. So that insecurity, in my mind it, grows a little bit more. And sometimes they just pass comments. ‘Hi, hello’ like that. But we don’t know them, who are they. And they’ll be looking at me very much, and sometimes they will just ask me ‘*Aap nepali hai na?*’, like ‘Are you Nepali?’. But actually, we are not Nepali, we are a different ethnic.’

Furthermore, Jovita feels increased discomfort especially in the daily interactions with taxi drivers:

‘And I am traveling – taxi also – many times I feel insecure because of reading newspaper, and all these like – sometime some girls they’re abducted. And sometimes they say: ‘*Madam, aapke paas time hoga to Saturday main – ham bhi thoda bahut free hota hai, phone kijie*’ – I mean like ‘on Saturday like I’m also free, if you guys are willing to go out, just give me a call, we can go together’. The men here – that sentence says – kind of...and the moment they enter inside the campus, they become aware – oh these people are not what we thought of – so their expression changes.’

Jovita studies at a renowned institute in Mumbai and her narrative of how the perception of the taxi driver changes, when he realizes the educational level of the woman, is a very important one. In a class-society like India, these markers bear a great significance in evaluating the social status of the person, and his or her relation to the public space (Phadke, 2012, p.61). Initially, the taxi driver stereotypes Jovita according to her looks and perceived ethnicity, whatever connotations that awakens in him. As Dutta and Sircar write, in popular discourse, Northeastern Indian women are racially stereotyped as ‘sexually aggressive, available and thus violable’ (2013, p.298). Yet, when the driver realizes Jovita’s actual social class and educational status, he understands that his social status is lower in comparison and backs off. Such a situation is crucial from the perspective of social and gendered power. Class, caste, ethnicity and gender form a complex power configuration that determines the position of each individual in a specific

situation. Altogether, my participants' accounts reveal that their living surroundings, social and ethnic origin, previous experiences of harassment and choice of transportation all play a role in determining their perceptions of public safety.

### **Areal differences**

Following, my participants explained that the fear of being harassed decreased or increased depending on the area they were in. Women who live in neighborhoods with mixed social classes or are exposed to slum areas told feeling more fear in their daily lives, due to the necessity to walk past the streets or corners that are perceived less safe. In fact, more than half of Mumbai's population belongs to the category of slum and pavement dwellers (Phadke, 2005, p.1501). Due to this, the presence of class and caste divisions is extremely notable, and daily life forces a continuous negotiation and interaction between the different inhabitant groups. For my participants, this also creates certain forms of avoidance and preferences to limit one's movement. For example, Kareena and Sumedha feel unsafe in their neighborhood because it is located next to a slum area. They avoid going out in the dark, and if they do, they take a cab and avoid walking. Similarly, Anushka tells how she needs to bypass an informal settlement in order to get a rickshaw from her house. Due to unwanted attention and staring, she dresses more modestly. She tells me she does not feel the fear of being physically harassed per se, more the desire to avoid being stared at.

In contrast, my participants feel a different sense of freedom in the wealthy, posh neighborhoods of Mumbai, such as Bandra, Juhu, Andheri, Versova and South Mumbai; whereas certain areas such as Govandi, Dharavi, Kurla, Ghatkopar and Chembur are perceived as risky<sup>6</sup>. As Sumedha explains, the perception of lack of safety also comes from the observed mindset of the surrounding people. This is especially notable when it comes to adhering to traditional values, and the amount of staring a woman gets if she transcends the normative behavior of the surrounding community. Sumedha explains:

‘In Bandra I can wear whatever I want. The same thing goes to South Bombay, I can just wear whatever I want, like travel – even in the *autos*<sup>7</sup> I can wear whatever I want. But whenever I am travelling here, like Ghatkopar, Chembur, all these areas – if I'm wearing a short dress then people tend to look at you, even in an auto.’

Thus, my participants have set clear boundaries to their movement and behavior, including

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<sup>6</sup> Govandi, Dharavi, Kurla, Ghatkopar and Chembur contain some of Mumbai's main slums.

<sup>7</sup> *Auto* – autorickshaw.

choice of transport and clothing. Based on the narratives of my participants, it becomes paradoxical, how much uncertainty and ‘unsafety’ the safety of Mumbai is permitted to contain within itself. In other contexts, having these doubts or the necessity to take extra precautions would not be considered as features of a safe city. What matters here, is the point of comparison these women have. All of my participants compared Mumbai to other cities in India perceived as less safe, especially Delhi or northern states. Because of the issues that these women faced or heard of elsewhere, Mumbai’s issues seem minor in comparison. Altogether, despite the fact that majority of my participants rated Mumbai as a ‘safer’ city, even the women who reported experiencing lower levels of fear took precautions, avoided certain localities and situations and stayed cautious about their surroundings.

### **The ‘crowd factor’**

Furthermore, my participants described different strategies for dealing with the fear resulting from interacting with people, particularly men, from the lower social strata. As Phadke mentions, this fear is socially constructed and a part of the middle-class discourse of public safety, according to which poor people and minorities constitute a threat in public spaces (2007, pp. 1514, 1515). This perception is visible in the narratives of almost each woman that I interviewed. In fact, all the participants felt that the level of income and education is a crucial determinant of safety and comfort in a specific locality. Based on their narratives, I named this the ‘crowd factor’. When asking, what determines the safety of a place for a woman, many of the participants immediately said, ‘*it’s the crowd, the people*’. With this they meant the quality and mindset of the people in a specific locality. For example, Sumedha explained:

‘I think it’s the crowd again, like if the people living there – if it’s more like a residential place, if there are educated people living there – then it will be safe, you can reach out to people but if it’s like a slum area or something like that, then it’s really not – it’s dangerous basically.’

The ‘crowd factor’ can even have an impact on women’s choice of work. In her interview, Saanvi explained that she chose her workplace due to the knowledge that she could trust the people at the office.

‘This (safety) is the reason, even I am working over here. My salary doesn’t give me those bucks – what should I say – that I deserve, I am not working on that power – but still I am working here because I feel it’s a safer place. Because the people – almost 70 percent of the people here are from my native place. I am between people who are educated – most of the people are from Bihar, so they understand and respect me, that is the reason.’



In addition, Sumedha explained that even when it comes to the choice of public transport, one has pay attention to the fellow travelers. She tells that she prefers metro over the local train, explaining that because the metro is more costly, the crowd is already limited to wealthier and more educated people. Because of this, she feels safer. Thus, the desire to feel comfortable in one's surroundings and to be able to maintain one's respectability is a key priority for the women. Correspondingly, Phadke writes that for middle-class Mumbai women, the elimination of risks and uncertainties, such as the presence of lower classes, especially men, creates an artificial 'illusion of safety'. While being present at a locality, the performance of class status becomes a central determinant for one's respectability, relation to risk and safety, and position within the society (2007, p.1513).

However, one of my participants had another perspective. Anushka argued that the fear that middle- and upper-class people feel around the lower class is the result of 'not engaging with the unknown'.

'I honestly feel – people don't really engage with the blue-collar people. Which I feel like is very essential when you're living in a city. And I do that, I have almost befriended all the shopkeepers near my house. They call me 'didi'<sup>8</sup>, I call them 'bhaiya'<sup>5</sup> – a lot of people don't do that. And they try and keep the distance. And that anonymity is the reason why they feel apprehensive in roaming around them, or those people. So that is the main issue. People as a community, like I said they are very classist here. Very, very racist as well.'

Thus, Anushka attempts to engage with people from different social strata to break the barrier of unfamiliarity that according to her is the reason for prejudice and lack of comfort. This approach works for her, and it would be interesting to see if other women could apply it too, in order to feel more comfortable in their daily interactions. However, befriending the 'working class' is very much 'counter culture' in a society that is structured around class and caste distinctions.

Furthermore, when it comes to perceived safety in a specific locality, another participant, Ruchi mentioned that it is not just the quality of the crowd that matters, it is also the quantity. Importantly, she also feels that the 'filtering system' she has created is the reason for why she feels safer in public spaces.

'It would be wrong to say I feel 100 percent safe because obviously there is a filtering system in mind when you're picking up a thing. I would not pick a concert in an area which I am not very

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<sup>8</sup> *Didi* – sister, *bhaiya* – brother.

comfortable with. So, the filtering system is obvious. You know, sometimes even if you are in a very posh club, and you are hanging out with people from middle-class and above middle-class, but if there is a bigger number of people – and you know how the herd mentality is, the crowd mentality is. Like people think they can get away with stuff.’

