

International Youth Day

Youth for Safety of Girls and Women

Youth Conduct Participatory Safety Assessments (PSAs) in Panipat City
5th – 12th August, 2018

1. Introduction

Following the Delhi gang rape case of December 2012, public safety for girls and women has been increasingly deemed a policy issue worthy of concern. Public spaces like schools, colleges, parks, market places etc. have been envisioned as spaces of liberation, social interaction and ideas. But for many girls and women, public spaces are spaces of fear, which they access while having to constantly look over their shoulders. The United Nation's 'Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces' programme, which started in 2010, recognized that public places all around the world are becoming unsafe for girls and women. From unwanted sexual remarks to rape, they experience various forms of sexual violence in public spaces. It happens with them on streets, in the lanes outside their homes, at schools and workplaces, recreational spots, public transportation and even public sanitation facilities. This everyday violence impedes their freedom and mobility, inhibits their participation in educational and work opportunities and limits their access to political and cultural life, while negatively impacting their health and well-being.

Since its inception in September 2015, Martha Farrell Foundation (MFF) has been working with young boys and girls on issues of safety of girls and women in public spaces, across 27 locations in 14 states in India. Through our programmes, we have been collectivizing young people (between the ages of 14-22) to identify these issues in their communities, cities and villages and to find solutions to them. We equip them with the skills and tools to turn into leaders, who influence their homes, communities, government, police, judiciary and other institutions to join them to bring about a change. **So far, we have collectivized nearly 22,000 youth, created more than 3,000 youth leaders and reached out to 2.9 million people.**

We believe that youth are critical stakeholders in efforts to end violence against women and girls (VAWG). As current



and future leaders, youth are the driving force for change, which can use their knowledge, power and passion to enable safe spaces for all. This International Youth Day, we pledged our support with the global call for action #SafeSpaces4Youth, for youth to come together, engage in activities related to their diverse needs and interests, participate in decisions making and freely express themselves.

We believe that #SafeSpaces4Youth is incomplete without safe spaces for young girls and women; that their vulnerability to violence and marginalization in public places prevents them from meaningfully engaging in political, social and civic matters and realizing the global vision of democratic engagement of youth across all spaces, platforms and sectors.

To mark this day, we started our campaign ‘**Youth for Safety of Girls and Women**’. In support of the global call for action, this campaign aimed to bring out how safe or unsafe public spaces are for girls and women. **Our youth leaders conducted Participatory Safety Assessments (PSAs) in six public spaces in Panipat City in Haryana to analyse what encumbers the safety of girls and women in these spaces and how they can be made safer and more inclusive for them. These public spaces include market places, public parks, monuments, malls and museums.**

1.1 What is a Participatory Safety Assessment (PSA)?

PSA is a tool that helps youth to map out safe and unsafe spaces in a locality based on lived realities and experiences of women and girls. **The core objective of conducting PSA is to develop an appropriate strategy to reduce incidences of sexual harassment in public spaces, with knowledge, ideas and support of the local community.**

The process of PSA not only helps in bringing focus to the issues of women’s (and girls) insecurity related to their environment; but it is also a very useful tool for:

- Promoting public discussions on issues of violence against women and girls
- Increasing awareness and understanding of the community, local governments, law enforcement agencies and others on the concerns of women and girls
- Including the community (including men and boys) in decision making processes around issues of violence against women and girls



- Encouraging partnerships in communities to jointly identify local and context-specific solutions to address issues of insecurity felt by women and girls

Additionally, a PSA exercise also presents a clear picture about the safety issues for girls and the attitudes, mind-sets of individuals residing within these spaces, and the key factors that impact women’s safety. It also aids in translating unsafe spaces into safe spaces. Other objectives include an understanding of the attitudes of the community around issues of gender and violence against women and girls.

1.2 Where have MFF and its Youth Leaders Conducted PSAs in Panipat City?

Between August 5-6, 2018, PSAs were conducted in the following six public spaces in Panipat City:

1. Salaarganj Market and Gate
2. Mittal Mega Mall
3. Tau Devi Lal Park
4. Kabuli Bagh and Masjid
5. Purana Quilla and Gandhi Memorial Library
6. Panipat Museum

These PSAs were conducted by 20 students from Govt. ITI Panipat and five youth leaders of MFF from Samalkha, Panipat. The students and youth leaders were accompanied by seven facilitators from MFF, who supported the youth in conducting the PSAs and consolidating their findings and recommendations.



Figure 1: Students of Govt ITI Panipat Drawing their PSA Maps

2. PSA Findings

2.1 According to the PSAs conducted from August 5-6, 2018:

1. Public places like parks, monuments and museums were found to be highly unsafe for women and girls with little or no security measures.

