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 Martha Farrell  
FOUNDATION

# Building Equal Futures

A study by adolescent leaders on youth,  
gender and violence

A part of **Go Girls Go** project  
and **Kadam Badhate Chalo** programme  
Supported by **PRIA & Martha Farrell Foundation**

# KEY FINDINGS

Most instances of sexual abuse and harassment have been noticed in public places or on social media. 77 out of 127 adolescents have witnessed or heard of abuse in the streets and public transport while 49 are privy to predatory behaviour and harassment across digital platforms.

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Sexist rhetoric (comments on clothes and body type) is one of the most visible form of sexual harassment that adolescents are continually exposed to, with 102 out of 127 adolescents saying that they are aware of such instances in their immediate communities. They also noted that victims of sexual harassment are often blamed for their choice of clothes and provocative behaviour.

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Bad company or peer pressure is another factor, with 49 adolescents claiming that drug and alcohol abuse among youth is responsible for the rising rate of crimes against women.

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Silence and stigma around violence and survivors of gender-based violence feeds the abuse cycle. 55 adolescents reported that women who speak out or wish to speak out are subject to victim-blaming, face threats when they lodge complaints; their accounts are not usually believed and their freedom of movement is further curbed.

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Widespread gender-based violence results in trauma, loss of confidence and lack of opportunities for girls and women in jobs and education

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Over half of the total number of adolescents (77) believe that the onus of housework should be on women as per traditional gender roles

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While half the participants (66) believed that legal systems should be stronger, 96 out of 127 adolescents were of the opinion that people's mind-set had to change for structural changes to take effect.

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# Youth under Lockdown: Introduction

**COVID-19 and the efforts to suppress it has had an alarming impact on the lives of young adolescents across the world, impinging especially on the rights of girls.**

During the lockdown, children's ability to manage issues such as anxiety and stress while being kept entirely indoors has come under scrutiny. A life outside home (in the playground, school or recreation centres) used to provide them respite from strict living conditions at homes, but during the lockdown, emotional, attention and behavioural difficulties have increased among adolescents. Children are finding it increasingly hard to cope with loneliness, fears about the coronavirus, or the loss of routine and support that come with school.

School closures have had a significant impact on the mental health of girls across the world. With 90% of the world's schoolchildren confined to their homes<sup>1</sup>, there remains a risk that many girls won't return to school once the lockdown lifts, especially if the West Africa Ebola outbreak is any indication. Moreover, a study by Girlguiding shows that over a third (38%) of those aged 4-10 felt sad most of the time, while a third of girls aged 11-14 told researchers they struggled with loneliness<sup>2</sup>. There are additional challenges with staying at home, with the burden of domestic work falling on girls (and their mothers). These provide grounds to make the assumption that progress in the last decade - to equalise gender roles at home and in the community - may regress due to the lack of a gendered response to the pandemic.

The crisis is exceptionally challenging for those who are not included in the national discussion and who rarely get to vocalise their needs. Turning the lens towards economically vulnerable households reveals a more acute picture of life of children under lockdown, coping with hunger, violence and cramped housing. In India, their education needs are going unaddressed. A report prepared by UNICEF has revealed that COVID-19 pandemic in India and lockdown has impacted 247 million children enrolled in elementary and secondary education, besides 28 million children who were undergoing pre-school education in Anganwadi centres<sup>3</sup>. With classrooms shifting online and only 24% of households in India having access to the internet, the education needs of children in the digital blind spot are being ignored. There is a large rural-urban and gender divide, which reflects the country's inability to align its COVID response to the United Nations' principle of 'Leaving No One Behind' and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Furthermore, with the increase in unsupervised screen time<sup>4</sup>, cyber abuse among and against children has increased, underscoring the need for data security and digital literacy.

1. <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>

2. <https://www.girlguiding.org.uk/what-we-do/our-stories-and-news/news/girls-tell-us-how-theyve-been-affected-by-covid-19-crisis/>

3. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/more-lifestyle/covid-19-pandemic-lockdown-in-india-has-impacted-education-of-over-247-million-children/story-TCOV57Gs3OAgLcBRLRlO4K.html>

4. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/children-among-biggest-victims-of-covid-19-lockdown-with-multiple-side-effects-cry-report/story-6seNnglfnQr6lAVV038K.html>

## Working to mainstream gender among adolescents: Kadam Badhate Chalو

Under the flagship Kadam Badhate Chalو programme, Martha Farrell Foundation has been building youth leadership to end gender-based violence (GBV) since 2016. KBC offers youth the platform to take collective action on ending violence against women and girls (VAWG) in their own communities. Leadership among boys and girls is not only developed and supported, but they are also provided with the skills and tools to lead this change.