On similar lines, Ardika argued that despite the fact that the ‘lower-income, lower education crowd’ is usually more dangerous for women, one could not expect being safe among highly educated, middle- or upper-class people either. When asking why, Ardika replied:

‘Someone can also belong to a really, really well to do family, can be very well educated and be a sex freak – you know where he *has to have it* – so it’s really, you can’t gage the situation.’

Similarly, Kareena says that women from all social classes are vulnerable to facing sexual harassment.

‘Women on both the sides, feel the same way. Even the woman who is living in the higher rate, whatever the areas, they also feel something about the ‘*sexualwala*’<sup>9</sup> thing.’

These remarks support the understanding that perceptions of risk and danger are socially constructed and based on the before mentioned discourse of public safety<sup>10</sup> that seeks to simplify the sources of risk and contamination into lower-class, lower caste and uneducated population groups. According to my participants, lower class areas are always perceived as more dangerous because the crowd lacks education. Furthermore, in public areas that are ambiguous and have a mixed crowd of people, the lower class, lower caste people are also considered as the main threat, yet women agree that even educated men can harass if they have that mindset. Another perceived risk is crowded places with a lot of people, where the quality of the crowd may not matter as much as quantity, when it comes to the risk of being harassed.

### **The inevitability of sexual harassment**

The normalization and belittling of ‘daily, mundane’ sexual harassment was a visible feature in many of my participant’s narratives. Anushka describes the daily harassment on the streets of Mumbai as something that feels almost like an essentialized, homogeneous part of the of the daily experience of moving around in public spaces a woman.

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<sup>9</sup> Related to sexual harassment.

<sup>10</sup> See Phadke, p.24

‘I don’t know how to actually bifurcate it. It’s just really like... it’s there. Maybe here and not here, it’s just there. Now it’s come to a point, which is sad, that it doesn’t even register in my head anymore because it’s just there, it’s just background music, on a day to day life.’

This exemplifies that street harassment is an integral part of the public experience of a woman in India: not a surprise, rather something to be expected. My participants agreed that harassment could occur anywhere.

‘Usually I know these places, so I completely avoid them, but then sometimes you probably wouldn’t expect anything to go wrong, and something might just – you can’t really predict.’ – Veera

‘You can’t really say, it could be any situation in India, it’s such a bad state, such a sorry and pathetic state because – I wish I could say Saturday nights because girls get dressed up and they wear really good clothes – so it invites but – how is it possible then for a girl in burka to get raped? It’s not even the time of the day because girls get raped at – now I think – you know one may even ask is there an age factor that does all this, but no, see there are kids who rape – there was a fourteen year old who raped an infant – so it’s so tragic, that where does this come from you know.’ – Ardika

‘I mean my friend was – so these two friends were from a long time, very good friends. So, the guy, we later realized that, the guy used to take photographs or videos of the girl. In the office premises. It is difficult, she was not very sure, being a friend, you just keep on thinking why he is doing that, and – all those things were there.’ – Pushpa

‘The people who have that kind of mentality to harass – they don’t have a time; they don’t have a place. They can be everywhere.’ – Saanvi

Accordingly, Bhattacharyya remarks, ‘it is an open secret that sexual predators are all over the place’ (2018, p.9). Due to the knowledge that harassment is inevitable, women are more concerned in preventing their own victimization, conscious about taking precautions and innovating new coping mechanisms and strategies instead of actively questioning or defying the root cause or source of the harassment. The reason for this is that the public sphere, as a masculine domain, is inherently hostile to the presence of a woman. The patriarchal norms of Indian society expect women to have a specific purpose when entering the public space, moreover, regulate women’s access to the public space by creating rules for when to go out, with whom and wearing what (Kohli, 2012, p.15). The ways in which my participants negotiate risk in public spaces and the contradictions that women’s emancipation, modernization and aspirational lifestyles that follow Western perceptions of modernity cause, will be addressed in the following sections.

## Negotiating risk in public spaces

### Precautions, coping mechanisms and confrontation

Koskela explains that the threat of sexual violence causes women to constantly monitor their surroundings and alter their mobility, resulting in a modified access to public space (1999, pp.111, 112). Correspondingly, my participants reported using multiple strategies to ensure their safety on a daily basis. Firstly, an important factor was evaluating the amount of risk in a specific locality, even before making the decision to go there. For example, Saanvi explained that she would always check the place on Google or consult her friends about it. Secondly, once inhabiting a selected locality, the women use several coping mechanisms for ensuring their safety, such as having company, dressing modestly and choosing a specific time of the day. When my participants go to a potentially risky place, or a place they are unfamiliar with, the reported coping mechanisms include informing their friends and family about their whereabouts, sharing tracking details, carrying a scarf in order to cover up if necessary and always keeping the phone at hand and paying extra caution to one's surroundings. However, some of my participants mentioned that the best precaution that one can take is simply not go to a place. This sounds blunt, however is a valid concern for women in India, for whom stepping out of the house can be a stressful experience due to all unwanted attention on the streets. As Jovita explains:

‘Even if I have little mobility, I still have that fear. Umm – majorly, when it’s not required, I don’t go out. That’s all.’

As exemplified by Jovita's behavior, the unfortunate consequence of conforming to the ideas of sexual safety is often the reduced access to public space. In order to ensure their safety and sexual respectability, Indian women maximize avoiding the risk of potential defilement in the public space (Kohli, 2012, p.14). Furthermore, most of my participants think that the police are ineffective in safeguarding women from street harassment. Anushka told of an incident in which she and her female friends complained of street harassment to patrolling police.

‘And we’d every time go to the cops and say this is happening, you really need to do something, and they’re immediate reaction would be: “Who’s asking you to smoke on the street, who’s asking you to wear shorts, who’s asking you to drink, who’s asking you to chill with these guys, who’s asking you to step out after 8 or 9”... so it all boils down to what we are doing...’

According to her, the biggest problem in this is that the offered solution comes down to restricting women's movement. Instead of facing the harassers, the police pour all the

responsibility on the women. In this manner, the root cause of the issue, the misogynistic mindset and disrespectful behavior of the harassers never gets addressed, rather is supported. Accordingly, Singh and Kumar write that one of the main reasons that allow the misogynistic behavior to continue within the Indian society, is that even the state institutions function according to patriarchal values (2019, pp.19, 20).

The fear of violence and sexual harassment has also had an impact on my participant's choice of accommodation. Ruchi and Veera explained that they spent a remarkable amount of money in order to live in a safe locality. Ruchi had lived alone in a posh area for nine years, before marriage. She admits that it was not the best decision economically, yet safety was her priority. For Veera, the decision also had to do with her possibility of professional advancement.

‘While I was interning at this particular place – I had to spend like an extra 20K per month, so I could live close to this place, because I knew my work hours would be pretty late in the night. And I knew, for me coming home that late is risky – because if I intend to come back home, I would have to put a time limit, till what time I can stay. While my competitors would like you know, stay back till wee hours and finish their work. Safety is the first priority. I would rather stay close to the – I spent extra money on that – so I could stay back late, that wouldn't be an inhibitor in my growth.’

Following, I asked my participants about their choice to confront, or not to confront the harasser in case an unpleasant situation occurs. Four of them said they would generally confront, two of them said it depends on the situation and time of the day and the rest four said they avoid confronting as a rule. The reason for not confronting was the fear of revenge and escalation. For example, Veera argued, that ‘safety is more important than getting justice in that moment’. Further, in a situation where the woman was alone and the harasser with a large male group, almost all of my participants said they would avoid confronting. The desire to confront was there, and my participants said they felt frustrated for not being able to fight back. However, one of the women said that after being molested several times, her attitude changed.

‘It took me a lot of – several times of being molested that I've come to this stage. I think I now I have lost that – you know you have a little grace as a woman – and if you have lost that – if you touch me, what more can you do, if you touch me, then I have all the power in me to beat up. It's sad that these things, like a sense of defense and wanting to learn, it happens over a period of time, it's sad that you have to experience that – then you harden yourself.’

She told me she got tired of seeing injustice and would rather teach the man a lesson, hoping that he would change his habits.