2. Even places like markets and malls weren't found to be very safe. What also stood out is that the routes to these public places are also extremely unsafe and girls and women face maximum sexual harassment on streets, lanes and by lanes.
3. Public places like railway station, from where public transport is accessed, were also found to be highly unsafe for women and girls.

2.3 PSA Speaks, When are Women and Girls Sexually Harassed the Most?

- **On their way to work**
- **On their way to schools, colleges or universities (and sometimes also within the premises of their schools, colleges or universities)**
- **At recreational spots like parks, gardens, monuments or markets**

2.4 Reasons for Lack of Safety of Women and Girls in Public Places:

- **Lack of Guards and Proper Security Measures:** One of the most important findings that stood out from the PSAs is how staff and guards responsible for the security of these public places are either complicit to VAWG in public places or are perpetrators of it. They also hassle the youth and facilitators when they are conducting the PSA and refuse to cooperate with them. PSAs findings also stated the absolute lack of women guards and workers in most public spaces. It is worth noting that these public spaces do not even appoint women workers for spaces like women's toilet.
- **Recreational spaces like monuments and market places are also not accessed by women, when they are alone.** They either visit in groups, with families or with partners. They might visit alone if they have a personal vehicle at their disposal. Clearly, the women's access to these public spaces is also divided across class lines, where women from more affluent backgrounds have better access to these places. Their access to personal transport, better social capital and wealth contributes to their safety in these public places.
- There were liquor bottle leftovers and syringes found in parks and monuments, indicating how they were frequently used for the purpose of intoxication which created an obvious threat to the public visiting the area. The Locals in the area corroborated that in times of police raid to these places, these people would use the broken boundaries of these public places to run away and escape. In Salarganj Market in Panipat, Haryana, it was found that men gathered at various locations. Places such as tea stall, the chowk and the bus stand which are the main thoroughfare for women. Sometimes these men are also intoxicated. These men harass the women by passing

sexual comments on them along with certain public spaces being used to defecate in the open. All of the above makes the place highly threatening and inaccessible for women.

- Public parks and monuments are visited by mixed groups such as children, youth, couples, women and men for recreational purposes. Yet these parks had poor infrastructure marked by broken boundary walls, poor security arrangement with minimal or no guards around the property for surveillance or relevant technology such as CCTV cameras employed for the above purpose. There were also areas which were covered with foliage and needed maintenance, some of these areas were out of the usual public eye and were dark and dim lit due to construction. Some of these places were frequently visited by both men and women respectively, but could be accessed by men at all times during the day but women could access it only at certain times during the day.
- **Toilets make a big difference!** Public places not just need women’s toilets managed by women workers. They also need women’s toilets that are centrally located, well-lit, safe and clean. Open defecations should be banned in all public spaces. Many PSAs brought out how despite the presence of toilets, men choose to defecate in the open (sometimes, in front of women’s toilet), which can lead to instances of VAWG in public spaces. Many reports in the past have pointed out that the lack of proper, safe and clean toilets often inhibits women’s mobility, curbing their participation in public life.



Figure 2: Closed Toilets at Tau Devi Lal Park

- **Spaces like parks, gardens, chowks and chaupals are not just public spaces for recreation, but also spaces for political and social mobilization and discussion. However, these spaces are often dominated by men, with limited or no access for women and girls.** This limited access is a huge deterrence towards women and girl's integration into political and social lives. They remain unaware of public debates and

opinions, do not have any stake in it and therefore, are not seen as important political and social actors. Also, due to their continued absence from these spaces, these spaces also become blind to their needs and aspirations and only cater to the male needs and aspirations.

- **Even the architectural design of many such public places tends to be gender blind.** Extremely narrow gates, lack of proper staircase, proper lighting or construction of toilets at the far ends of the public place are some of the examples. As a result, these spots also become a site of violence against women and girls, where men can easily ambush them and sexually harass them without the fear of being seen or noticed.
- **Some of these public places are located in far-flung areas (like the Panipat museum is located outside the main city, near a canal and forest area). Due to lack of proper public transportation in some of these areas, one has to walk up to these public places or take recourse to shared autos, rickshaws or taxis.** It has been brought out from many PSAs that often the route to these places or the mode of transportation to reach these places is also highly unsafe. Even if a certain public space is safe in itself, the route to that public space can be highly unsafe, limiting women's access to public life, recreation, work and education opportunities.
- It is also perceived that presence of state security forces (like the police) contributes to the safety of a public place. Some of the PSAs say otherwise, where despite the presence of a police station or a police chowki in the vicinity, there are rampant instances of sexual harassment, thefts, pickpocketing or drinking and gambling in the open. This also shows that often the state does not prioritize the safety of women and girls.