The programme thrives on a participatory model, where the youth work in close proximity with the members of their communities that they share direct relationships with. This includes parents, teaching and non-teaching staff of educational institutes, service delivery persons (public transportation officials, shopkeepers, etc.), local elected leaders and citizen leaders, among others. It is guided by the belief that the root of ending violence against women and girls lies in changing the gender relations and equations between men and women, and boys and girls. This goal cannot be achieved without the active participation of the youth in the community, especially young men, who must take a stand and tangible action against VAWG.

As part of two sub-programmes under KBC, namely **Go Girls Go** and **No More Boundaries**, the Foundation and its partners have also been supporting adolescent girls in assertively pursuing their aspirations or careers of choice, with the belief that a young person's personal interactions and positive experiences in adolescence can turn into a lifelong commitment to make sustained contributions to their communities. In 2020, KBC 4.0 with a revised curriculum was implemented in 4 schools each in Delhi, Panipat, Deoghar and Bhubaneswar with a focus on 30 youth in each school (120 students between the ages of 12 - 16 years, with an equal ratio of boys and girls.)

## Fostering Adolescent Leadership through Online Fellowship

With the declaration of COVID-19 as pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO), countries around the world began to respond by imposing measures like social distancing, quarantine and isolation. The Indian Government also imposed a countrywide lockdown from 25 March, 2020. This has had a significant impact on the mental health of adolescents. Being away from schools, colleges and friends has evoked the feeling of fear, anxiety, boredom, loneliness, anger and sadness among them<sup>5</sup>.



<sup>5</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/children-risk-lasting-psychological-distress-coronavirus-lockdown-save-children>

Martha Farrell Foundation launched an online fellowship programme for adolescents associated with KBC in Panipat, Delhi, Deoghar and Bhubaneswar, to foster leadership among them. The broader theme of the online fellowship retains its focus on **Gender, VAWG and its manifestation during lockdown**. A major objective of the programme is also to enable constructive use of their time during the pandemic.

The fellowship requires weekly engagement from the youth, through online sessions on different themes followed by a reflective task for homework. Major topics covered in the sessions were on the self, dismantling gender, gender inequality, discrimination and violence against women and girls through various creative participatory activities that made use of art-based methods.

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## Study Overview

After developing an in-depth understanding on these topics and related issues, Fellows realised that the unequal gender power relations and related social norms are the root cause of VAWG, and that there is a need to change the way society thinks and perceives gender and violence.

The first step in the process of change was to conduct a thorough **situational analysis** of the factors that leads to violence against women and girls. Fellows expressed an interest in understanding how their peers think, what they feel, when it comes to gender issues. A study was conducted to **explore the perceptions of adolescents** in the broad context of women's safety in public spaces and within their own communities, to understand their peers' thinking when it comes to gender-based violence (GBV).

Following a short orientation on research tools and methodology, they successfully conducted a **survey with 127 adolescents on Youth, Gender and Violence**, to build an accountable and equal society through Community Based Research.

**This report looks at the drivers and factors associated with gender-based violence, through data and insights gathered by adolescents across India.** Fellows mapped the origin, locus, intent and impact of abuse through this survey involving 127 youth participants from various communities across India.