Another precaution taken by my participants was the choice of clothing. Clothing became an important point of discussion in most of the interviews. My participants discussed their desire to wear certain things, their choice of wearing something more ‘appropriate’ instead and also what happens when one’s choice of clothing is perceived as ‘inappropriate’ by others. Many of my participants felt restricted in terms of clothing and aspired to wear something more modern and fitting instead of covering themselves up in traditional *kurtas*<sup>11</sup> or baggy sweaters.

‘I would love to really dress up modern and be really formally and nicely dressed but what happens is you often think ‘oh my God, is that showing too much stomach, or is that showing my cleavage or’ – I mean I feel a difference because for someone who travels abroad a lot like me – I see the difference – there I’m free, I can wear whatever I want – and not have guys – sometimes even a compliment in India feels like an attack, because they are out there in huge numbers – you can’t pick out who the genuine one is.’ – Ardika

At the same time, one of my participants explained that she attempts to challenge the perceptions of what women are supposed to wear. Anushka, a confident, upper-middle class woman, often wears shorts or strapless tops and above knee length dresses. She told me of an instance in the local train, illustrating how deeply engrained those gender attitudes are that penalize women for dressing outside the norms.

‘I was like in a normal – skater dress or whatever you call it – and I was in the train and there was this tiny kid, like she was a vendor – hawker rather – and she comes to me and is like “Why are you wearing such a tiny dress?” and I’m like: “Because I like wearing this dress” and she’s like “But you shouldn’t be it’s not good”, and then my friend, immediately intersects: “Do you not watch movies?”, she’s like “Yaa” – “Deepika Padukone<sup>12</sup> wears” and she’s like ”Yaa, but that’s in the movie, otherwise outside the movie she doesn’t wear” – and we’re like “Who said?” and then she didn’t know what to say, and because again she felt that because at home, how she’s probably not allowed to wear, so it’s that whole...’

Anushka explains that only certain women can access the lifestyle, in which wearing ‘that dress’ is possible.

‘I’m still the one percent. Those guys don’t, the 99 percent are not, even though they aspire to wear what they want to, do what they want, they still don’t get the freedom to do it.’

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<sup>11</sup> A kurta is an Indian traditionally worn, loose collarless shirt. It resembles a tunic, is usually below knee-length and worn with leggings, jeans or *churidar*, or *pajama* pants underneath. It is considered to be a neutral and respectable outfit for daily use.

<sup>12</sup> A Bollywood actress.

Correspondingly, Phadke argues that clothes function as a marker of status and modernity. According to her, Indian upper-class women are more comfortable in wearing skin revealing or form fitting clothes, due to their cultural capital (2007, p.1514).

In brief, my participants reported engaging in multiple precautions in order to ensure their safety in their daily lives. Majority of them felt that these precautions had been efficient, yet some of them argued that no precaution is sufficient.

‘You never know – you have boyfriends forcefully raping girls who say no to sex – you have grandfathers – like I had a friend whose grandfather molested her for *years*. There are girls who are betrayed by their cousins, real brothers and father – and it’s a nightmare – where would they go and how would they trust anybody after that.’ – Ardika

Thus, there are unexpected situations for which taking precautions is difficult. Also, acquaintance rape is a real concern in India. The National Crime Records shows that in 95 percent of the cases, the perpetrator was known to the victim (2017, p.147). As Ardika pointed out, these cases break the smallest amount of trust the victim had. Altogether, there is a necessity to target the mindsets of men that allow the occurrence of incest and rape, rather than putting the burden of self-protection on women, especially since it is inadequate in most of the cases where both physical and gendered power is involved. As another participant of mine told me, because of the power dynamics of gender and age, she could not do anything about the fact that she as a teenager was assaulted by an elderly man in her community. She said that in this case her voice did not matter, because she was yet to make her place in society, whereas the man had established his status. Therefore, it would be crucial to challenge the patriarchal norms of men’s right to women’s sexual control and subordination, in order to break the power dynamics that permit women’s sexual violation in the Indian society.

### **Gender-division of public spaces**

Sen (2014) writes that ‘male control of the public space is the norm of the Indian male’s image of his world today’ (p.145). The power asymmetry between men and women is clearly visible in the public spaces in India, including Mumbai. As Hutson and Krueger say, street harassment is an exercise of symbolic power, made possible by features of public space. Because of the dominant ideologies and discourses that dictate ‘appropriate behavior’, women expect negative sanctions when using public space (2018, pp.2, 4). Importantly, as Koskela describes, the avoidance of certain localities due to perceived risk enhances male domination over these. She explains, that cities become divided into male-dominated ‘masculine’ areas and supposedly safer ‘feminine’ areas (1999, p.112). I asked my participants if they felt that Mumbai has a clear

gender-division when it comes to occupying specific public spaces, and if the presence of a woman in these localities was considered risky. The answer was yes, and the narratives reveal that this has to do with both place and time. Anushka said that women are not expected to be out at midnights, but men can be out anytime. Sumedha thought that lonely areas and slum areas, such as Dharavi and Govandi were unapproachable too. My participants' answers illustrate the gendered power dynamics within the public space:

'A lot of people just assume that – on a street where there's a lot of car mechanics shops, they ask the women not to go around evening time there and that's like a very basic example. Places where it's just heavily men infested, haha, that's about it.' – Anushka

'I haven't acquainted to such places, haven't visited. *I have been to very selected places.*' – Saanvi

'A lot of places. Liquor shop for that matter. I mean – I don't know how it works abroad, women can just go to a liquor shop and buy it, and nobody would give a damn? These are more subtle, like sexist things you come up with. Because I've not faced the hardcore, I've faced the more subtle sexism, day after day. So, I would never, willingly go to – a liquor shop because there will be like ten thousand men – "Oh she's gonna drink, oh she's easy". And any crowded place essentially. Certain set of bars. Like – these so-called shady bars. Or just like walking around late in the night in the entire city. Girls, walking around at Band Stand<sup>13</sup> or Marine Drive<sup>11</sup>, at three in the morning – you just can't fathom that, can you? Like even in a city like Mumbai, it's difficult to imagine that.' – Veera

'Depends on the people, and how they look at you, how they scan you – so you get a feeling of yeah, you don't want to go that side. There's no chance for me to go there again.' – Kareena

These narratives reveal that my participants engage in constant negotiations of what is expected from them and how much they can challenge these norms and still maintain their respectability and safety within the public space. As Hutson and Krueger remark, the fear of sexual harassment causes women to alter their behavior and usage of public space, so that it matches with the public expectation (2018, p.12). Saanvi's comment here is the most revealing. The fact that she says 'I have been to very selected places' is a sign of a normative regulation and control system, according to which 'respectable women' should not even be exposed to situations that would contain the risk of defilement and danger. Saanvi's position as a 32-year-old married woman is different from the unmarried girls who are living an independent student life. As Phadke says, single young women, especially those who live far from their families, have less

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<sup>13</sup> Popular places for hanging out, located by the sea in fancier neighborhoods.



pressure to manufacture respectability due to the fact that the surveilling family structure is not present (2012, p.63). Furthermore, my participants agreed that there are ‘unspoken rules’ of what place is appropriate and what not, and this is something to be felt intuitively. The women felt a great sense of discomfort especially when it came to certain ‘lower class spaces’, for example the car mechanics areas that Anushka mentioned. Here, class and morality intersect. As Phadke elaborates, class is an important determinant for access to public space and notions of threat are constructed and contextualized around unspoken boundaries that control these spaces (2012, p.61).

## **Challenging normative perceptions of Indian womanhood as ‘modern women’**

### **Claiming the public space**

Importantly, my participant’s descriptions show that these young women make explicit efforts to challenge the norms that seek to dictate their choices and behavior. As Anushka described, this has to do with the notion of being a ‘modern woman’. Further, as a ‘modern woman’, she told feeling more comfortable in Bandra, one of Mumbai’s trendy and upscale suburbs, in contrast to other areas that lack the normalization of night-life and women participating in it. Anushka bases her self-categorization of a modern woman in reflection of the perceived opinion of others:

‘In terms of what the locals call a modern woman, is like wearing western clothes, drinking, smoking and all of that. That’s the reason why this place is more comfortable, because it has all the bars and pub culture happening, whereas again, for example Chheda Nagar<sup>14</sup> has not.’