2.5 The Attitudes and Perceptions that stood out:

- **The perceptions of safety are very different for boys and girls.** The former often find many public places safe and accessible whereas the girls do not. They find many places unsafe because they are dark, isolated and insecure. Also, boys and girls do not access these places in the same manner. Boys, who are rarely faced with any constraints upon their mobility always, know public places better and hence end up drawing very expansive and detailed maps. Whereas, for many girls, it is their first time when they visit such public places unaccompanied by family or guardians. It is the first time that they explore these places on their own. Therefore their maps show their inexperience of such places and tend to be far less detailed and smaller in size.
- **During various discussions, it has come out that girls have to be always mindful or careful of their body-language and behaviour in a public place.** If they happen to look at boy/men in a public place or are seen laughing in a public place, they are often

stalked, whistled at or groped by men and boys. Girls often say that they prefer to walk with their head down, not talk much, and wear fully-covered clothes while they are in a public place. In short, girls often work very hard to render themselves invisible in such public places, occupy as less space as possible, to ensure that they are not faced with sexual harassment. Even when they are with the PSA group during the transect walk of an area, they generally tend to walk in groups, speak less and avoid talking to strangers (if unaccompanied). Boys, on the other hand, run around, talk to everyone, take the lead and dominate discussions. This reiterates the point that boys and girls have a differential access to public places.

- **Many young boys expressed that girls should not go alone to these places because they will definitely be sexually harassed. They also said that girls behave inappropriately in public spaces which are one of the prime reasons for their harassment.** Often, in certain parks and monuments, young couples are seen enjoying the company of their partners. They usually inhabit the most dark and unseen spots of such public places. In various discussions that we have had with youth in various locations, some of them have articulated that the high presence of these young couples is a threat to public safety and decorum. Upon further discussion, it also came out that women who willingly engage in public display of affection are inviting sexual harassment upon themselves. But some of the other youth (including the facilitators) felt that a woman's right to safety in a public place is non-negotiable, irrespective of her choice of dress, occupation or time of accessing a public space. While these discussions do not always reach a consensus, the issue of a safe space for love came out very evidently from the discussion. In light of events from the past few years, where young lovers have been persecuted on Valentine's Day for expressing their love or desire for each other and 2-star and 1-star hotels have been raided to nab such couples, the right to love in a free and safe way is one of the most important issues of women's safety in public places. Often the consequence of such choices is more upon women and girls, who are raped and killed for making such a choice. Many such couples do not enjoy the freedom to express their love for each other within their homes or privately express it within the confines of a good hotel. Their options for meeting and enjoying with each other are very few, which include these parks and gardens. It is necessary that we create safe spaces within these public spaces for young people to express and enjoy love and desire, without discomforting others. Any discourse and action on #SafeSpace4Youth is incomplete without this, where youth of all backgrounds have the right to a safe space for love.

2.6 PSA Recommends, How can we make Public Places Safer for Women and Girls?

- **Installation of proper lighting, security and surveillance mechanisms in all public spaces at all public spots**
- **Presence of female guards at all entrances and exits along with male guards**
- **Better maintenance of public places like monuments, parks and museums**, so that they do not have any blind spots, overgrown foliage or broken boundary wall and gates.
- **Construction of proper, clean toilets in centrally located spots**. Separate toilets should be constructed for men and women; they should be well-lit and open at all times. Also, in many women's toilets, there are no women attendants, which often deter women and girls from using them.
- **Provision of proper, safe and regular transportation to all public places**. Also, streets and lanes next to them should be well-lit and secure.
- **Proper and manned parking areas around these public spaces**, so that the roads or lanes in the vicinity are not jammed or cramped, allowing women and girls to comfortably walk to their destinations.
- **Regular and ongoing patrolling by the police machinery** to effectively check and curb sexual harassment of women and girls in public areas, bus stands, chowks etc. Also, police should work towards prohibiting **alcoholism in public areas** since it leads to increased violence and harassment.
- **Proper training of security staff, including gender sensitization training** so that police personnel is sensitive towards issues of public gender violence and equipped to eliminate such violence to enable safe public places for girls and women.
- **Public places like parks, gardens, monuments, museums should be utilized further for public events**, so that they are maintained regularly and not remain as desolate as they usually are. Also, these events should also cater to women audience or visitors to ensure their regular participation and access to public places.
- **Continuously work with youth, students and communities to influence and change behaviours and attitudes that abet violence against women and girls in public places**. From MFF's previous experience, working with young girls and boys in schools and colleges can make a big difference. The youth generate their own knowledge and evidence (through PSAs and other activities) and use it to facilitate dialogue amongst themselves, their families, communities and institutions (like police, district administration, ward councils, panchayats and school management). This dialogue helps in both questioning and transforming patriarchal perceptions and attitudes related to safety of girls and women in public spaces.