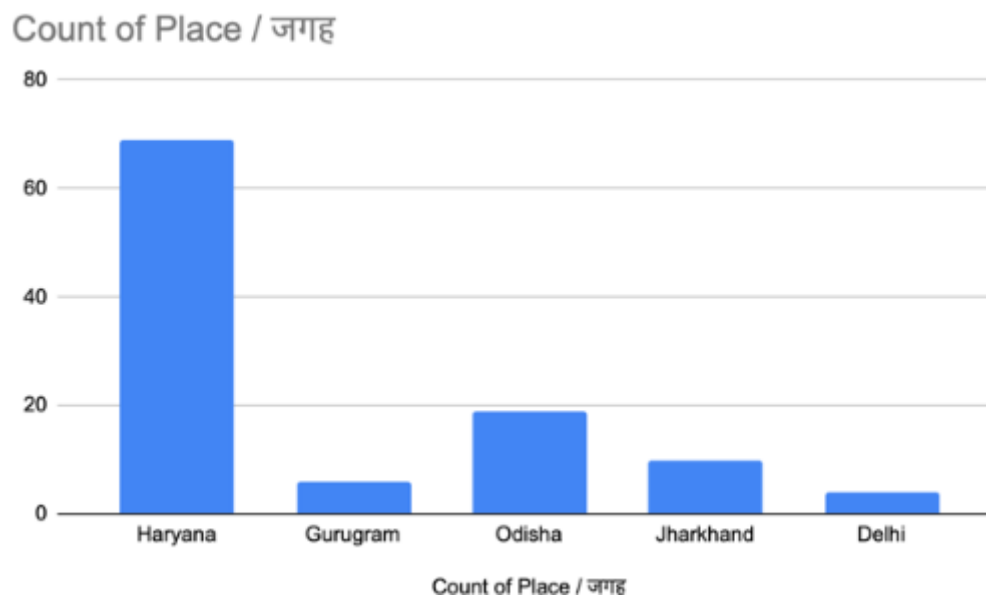
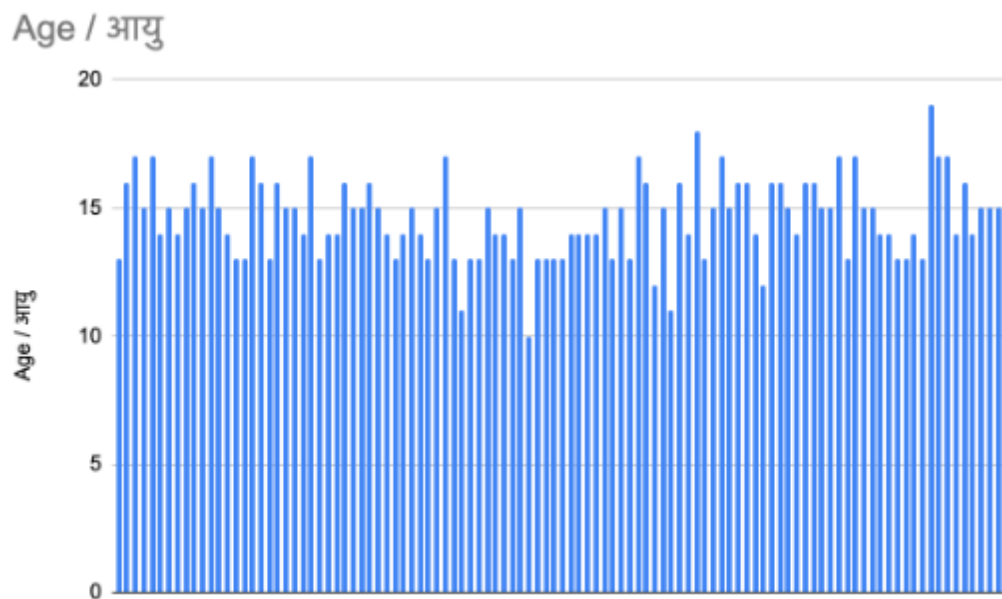
### RELATED SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



# Demographic Profile

The survey was able to capture the patterns of thinking and behaviour for a range of adolescents aged **between 11 and 19 years**, and how they perceive gender and violence. This generated a comprehensive overview of how adolescents come to internalise patriarchal notions masquerading as “societal norms” or “age-old traditions,” and at which age a gendered worldview sets in, especially among boys. The difference in response between younger and older children demonstrated this.

Geographically, the survey covered urban well as rural areas with participants situated in KBC sites - **Delhi, Gurgaon, Deoghar, Bhubaneshwar, Panipat and Sonapat** - with most of the responses generated from Haryana.



# Methodology

The study was conducted virtually, using a self-administered questionnaire with around 14 simple questions. Keeping the participatory model in mind, the questions and corresponding options (for answers) suggested by each fellow were shared in the WhatsApp group and taken into account while preparing the final questionnaire, which was then collated into a Google Form. This form was made available in two languages – Hindi and English. The data collection period began a month after the nationwide lockdown was announced, and lasted a week.

## The research study included questions such as follows:

- What are the dominant types of VAWG?
- What are the possible causes of VAWG?
- Where does VAWG predominantly take place?
- What are the consequences of VAWG?