As Veera explained, there is another term for a ‘modern woman’: the ‘bold girl’. The difference here is that ‘bold girl’ is used in a derogatory manner, in order to judge the young women who do not behave according to the societal expectations.

There’s this whole word that’s attached, ‘bold’. They say, “Oh that’s a bold girl”. Like they won’t say ‘easy’. And somehow now ‘bold’ has got this negative connotation to it. So, they’ll be like “That’s a bold girl”. Especially these aunties – “Oh what a bold girl”.

Further, Veera said that women are shamed of their choices of clothing and activities by men and women equally.

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<sup>14</sup> A small, conservative residential area in East-Mumbai.

‘Clothing – or you could be in a sweatshirt and like – you know these shady bars, you’re the only girl and surrounded by a lot of boys – so they’ll be like “Oh look at that girl. Hanging out with men. Oh, she probably likes that attention. Let’s go, talk to her”. I would first become uncomfortable. But I would like to try to break these barriers and be like “I don’t care” – I would just go there.’

The agency that these young middle-class women possess for challenging the norms is very crucial here. My participants fully recognize that this comes from a place of privilege. The same applies to their perception of gender roles and division of housework within the family. Ruchi explains that being a middle-class woman, she can say no to cooking if she doesn’t feel like it and hire a cook. Besides being able to afford a cook, she can take a stand on her position in the family. According to her, this is not even the case with every middle-class woman – because of the social conditioning, that women as ‘ladies of the house’ need to cook, women who can afford a cook would not do it. Ruchi argues that men are getting more aware and no longer putting all the burden on the wife, but this change is slow.

Suman’s story is another example of the subtle ways in which young, educated middle-class women challenge the normative gender roles in India.

‘Usually my classmates itself, they would order (liquor) on the phone. But I would go and get. Because half of the people who come to the liquor store are already drunk. But I don’t fear that. Like every time - people give you looks. So, but I am there. See – there is a difference between me and other people in general. What makes me uncomfortable I try to do it. I try to at least make myself comfortable. I should not be in that fear. I try to overcome that fear.

It’s not that I should be making myself comfortable everywhere. For example, at the *tapri*<sup>15</sup> itself – if there are too many men staring at me – they’re just uncomfortable with the fact that you know – a female individual is smoking. Then I would go to shift my space. So, there are ways of fighting norms. You can’t agitate all the time. You have to think rationally.’

While Suman engages in ‘counter normative’ behavior, she does it with consideration. This illustrates the fact that opposing the norms does not necessarily require doing so by loud statements and behaviors, the small efforts matter as well and make a difference on a personal level. For Suman, the ability to enjoy her cigarette in public space without fear, and the ability to overall test the boundaries of what is seen as appropriate female behavior, brings a personal experience of contentment.

Another example of the ways in which my participants sought to address the power asymmetry in the public space is Anushka’s participation in a Blank Noise initiative. Blank

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<sup>15</sup> *Tapri* – a roadside, shanty tea-stall that also sells cigarettes, snacks and other small items.

Noise<sup>16</sup> is a Bangalore based NGO that fights against gender-based violence, especially sexual harassment in public spaces. Anushka told about her experience of taking part in an event called ‘Meet to Sleep’<sup>17</sup>:

‘In December I did one of these events, called ‘Meet to Sleep’, where we just take our mats, and go in a public space and sleep out in the open. So, we did that in Juhu beach, in the afternoon. It was not just in Bombay, people across the country in different cities – that felt empowering, we were like five six women sleeping and then there were guys hovering and staring – but it was weird because at the same area, there were other guys doing their own thing and sleeping, and no one bothered them, but then the only way to go about it is to normalize us being out there.’

Such initiatives are an important demonstration to show that women should have the same extent of freedom and safety in a public space, as men do. Anushka told me that with her behavior, she attempts to keep on claiming the public space, and hopes to see other women doing the same.

‘Again, the day we all women go claim the public space, the day when they get to see so many women in shorts that they’re just like “It’s just a woman in shorts” – you get my point – before it was a totally alien thing for a guy to see “Oh my god legs” – now I think it’s getting there.’

Phadke has extensively addressed the need for women to claim the public space. She calls this the need to ‘loiter’, and proposes that it is the only way to expand women’s access to public space but also transform women’s relationship with the city, to ‘re-envision citizenship in more inclusive terms’ (2009, p.185) For the women who dare to loiter, it becomes an embodiment of freedom and claim but also the right to pleasure in public space – freeing oneself from the need to manufacture purpose and expect sanctions whenever one wishes to occupy the public space for leisure activities, without a specific purpose other than enjoyment (pp.185-193). Loitering is a significant act for challenging the power dynamics of public space, entailing the possibility of renegotiating sedimented roles and contesting societal expectations. For Phadke, the right to public space means the right to loiter, especially for women across classes (pp.194, 198). However, as shown by previous examples, the reality in Mumbai and in India is far from this ideal. Yet, the continuous efforts of individuals and organizations are working to challenge the status quo. The transformation it would bring on long-term, remains to be seen.

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.blanknoise.org/>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.blanknoise.org/meettosleep>

## Fighting against the unequal gender-socialization

One of themes that my participants were most concerned about was how the combination of unequal gender-socialization and lack of gender-sensitization led to unhealthy, violent and misogynistic behavior in men. As mentioned in the theory section<sup>18</sup>, gender socialization occurs in the early childhood and within the Indian context, this process teaches children about male dominance over women. My participants provided varied and insightful opinions on the connection between patriarchy, internalized gender roles and sexual harassment.

‘That’s the way they’ve been brought up: you are the end, all in the world, of everything, and so – like just because you have a penis in between your legs makes you special and we prayed for you and we finally got you as a gift – just go and do whatever you want because you don’t owe anyone anything.’ – Veera

‘It’s a lot of the surroundings. The surroundings are like that and there are very few role models who you can look up to, who treat women well. Because I taught in Govandi, I know that Govandi especially, it’s a very male dominated area. The kids grow up in an environment where the dad beats the woman, the wife, they grow up in a such a setting so obviously it’s gonna happen.’

– Sumedha

‘I would say there is a software problem in them. They haven’t been brought up that way. How to treat a woman – how to respect a woman – they haven’t been. Because they get these things from the family.’ – Saanvi

According to these women’s perceptions, the social conditioning of the female and male child is crucially important. Saanvi, who has a 7-years-old daughter, told me that she has taken a mission to raise her daughter into a strong woman. Saanvi’s father taught her to defend herself from early on, thus she wants her daughter to be able to do the same.

‘My father he told me – “If you cannot manage the things outside your home, on yourself, then stop going outside. Go outside only when you can manage your things on yourself.” And same I say to my daughter. She has things like “*Vah - usne maara*”, “that boy has hit me”. She’s a kid, I told her: “Don’t come to me crying – you beat him up, I’ll manage the things. Okay? Or you tell him, just without beating him up – first you convince him that this is not the thing – don’t come to me crying”.’

One of my participants also felt that it was her responsibility to teach younger girls to defend themselves from sexual harassment. She told me, that she regularly spoke with the girls in her neighborhood and made sure that they were aware on what to do if an unpleasant situation

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<sup>18</sup> See p.11.

occurs. She also told me of recently beating up a man, who had groped a girl.

‘A girl comes towards me, and she was hugging herself really tight and crying so I just reached out to her and I said, “Are you fine, are you lost”. And she said that – “Do you see that man, going to the opposite direction?” I said “Yes, he’s drunk”. And she said, “He grabbed my boob” and I said, “WHAAT?” and she said “Yeah” – “Are you sure?!” and she said “Of course”– and I just lost my cool – I said “You don’t do that”– she was like in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade, she was like seventeen, and I lost my cool and I went and I beat that man up, and to my benefit there were shopkeepers and vegetable vendors who came to my aid you know and they beat him up – I don’t care if that was a lesson for him or not, but somewhere the girl felt – okay I should do this the next time. I told her that next time this happens, instead of crying, shout as loudly as you can, make a scene – let the guy know what he’s done wrong, he’ll feel awkward, then he’ll feel endangered.’

Altogether, by taking action and responding to injustice, this woman felt that she could take a stand against sexual harassment and be accountable to herself and other women.

‘I can’t stop them from doing what they’re going to do, but I can control how I want to see it – I need to be there for myself, because how long will this go on, someone needs to put a stop in little ways and that’s what I do.’

Furthermore, Zietz and Das write that gender norms are further shaped by community level norms and structural determinants, such as acceptance of violence, male right to discipline, harsh physical punishment of children and linking male honor to female purity (2018, p.4). One of my participants, Kareena, who taught children in a slum community in Govandi, told me about the difficulties she faced in correcting the detrimental practices that children learn from their homes.

‘The kids know what a bad and a good touch is because we made them aware. So, the kids, especially the boys, they want to experience this feeling. I think it’s especially the media, it’s everywhere – everybody knows what porn is, they’ve seen all the videos. I know – 10 years old (kid). There was a guy in the community who used to sell these ‘*ten minutes ka video*<sup>19</sup>’ and they used to see, and they used to describe each – and because their houses are very small, they can see what their parents are doing, so everything is very visible in front of them – so like they’re aware of everything – even the way their dad treats the wife. So that is how they treat everyone. Even the younger kids – the way they treat their mom – it’s same how their dad treats their mom.’

As she describes, the problem here is that instead of responding to the gender education, the boys use the knowledge for testing their sexual boundaries. Furthermore, the combination of

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<sup>19</sup> A ten minutes video.

seeing their father's violent behavior towards their mothers and the availability of sex tapes teaches the children unrealistic and unhealthy sexual behavior. Indeed, my participants argued that one of the main obstacles for tackling the harassment behavior of Indian men is lack of education, including sex education and gender-sensitization. Ardika argued that the combination of illiteracy and unemployment was the biggest risk factor for 'evil practices':

'It is absolutely true, you know an empty head is a devil's playground, so when you have nothing to do – boys watch videos, they take photos, boys watch porn and which is fine – watching porn is fine but they don't have anything else to do – so all they do is that and before they know they're addicts, and every time they look up and they see a girl they see that.'

Because of such unavoidable conditioning of men, my participants felt that the only thing they could do so far, was taking the responsibility to themselves: being stronger women and encouraging and helping other women to be strong.

'So why don't you man up for yourself. I think every girl should know self-defense, should know martial arts. Then she can be free, because she knows – if you mess with me, I'm going to tear you apart. She has to be like a shark. She cannot be like a – you know those attractive fishes who can be really scared.' – Ardika

'Don't be scared, don't keep your mouth shut – speak up. Because if you are being harassed, you are allowing that person to harass you. Nobody can harass you without your permission. There are instances where it happens, behind that also there is some reason or situational thing. So, don't shut your mouth, speak out and let the surrounding to know that you are capable enough to take care of yourself. Keep treating yourself a priority – that's not something luxury – that there's an option, okay maybe I can, maybe not – that's the *demand*.' – Saanvi

'For me, ideally, I don't – I do not try to take measures intentionally to prevent something from happening. But for me, I will try and push my boundaries even more. I do not like to take preventive measures, because that would mean that I am not trying to live – it's not worth it, why should I give them that power over me?' – Anushka

These narratives portray that my participants feel the importance of taking action and setting an example for men and other women. Altogether, these opinions show that these women have formed autonomous opinions and choices, not fearing to challenge the normative perceptions of what a woman should think or do.

## Challenging taboos around sex and sexuality

Further, some of my participants argued that taboos around sex and sexuality can contribute to women's inability to defend themselves from sexual harassment. On one hand, Anushka argued, that a necessary step for getting rid of men's desire to harass women is normalizing sex in the society.

'That is the priority. Once you do that, you break the barriers over stigma right? Because now, sex for them is still like a far-fetched bubble that they cannot reach out to. Hence builds the aggression and the wrongdoings that they do. Once that bubble is burst and you really get into the core of it, normalize it, that's the only way to go about it.'

On the other hand, Veera criticized the hypocrisy of denying sex and sexuality from being a crucial part of the Indian culture:

'When we talk about sex, let's not make it a taboo – let's not bring the whole 'it's not in our culture' thing because... yeah you know, how do you have this population – how did you get that? So, let's not make it a culture thing, that we don't talk about it out loud. I mean you have these caves, where there are women naked – somebody made them – have you been to Elephanta<sup>20</sup>? Go there, there'll be caves, naked women – you know carved into stones, so we belong to that culture, why is it such a taboo now?'

In addition, one of my participants explained that she had suffered from the fact that sex is a taboo in her community. As a child, she had faced sexual harassment from an elder man in her community, but because sex or anything related was not an open topic, she was not able to talk about the incident before more than ten years had passed.

'I did not realize, because at that time I was a young child. I did not realize that was exactly harassment to me. But it came in my head again and again, but I did not know I should tell that thing to my mom, and then maybe I could recover soon. But kind of – there was something that was in my heart, but I was not able to tell – because in our community what happens, we don't openly talk about sex and that...if you're having sex then you have to get married. My parents, they never explained anything about sexual harassment or about sex life to me. So, for me sex means – I have to be very away – I mean, that was according to my understanding – that was not a right thing in life to do – that is what I understood.'

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<sup>20</sup> Elephanta caves are a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The caves contain a collection of cave temples, with carvings and sculptures linked to the cult of Shiva. (<https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/244>)

‘If my parents could have told me about all those things, I could have been more aware, and maybe I could have discussed more with my parents, and I could have – taken some precautions. Yes. I think that taboo applies here. Because of that taboo issue my parents probably didn’t talk.’

As her story shows, victims of sexual violence may suffer from the stigmatization of sex. For unmarried women, who live in conservative communities, it is even a greater taboo, since maintaining purity and respectability in the eyes of the community and securing one’s chance of getting married is of utmost importance. The fear of losing one’s respectability, the shame of what happened or simply unawareness of being violated are thus some of the reasons that can prevent a woman from speaking out. According to the popular and academic discourse, the women who speak out and manage to receive support from their friends and family are few. Singh and Kumar write that even in today’s India, the family takes part in silencing the victim and preventing her from getting justice. Majority of rape cases are not reported or become withdrawn due to the pressure from the victim’s families. In some horrifying cases, the parents of the raped girl force their daughter to marry the rapist (2019, pp.21-22). On this scale, my participants belong to the lucky minority, since they have managed to discuss their experiences of being harassed with their friends and parents and receive emotional support without sanctions. All of the interviewed women agreed, that in case they experienced sexual harassment, they would be able to receive adequate emotional support from their close ones.

### **Breaking the silence**

My participants shared personal stories of how being able to talk about harassment with their parents and friends made a great difference for them. These women also spoke about their emotional turmoil in considering how the knowledge of what happened to them would affect their parent’s well-being. One of my participants had gone through an extremely traumatizing incident. She was molested by her cousin, whom she had trusted like a brother. She told me there was a lot at stake after it happened. She told me about her fear that no one else would believe her. She had also been afraid that by coming to know about it her parents would be greatly hurt and no longer be able to trust any man around her. These fears kept her from speaking initially, but the fact that her other male cousin belittled what she had been through made her speak out finally.

‘So, I didn’t tell them for a very long time and it was a moment where another cousin brother, he tried to belittle the situation, like “Oh my god what happened to you was nothing compared to what happened to so and so” – and that’s how I got really provoked by it, and I lashed out and that’s how my mom came to know that – oh my god something must be really wrong with her.’



While I was interviewing this young woman, her mother was able to hear our conversation, yet did not intervene and gave her support and acceptance for the interview. This was impactful, especially considering the fact that in popular and academic discourse, Indian parents would not desire their children to account such incident to a stranger, and especially not a foreigner, I thought to myself. This example of a family who had taken full measures to support their daughter, not to side the harasser and make sure their daughter recovers by providing therapy rebuked a lot of the narratives that claim that the rape victim's family is the first one to destroy her with shaming and victim blaming. Yet, her incident is also exemplary of how the power dynamics of gender can function in order to downplay the severity of the turmoil a victim of sexual harassment has gone through, even more to protect and defend the harasser. She told me:

‘When I got molested by my cousin, we had gone out of town, and his girlfriend who’s really close to me – who’s apparently close to me – she saw him molesting me and it was a shocker because she comes to me and she has the audacity to tell me: “Oh it just happened once. Why you’re making a big deal about it?”. Not only didn’t she bother that her guy is cheating on her, but the fact that he is molesting his cousin, pinning her to the wall, forcing her, feeling her up and you would stand there, watch it and you have the balls to go and tell her – that “It only happened once!”. So, you know you really can’t trust –’

Her story shows that in certain situations, women may take part in protecting the harasser instead of empathizing with the victim. Why it occurs is an important question. Whether it is due to the internalization that men are higher in the power hierarchy, or simple desire not to lose face, the problem is that it occurs. As another participant Pushpa told me, there have been so many cases in which the family of the rapist protect him instead of blaming him. She further argued this had to do with the culture of male dominance and the differential treatment of girls.