Given the nature of the questions, multiple choice was enabled which meant that participants could choose more than one answer to these questions. This led to a deeper understanding on the interconnectedness of certain factors and impacts of abuse.

## Furthermore, the options were decided on the basis of examples of rape culture:

- Blaming the victim (“She asked for it!”)
- Trivializing sexual assault (“Boys will be boys!”)
- Sexually explicit jokes
- Tolerance of sexual harassment
- Publicly scrutinizing a victim’s dress, mental state, motives, and history
- Gratuitous gendered violence in movies and television
- Defining “manhood” as dominant and sexually aggressive
- Defining “womanhood” as submissive and sexually passive
- Pressure on men to “score”
- Pressure on women to not appear “cold”
- Assuming only promiscuous women get raped
- Refusing to take rape accusations seriously
- Teaching women to avoid getting raped instead of teaching men not to rape

Fellows decided to conduct this study with other adolescents of similar age group who were either their friends, classmates, cousins or some acquaintance from the family. The web-link to the Google form was shared with them for marking their responses. Within one week, the Fellows were able to get responses from 127 adolescents and youths.

# Focus Areas Of Study

## I. Forms and loci of VAWG

To begin with, adolescents asked their peers of the different forms of violence that they are aware of. They led with the question: **What forms of violence against women and girls have adolescents witnessed or heard of?** The array of options included forms of emotional, verbal, visual, online and physical abuse against women and girls.

According to the survey, the most common kind of VAWG takes place on digital platforms. **79** out of 127 of the adolescents participating in the KBC study were privy to online predatory behaviour or abuse on online chatrooms, which encompasses comments on physique, dress, stalking, blackmail etc.

A study conducted in the UK in 2019<sup>6</sup> found that 51% of the 1,500 teens participating in their survey have witnessed people their age sharing nude or nearly nude images of someone they know between 2018-2019. Almost half (47%) said that they have witnessed people their age editing photos of someone to make them sexual, for example putting their face on a pornographic image. 4 in 5 (80%) had witnessed people their age using terms like 'slut' to describe girls in a mean way online in the last year.

Recent news reports reflect that there has been no let-up in crime against women and girls during the lockdown. In fact, it has had the opposite effect, primarily due to the increased use of tech.

Teenagers are continually exposed to disparaging comments on women's bodies and clothes (both online and in-person), a form of VAWG which is often trivialised and normalised by the term 'eve-teasing'. This constituted the second-most common form of VAWG among adolescents, with **66** adolescents reporting they know that girls and women are harassed because of what they are wearing, and **36** saying girls and women are often subject to lewd comments about their body type (weight and appearance).

Body shaming and critical comments have a negative influence on body image in adolescent girls. Coupled with impunity of perpetrators aided by the popular misnomer "Boys will be boys", the condonation of such behaviour further feeds into the cycle of harassment. Its far-reaching implications also include restrictions on women's and girls' movement, ability to socialise freely, which in turn affects their education and career prospects.



6. <https://www.childnet.com/blog/step-up-speak-up-new-resources-to-address-peer-based-online-sexual-harassment-with-13-17s>



The second question sharpened the focus on VAWG by asking: **Where have you (adolescents) frequently observed VAWG?** This was an attempt to map and trace the most unsafe spaces for girls and women.