## **#MeToo**

Following, I asked my participants about the impact that the #MeToo movement had had on their lives. The #MeToo movement started with actress Alyssa Milano's tweet in the US in October 2017. In India, #MeToo has been on the surface since October 2018, with wide coverage in Indian media and popular discourse: many celebrities and ordinary citizens have been coming out and sharing their stories of being sexually violated (Tella, 2018, pp.2, 6). All of my participants agreed that after #MeToo, the general ease to discuss sexual harassment had improved. This had led to meaningful moments of sharing stories and releasing the burden that

had been there for years. Ruchi told me about her friend, who had opened up encouraged by #MeToo.

‘I met her after #MeToo and she got so emotional and she started telling her stories. Because you know we operate in common circles. So, I know a lot of people she has worked with. And then she started naming people, that you know this one used to do this, and this one used to do that, and that’s because she realized that now the people are accepting that decision in the society – when somebody raises their voice, they are not ridiculed, they are not judged.’

Ruchi also thinks that the movement was an important game changer in the culture of victim blaming and normalizing sexual harassment in public and private discussion.

‘With #MeToo, what has happened is that people are not afraid of victim shaming. And the amazing thing that has happened is – you know it’s like – women are handholding other women. So, that is very empowering. The biggest advantage is that after #MeToo, sexual harassment has become a part of the regular discourse. People are – you know people who were not comfortable talking about it to their parents, to their families – I know people who have had incidents years ago and wouldn’t even realize that it was sexual harassment of some level. And then they have spoken to me and I have told them that you need a closure, talk to your parents and see what you want to do about it. Now that it has come to the forefront, they have the courage to talk to their parents.’

Another participant, Anushka, has taken part in the movement by posting her #MeToo story on her Instagram page, revealing the identity of the harasser and what he did. She told me that when the incident happened, seven eight years ago, talking about it to people was ‘not as comforting as opposed to now’. She feels that people are changing, and the situation is getting better. Furthermore, one of my participants said that hearing other women speak out and get justice gave her comfort, when she herself could not do it.

‘I was so glad – you know through someone else’s fight, through someone else’s – you know when someone – other girls got their justice – I found my solace because I think – we should – girls should learn how to stand up for each other. The sisterhood or whatever – so I really felt like somewhere – okay my molesters they are wherever they are, and I couldn’t do anything, but these guys, they got their answer.’

On the whole, my participants narratives reveal that #MeToo has brought meaningful closures for Indian women, created a sense of sisterhood that has a shared burden and given solace to those women who have not been able to speak about their sexual violation.

### Transcending victimhood - 'spoiled goods' or empowerment?

Traditionally, there has been plenty of stigma and taboo attached to victims of sexual violence in India. There is a belief that only 'bad' women get assaulted, and further a woman that has been assaulted is seen to have lost her 'purity' and 'honor' (Bhattacharyya, 2014, p.1347; Singh and Kumar, 2019, p.21). And since a woman's sexual respectability is considered to be the precondition for her future marriage prospects and her professional success, sexually violated women often suffer from social exclusion (Natarajan, 2016, p.2; Bhattacharyya, 2018, p.8). Despite the slow change in mindsets, recent scholarly writing confirms that victim blaming is generally the norm, rather than providing support and understanding. Singh and Kumar argue that the practice of victim blaming is powerfully internalized within the society; moreover, is the overall discourse within the public sphere, therefore difficult to weed out (2019, p.21). As Ardika explains, the Indian society is skilled at 'killing' the violated woman:

'When a victim is raped or molested, or even-teased, she dies somewhere. It's like a horrible death that you face because you feel so – you feel insignificant, you feel all sorts of things. And god forbid the society know something has happened, then they kill you. They help you. Oh, you wanna die let's kill you. Because their words, their actions – they come for the gossip. You know it's like Saturday night live for them. They're like "Ooohhh" they'll chuckle and be like "Oh *beta*<sup>21</sup> this happened" and "Oh my god you know this happened". So, even if at all she survived it, society kills her. Then what happens, she commits suicide, in our country. She can't take the burden. She can't see her parents take the burden.'

In such an environment, that systematically functions to bring victims of sexual violence down, women find alternative ways to address their trauma and injustice. As one of my participants explained, going to the police and filing a complaint was the last thing she wanted to do after being molested.

'Practically I should have gone to the police when I got molested but the police are also – they don't really help. You cannot rely on them. The questions they ask, the court – the Indian court is not a place you want to go ever. Ever. Because the judge and the people over there – you have so many criminals over there also – and it's like you're putting yourself through it again. Just get some closure, go to a counselor, you know, meditate, do some yoga, strengthen yourself, take up self-defense, lash out – go to gym, remove your vengeance, steam it out. That will probably get you better results – like I would rather go to a self-defense class than go to the police station because I

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<sup>21</sup> *Beta* – 'son', used by elders to address younger people.

may put myself through that again and again, put my parents through that trauma, spend money on getting that trauma – I would rather spend money on de-traumatizing myself.’

Another participant said that not speaking about her harassment was a deliberate choice, in order to protect the families of the harassers.

‘And today, even me, I am not coming out. I could have spoken – so and so person – I still remember their names – but I am not willing to come out with it, because those people have already settled in their lives, with their wife, their children – so how many people are you willing to hurt? I will definitely not do that, because I have already moved on, I have already forgiven them – and also like, I have much better life than before now. So, that’s okay.’

These stories illustrate how these women gained a sense of contentment and agency in deciding to empower themselves and find peace instead of looking for a revenge. In an environment which is already hostile to the ones who speak out, such approach does protect the person who has been wronged, especially if speaking out causes more pain than staying silent and prevents the person from healing of her trauma. This challenges the general notion that it would be better for the woman to always speak out. Ideally, what matters here is these women’s choice of keeping silence. When you choose to stay silent for your own good or for any other reason, you claim your response instead of victimizing yourself by denying your agency.

### **The level of claim in public spaces**

While embarking on the process of conducting fieldwork in Mumbai, one of my main interests was to find out about the level of comfort that young women feel when they move around in the public spaces of Mumbai. This had to do both with my concern of their sense of freedom and equality and my curiosity, since I often felt largely endangered and frightened while moving around the city on my own, especially at night. The interviews with my participants provided crucial insights. I realized that even these privileged young women felt concerned while occupying the public space and engaged in constant negotiations in order to ensure their comfort and safety while moving around the city. While thinking of my participants’ perceptions of safety in Mumbai in light of Phadke’s concept ‘claim’, the narratives revealed that none of these women felt a full sense of claim to the city. The general feeling was that even though Mumbai was perceived as safer than other cities in India, as shown by the previous chapters, there is still a sense of alienation that these women felt in the public spaces of Mumbai. Altogether, most of my participants visualizations of safety did not correspond with their experiences in reality.

‘The freedom to go anywhere, and wearing whatever I want, umm, like of course, appropriate stuff, and some way I think people will not judge me or stare at me, where people will consider I’m equal with them, you know there won’t be like “Oh she’s a girl, she’s different”.’ – Sumedha

‘To do whatever you want to do. No second thoughts about it.’ – Kareena

‘Irrespective of the time, I can just move freely, without having like that concern – “Oh I need to have a guy around to protect me” – or like men not staring or ogling at you – like you can dress anyway you want. Basically, be free. Safety is freedom yeah. I can do whatever the hell I want, whenever I want, and not have the fear of “Oh I might have to face the consequences of my certain set of choices”.’ – Veera

‘Safety and freedom go hand in hand. I think if I feel free to do whatever I want to, and I don’t have to think about ifs and buts, I think I’m safe. I can do whatever I want to, without being advised, without being worried for.’ – Ardika

‘If I don’t need to think about what I am wearing, where am I going, what is the time of the day – and I can just do – I can mind my own business without bothering, then I feel it is safe.’ – Pushpa

These perceptions show that being safe would mean being carefree and being able to access the public space on the same terms as men, without the sense of being objectified or needing to have second thoughts about the appropriateness of one’s presence. Despite the fact that my participants did not feel such complete freedom in Mumbai, most of them agreed that if something happened, people would usually come and help, as opposed to other places in India. Altogether, my participants had experienced the highest amount of independence and freedom in Mumbai, regardless of its constraints. This further indicates the urgency to address the issue of women’s public safety in India. If cities that are considered to be the standard of women’s access to public spaces contain as much possibility of endangerment, one can yet imagine the scope of the situation elsewhere.