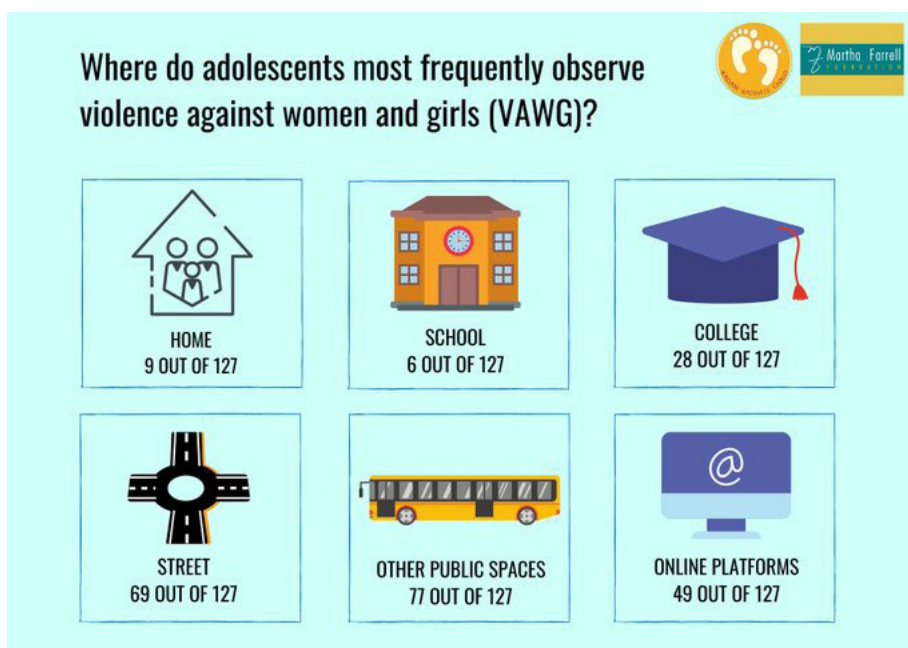
In decreasing order, the participants replied: **Public spaces** (streets, buses, markets), **online platforms, college, school and home**. It is worth noting that public spaces (online & offline) become unsafe places for women & girls, thus consigning them to the domestic sphere. There's an assumption that sexual predators and harassers are just one of those unavoidable aspects of life, and the onus is on women and girls to insulate themselves. This highlights the need to make public spaces safe in order to ensure equal participation of women in public life.

The forms of violence to which children are exposed vary according to their age and stage of development. Although only **9** adolescents in the study view "home" as a site of violence, it is, in fact, one of the most dangerous places for girls and women, owing to intimate partner violence or family violence which go unreported. Young children are more likely to be abused by primary caregivers

and other family members because of their close dependence on them and limited, independent interactions outside the home and family setting, which is why they don't often recognise the abusive behaviour for what it is. In India, moreover, marital rape has not been deemed a criminal offense yet, adding to the under-reporting of such crimes, while child marriage continues to plague various communities in India.

Meanwhile, older children are more likely to be victimised by people outside the home and family. According to the survey, schools

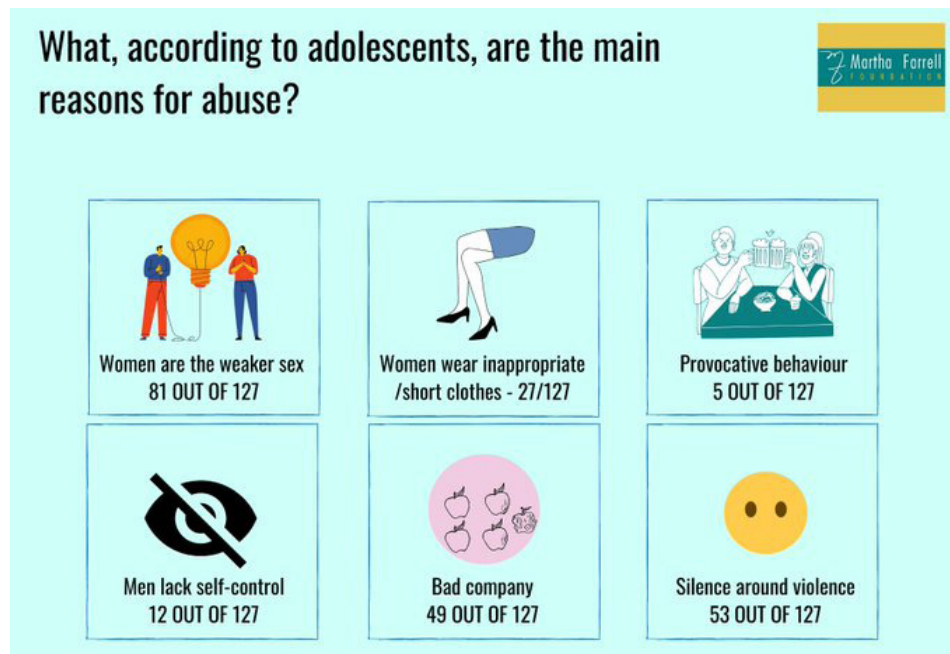
are safer than colleges (**6** and **27** respectively), and colleges are safer than public spaces (**69** said streets are unsafe while **77** pointed to public transport and marketplaces). However, even if occurrence of VAWG is low inside the institutional premise, it does not mean that peers (school/college mates/dating partners) don't inflict the same on digital platforms, in forms that range from bullying, dehumanisation and stalking, to pornography, rape threats and blackmail. Negative comments, rumours, and even unflattering or objectifying photos of adolescent girls are widely circulated by, potentially anonymous, peers through the internet. In higher education institutions, furthermore, sexual harassment poses a monumental challenge in keeping campuses safe for female scholars.



## II. Factors determining intent and impact of VAWG

Adolescent leaders asked their peers, “**What are the main reasons of gender-based abuse?**” and found that they have majorly internalised the “Weaker Sex” analogy and “Blame the Victim” mentality. A good many believe that gender-based crimes are on the rise because girls use cell phones (16), wear inappropriate clothes (27), go out at night (36), mingle freely with boys or enjoy equal freedom as boys (30).

The false idea that clothing contributes to rape was incredibly common among the participants.



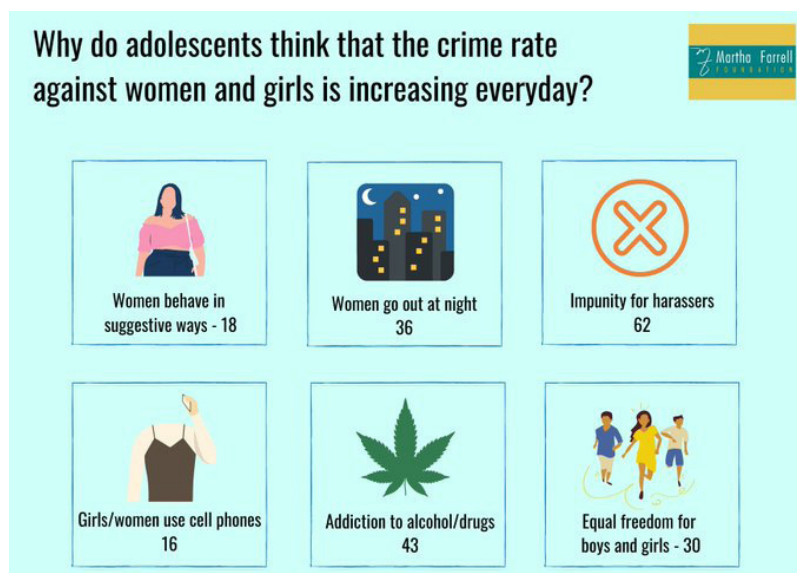
The myth that sexual assault is something that only happens to people who make bad choices has been debunked a US Federal Commission study on Crime of Violence<sup>7</sup> which found that just 4.4 percent of all reported rapes involved “provocative behaviour” on the part of the victim. It also found that most convicted rapists could not remember what their victims were wearing. But according to the survey participants, when girls and women exhibit “provocative behaviour” or “behave in suggestive ways” (which in common parlance refers to drinking, smoking, speaking their mind, using slang words, speaking loudly, partying, promiscuity etc.), that creates grounds for abuse.

In most cases, this pattern of thought is in line with ideologies and codes of conduct perpetuated by parents and elders, in how they raise boys and girls by a different set of rules. The role of media (films and social media content) cannot be dismissed either, in how they represent the “ideal woman” and the “wayward woman.” Cultural messages depicting women as physically weak are also detrimental; social conditioning of women to maintain their shape, control their size, refrain from doing heavy lifting, all contribute to “male physical advantage,” a commonly used argument against women (81 out of 127 participants believe that). Boys and girls learn early on that women must be small, petite, meek and nice. Anything else is an aberration (“Amazonian woman”, “undesirable,” etc.)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/04/13/why-dress-codes-cant-stop-sexual-assault/>

**12** adolescents believe that VAWG is a prevalent menace because men lack self-control, putting the blame squarely on men. But this perspective runs the risk of assuming that men are constitutionally oversexed, or they cannot control their urges if they are suffering from sexual deprivation. But rape does not stem from sexual desire. As Susan Browmiller puts it in *Against Our Will*, sexual abuse is a political crime whose motive is power.<sup>8</sup>

**49** participants called out bad company and peer pressure as the chief causes behind abusive/predatory behaviour and **43** of them argued that alcohol and drug abuse increases abusive tendencies among men. **53** participants agreed that “Silence around Violence” makes women and girls more vulnerable to VAWG, with **62** of them stating that impunity of harassers is responsible for this silence and stigma around abuse. Survivors are rarely believed, the due process to secure justice is often skewed against the survivor<sup>9</sup>, and even if a legal precedent is set (with capital punish-



ment in some cases), it hardly changes the status quo in how women are treated at home, at work and in the community at large. When boys and men aren't held accountable for their actions (day-to-day misogyny), the patriarchy continues to find new ways to discriminate against and oppress women.