## VI. Discussion and conclusion

The goal of this study has been to find out something novel about the experiences and perceptions of young women in Mumbai, regarding the societal norms, gender roles, and perceptions of danger and sexual harassment that influence their choices of movement in public places. My aim was to find out about the degree of empowerment these women feel, and if their so-called ‘privileged’ position as educated, independent middle-class women functioned as providing them with an increased sense of comfort while inhabiting public space, together with

greater access to public spaces. However, as the academic literature and the results of my study portray, women's empowerment has not translated to women's increased safety in public spaces. Despite the efforts of the Indian government, media, NGOs and private persons, to challenge and change the misogynistic attitudes that lead to sexual violence against women in India, and despite the protests and awareness campaigns, women in India continue to experience sexual violence, across different social classes and religious and ethnic groups. No woman is completely safe from it, no woman has been spared from the repercussions neither the fear of it. Moreover, Indian women feel a daily need to protect their bodies and reputation from defilement. The whole notion of the risk of becoming 'spoiled goods' is deeply engrained in women's hearts, due to the general social conditioning and the fear of possible sanctions.

Furthermore, my participants narratives reveal that their perceptions on safety in Mumbai are influenced by their origin, ethnicity, living surroundings and previous experiences of sexual harassment. Their point of comparison matters as well: most of the women had travelled or lived in Delhi or other cities in India, considered to be some of the worst. Therefore, despite not being perfectly safe, Mumbai felt much safer in comparison. Importantly, some of the daily harassment was seen to be an integral part of the life on an Indian woman; 'a background noise' that women were used to. For majority of my participants, having to interact with lower class people brought the greatest amount of discomfort. Due to a desire to avoid the uneducated and potentially dangerous lower-class crowd, my participants filter out their choice of public spaces carefully. More than that, my participants agreed that sexual harassment could occur anywhere; being among an educated and wealthy crowd was not a saving factor. My participants inhabit privileged spaces and better neighborhoods, as well as go to renowned educational institutions and workplaces, yet continue to be exposed to harassment. Due to this inevitability to avoid the risk of facing sexual harassment, my participants feel that it is their responsibility to take precautions and ensure their personal safety.

While middle-class women in Mumbai move more freely, dress more freely and engage in lifestyle choices that would not be accessible to the majority of Indian women, this comes with restraints. As my participants narratives of public safety and risk reveal, these women feel a constant sense of being watched over and experience the need to negotiate and alter their behavior accordingly. This has as much to do with the male dominance of public space as it does with women's desire to feel safe and respected. Middle-class women's sense of safety and comfort in Mumbai relies largely on a specific choice of activities and localities, even transportation with a selected crowd. Yet, by avoiding certain activities and modifying their movement in public spaces, women take part in reproducing male-dominance over the public

space. Importantly, the interviews revealed that my participants felt excluded from certain localities due to the overarching societal perceptions of what ‘appropriate women’ can do. They also reported facing social sanctions, if breaking the barriers of what the patriarchal discourse determined to be a woman’s place. However, my participants stories also reveal that some of the women purposefully engaged in ‘counter normative’ behavior, willing to do the uncomfortable in order to challenge the gender roles that seek to limit their sense of equality and personal freedom. Ways of doing this included fighting back and encouraging other women to do so, in addition claiming the public space with one’s presence in situations where women are not expected to do so. Furthermore, the participant’s narratives reveal that Indian women are taking action to break the silence surrounding their own experiences of harassment. Overall, the #MeToo movement is seen to be a crucial stepping stone for breaking the stigma over sexual harassment and pointing out the fallacy of victim blaming. Nonetheless, my participants stories show that some women choose to stay silent and focus on healing instead, since the overall social environment in India is still largely discouraging for women who discuss their sexual violation in open.

Nevertheless, the fact that my participants were eager to discuss topics related to sex, gender and sexuality, tells about a shift in mindset. These are no longer taboo topics in certain settings, and the general atmosphere in discussing instances and personal experiences of sexual harassment has become more positive. Even so, my participants’ narratives show that a number of Indian women can share their experiences of being harassed with their parents and receive emotional support. Furthermore, thanks to the widespread feminist initiatives and movements such as Blank Noise, women are provided with a chance to deal with their negative experiences in a productive and constructive manner.

Finally, while considering the sense of claim and comfort that young women feel in Mumbai, my participant’s narratives show that none of them feel a full sense of belonging while occupying the public space. Even in Mumbai, the city considered to be the most female friendly in India, the public space is largely male dominated and not designed for enhancing the access of women to it. Moreover, this study shows that public safety and experiences of it in Mumbai are a multilayered phenomenon, constantly evolving and changing with the power dynamics of gender, caste, class and ethnicity etc. Therefore, an intersectional analysis of the factors that contribute to women’s sense of risk and safety in public spaces might be the best for revealing crucial details of the daily negotiations that women engage in while moving around the city. Importantly, one cannot simply label Mumbai as the city where women experience the most freedom in India. Despite the general feeling of being ‘freer’, the negative examples and the

constant sense of having freedom only to a certain extent, moreover, having to fight for one's right to occupy a public space as an equal citizen, shows that Mumbai is still far from being safe and female friendly. Yet, as this study shows, a change in awareness is occurring slowly but surely. Women are feeling more and more brave to articulate their need and right to full and equal citizenship, and the right to experience pleasure and 'loiter' in the public space. However, in order for this new wave of thought to achieve a full transformation, the biggest challenge is to counter the overarching patriarchal discourse that still controls the rhetoric and the institutions of the public sphere. As the examples given within the analysis show, a change needs to occur both top-down and at the grassroots level. The state institutions, the judiciary and the police, which are meant to guarantee women's safety, take part in their repression. And the gender roles, that are taught in families and internalized to support male dominance, maintain the power asymmetry both within the private and public sphere. If these two practices can be challenged and reversed, a real awakening and change in women's relationship to public space in India is likely to occur.



## VII. Appendices

### 1. Participant profiles

**Anushka**, 25 years old. New friend. A freelance designer, who works with different customers in Mumbai. Comes from Kolkata but has grown up in Mumbai and studied at a famous design institute. Identifies herself as upper middle-class. Has taken part in the #MeToo movement and participated in campaigns and activism organized by the NGO called Blank Noise. Enjoys dancing and uses her artwork and illustrations to deal with controversial and difficult topics.

**Sumedha**, 27 years old. New friend. Originally from Goa. Has lived in Mumbai for the past four years. Identifies herself as middle-class. Has a passion for travelling and is moving to the US for her master's degree. Worked for Teach for India and taught kids from a slum area in Mumbai. Loves macchiato, dogs and functional training.

**Kareena**, 28 years old. New acquaintance. Has been working in Mumbai for a couple of years and now shifting to Bangalore for a new position. Identifies herself as middle-class. Worked for Teach for India and taught kids from a slum area in Mumbai. Comes from a mountain city in North India. Thinks that when it comes to dealing with sexual harassment, everyone should carry the responsibility themselves.

**Saanvi**, 32 years old. Friend's sister. New acquaintance. An editor in a male-dominated maritime magazine. Comes from the northern state of Bihar. Identifies herself as middle-class. Moved to Mumbai nine months ago, and lives in Navi Mumbai with her husband and seven years old daughter. Believes in every woman's power and ability to defend herself and says that does not hesitate to hit a man with her *chappal* (sandal) in case he tries to approach her inappropriately.

**Veera**, 26 years old. New friend. Studies in a renowned business school in a fancy area of Mumbai. Identifies herself as middle-class. Is originally Bengali but grew up in Mumbai. Commutes daily with the local train from Navi Mumbai, the other side of the city. Says that she is annoyed of the posh kids in her university who judge people based on the area they come from. Thinks that media and education have a crucial role in gender sensitization and building awareness on the need for better gender-equality.

**Pushpa**, 28 years old. New acquaintance. Works as a software engineer in a large male-dominated company in Mumbai. Her office consists of four women and fifty men. Identifies herself as middle-class. Lives in a better residential area not too far from her office. Is originally

from Maharashtra and has lived around in different cities in central India. Has had a good experience in Mumbai when it comes to safety and is hoping it will not get spoiled.

**Ardika**, 23 years old. New friend. Studies English language and literature in Mumbai. Identifies herself as upper-middle class. Has family in London and dreams of moving there. Is an animal activist. Would like to dress up more formally and in fitted clothes but does not feel comfortable to do so because of the negative attention from men on the streets. Says that it's difficult to trust people in general, especially men.

**Suman**, 23 years old. New acquaintance. A master student in criminology at a renowned institute in Mumbai. Comes from the Northeast of India and has grown up mostly in Delhi. Identifies herself as middle-class. Considers herself an atheist. Says that she is different from other women because whatever she is uncomfortable with, she tries to do in order to challenge herself and the societal perceptions of how she is supposed to behave.

**Jovita**, 33 years old. New acquaintance. Nearly done with her PhD on innovative work behavior of nurses for a renowned social sciences institution. Originally from the North-east of India. Identifies herself as lower-middle class. Passionate about human rights and helping orphaned children. Christian, takes actively part in the church events. Loves traveling and has seen many countries in Europe with her husband.

**Ruchi**, 35 years old. A friend for four years. Has a successful career as a journalist for India's biggest English language newspaper. Comes from the Northern state of Bihar and has worked in Mumbai for more than ten years. Identifies herself as middle-class. Got married recently. Has a passion for writing and posts occasional stories and poetry on social media. Commutes to work mainly with Uber.

## **2. Interview guide: Young women's perceptions on public safety in Mumbai, regarding sexual harassment**

### **Research questions:**

1. *How do young women who live, work and stud in Mumbai perceive the safety of public spaces in the city, regarding the risk of sexual harassment?*
2. *How do they navigate moving in public spaces and negotiate risks in their daily lives?*
3. *To which extent does their choice of mobility, lifestyle, and response to risk in public spaces challenge the dominant patriarchal gender order, and amount to women's 'space claiming' as well as a new sense of empowerment, that transcends victimhood?*

**Method:** Semi-structured in-depth interviews with open ended questions.

**Background information of the participants:** age, occupation, marital status, social class and religious and ethnic background

### **Interview questions**

(divided according to the themes of the sub questions of the thesis)

#### Questions addressing individual experiences and perceptions

##### **Individual mobility patterns**

In your daily life, how much do you fear facing sexual harassment in public spaces? (on a scale from 1-10)

Do you feel the risk of facing sexual harassment on your way to work/university?

Are there certain places you prefer or avoid going to in order to ensure your safety?

Does the fear of facing sexual harassment have impact your choice of activities for leisure time, your choice of clothing or transportation?

How do you experience safety in your own living surroundings?

Do you feel a remarkable difference in terms of safety when it comes to different areas in Mumbai?

Do you feel safe to walk alone and use public transport?

DO you feel safe to attend concerts and other public events or visit clubs and other places for recreational activities (e.g. gyms, restaurants, cafes, malls)?

### **Precautions taken in day to day life**

What are the precautions you take in day to day life in order to avoid sexual harassment in public spaces?

Do you feel that these precautions are efficient?

### **Personal coping methods to avoid harassment or in case harassment occurs**

How do you react if a person tries to harass you on the street? Would you confront the person or rather avoid confrontation?

Does your reaction to harassment depend on the place where it occurs, or on the surrounding conditions? (For example, the presence of bystanders or an empty place).

Do you feel that it is easy to ask for help in case facing harassment in public? Who would you approach for help?

### **Discussing experiences of harassment and the risk of harassment in one's social circle**

Can you talk about experiences or fears of sexual harassment with your parents? If yes, how do they react?

Do you discuss experiences or fear of sexual harassment with your friends? If yes, more with male or female?

Do you feel that the #MeToo movement has made it easier to discuss sexual harassment in public and within your own social circle?

In case experiencing harassment or negative attention in public, do you feel that you can get enough emotional support from your friends or family?

Have your parents given you advice on how to avoid facing sexual harassment in public?

Did your school provide you with gender or sex education?

### General questions regarding sexual harassment in public spaces of Mumbai

#### **The acts of harassment**

According to your observations, what types of sexual harassment women face in the public spaces<sup>22</sup> of Mumbai?

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<sup>22</sup> **The definition of public spaces:** Public spaces are those spaces where all citizens – irrespective of gender, class, sexuality, disability or any other social identity – have the right to access. Here, public space embraces all those spaces accessed by all women. These include streets (neighborhood streets, lanes, streets leading to the main roads), modes of public transport (city buses, intercity coaches, trains, metros, auto-

What are the most common situations where harassment occurs? (Time, place etc.)

### **The characteristics of the perpetrator**

According to you, what types of men are most likely to engage in street harassment?

### **Perceived reasons and justifications for harassment**

According to you, why does harassment occur?

How is harassment justified by the perpetrators and why are the perpetrators able to get away with it so easily and repeat the actions?

Do you think that social norms and gender roles to some extent allow harassment behavior towards women? (e.g. patriarchy, ideals of masculinity and femininity, the type of sex education or the lack of it)

Do you feel that there is a general apathy towards street harassment? (politicians, police, general public) (normalization of harassment “rape culture”)

Do you think popular culture and films and music videos, have had an impact on sexual harassment? If yes, in what way?

### **Resistance and reactions to harassment**

According to you, what is the best way to react when facing harassment?

What are the reactions of women that you have seen the most?

What are the reasons behind engaging in a certain response? (e.g. avoidance of confrontation in the fear of retaliation)

Can a woman ‘fight back’?

### **Coping mechanisms and strategies for self-protection (precautions)**

According to you,

How can a woman protect herself from street harassment in Mumbai?

If facing harassment, what are the coping and support mechanisms that a woman can employ?

Is it easy for a woman to ask for help in case she is being threatened or assaulted? Whom can a woman ask for help?

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rickshaws, rickshaws) and sites like bus stops and market streets (bazaars, shopping malls). (Bhattacharyya, 2015, p.1343)

How do people respond when asking for help?

### **Consequences for the victim**

According to you, what are the main consequences of street sexual harassment to the victim? Are some forms of harassment seen as worse?

According to you, does the fear of harassment limit a woman's choices of movement in Mumbai? Describe how.

Do you think certain women are more vulnerable to harassment?

Do you think becoming a victim of sexual harassment will cause the woman to be shamed by others? Does it have an impact on her perceived status in her social circle, e.g. at workplace or at home?

In general, how acceptable is it for a woman to discuss the experience of being harassed?

### **The gender divide of the public space**

What are the places that women cannot access equally with men, without the risk of being harassed?

Is there an unspoken rule of the places that are perceived as appropriate or inappropriate for women?

What are the factors that determine whether a place is safe for a woman?

What happens if a woman 'breaks the rules' and goes to places that are not seen as appropriate for her?

According to you what does it mean to be safe?

### **The legal aspect and the role of public authorities in protecting women and providing support**

Are you aware of the laws on sexual harassment?

If yes, do you feel that the laws are properly implemented and protect the victim?

Do you feel that the authorities take street harassment seriously? If yes/no, give reasons.

In case of experiencing harassment, would you seek assistance from the police? If yes/no, why?

### **Prevention of sexual harassment on the streets**

In general, what according to you are the measures taken to prevent sexual harassment in the public spaces of Mumbai? Do you think these (mentioned) measures taken are/have been effective? If yes/no, what measures you think should be taken to prevent harassment?

According to you, who do you think is responsible for preventing street harassment from occurring?

In general, do you think it's possible to eliminate sexual harassment on the streets in Mumbai? If yes/no, give reasons.

What do you think is needed in order to change men's negative public behavior towards women in Mumbai (or in India in general)?

In general, do you feel that Mumbai is safer when compared to other cities in India, which you have travelled to or lived in?

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