This section of the survey also shows the extent to which adolescents understand the impact of abuse. All participants agreed that a history of abuse results in trauma, low self-esteem and a lack of confidence, especially in the absence of survivor-support mechanisms.

**62** participants agreed that survivors live in fear and isolation, or develop symptoms of PTSD or post-traumatic stress disorder (**60**) like low self-esteem (**16**) and shaken confidence (**79**) in later life. **29** adolescents astutely pointed out that a lot of women also learn to dismiss or ignore the experience<sup>10</sup>, which may fester and manifest in problematic thought or behavioural patterns later in adult relationships.<sup>11</sup>

8. <https://time.com/4062637/against-our-will-40/>

9. <https://www.ndtv.com/karnataka-news/unbecoming-of-an-indian-woman-says-karnataka-high-court-grants-bail-to-rape-accused-2252141>

10. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/we-have-normalised-abuse-by-telling-girls-to-ignore-it/articleshow/64820657.cms>

11. <https://www.abc.net.au/life/how-silent-treatment-affects-children-and-adult-relationships/11061884>

## According to adolescents, sexual abuse results in:

- Fear and lack of confidence
- Trauma and insecurity among girls and women
- Low representation of women in education and jobs



## Survivors of abuse tend to feel:

- Petrified
- Isolated
- Low-self esteem
- Dismiss their experience



Adolescents who took the survey also had a nuanced understanding of the far-flung impacts of abuse, beyond visible and immediate effects. They were able to identify how safety concerns, unabated, lead to high dropout rates among girls and low participation of women in the workforce.

## III. Mitigation and Justice

### The survey also tries to ascertain how society reacts when:

- Survivors raise their voice against violence
- Young bystanders try to intervene

According to **78** adolescents, VAWG survivors who speak out about their experience often face disbelief and ostracisation. In an almost perverse reversal, the survivor is stigmatised while the accused is let off with a slap on the wrist. According to **38** teens, the survivor or their family are also threatened with dire consequences for reporting the crime. A lot of times, family members of the survivor prevent them from raising their voice, for fear of social isolation, lack of marriage prospects, or untoward repercussions if the perpetrator enjoys a higher position in the community (in terms of socio-economic power and privilege).

In the long term, this results in curbing of freedom for the survivor (**21** adolescents feel this to be true) with similar impact on other girls/women in the community, who are reminded of this incident every time they disobey rules (like flouting curfew). This too is a major systemic factor responsible for limited education and career opportunities for women.

In the absence of satisfactory legal framework, adolescents broached the concept of bystander intervention, asking their peers if they have ever effectively diffused an active situation that was/ could turn abusive, and how. They asked, “**When you try to stop someone from harassing girls, what is their reaction?**” **60** participants answered saying “They think we are trying to be smart,” **44** said “They ignore us and stop being friends” and **47** confessed “They express their displeasure very clearly if we stop them.” It could be because, as **36** participants rightly noted, “They think we are depriving them of their right (to harass girls).” **20** adolescents have also experienced reactions reeking of toxic masculinity, where perpetrators of abuse have called them “afraid of girls” for wanting to

stop abuse.

Finally, adolescents were asked, "**How can VAWG be mitigated?**" **66** of them believed that the framework of gender justice must be strengthened with stringent policies and effective implementation of laws. But an overwhelming majority of **96** participants posited that a bottom-up approach will catalyse the progress to achieve a gender-fair and equal future. They agreed that change must begin at home, in the immediate society, the spaces we occupy everyday and with the people we associate with in our daily lives. Patriarchy, like any other ideology, can be unlearned. For swift and exemplary justice to have a real impact on women's safety and dignity, a shift in society's precepts about women's abilities, roles and appearance is crucial.



The infographic features a teal background with a yellow and teal logo for the Martha Farrell Foundation in the top right corner. It contains two speech bubbles and two illustrations. The first speech bubble, on the left, is connected to an illustration of a woman sitting at a desk with her hand to her chin, looking thoughtful. The second speech bubble, on the right, is connected to an illustration of a man standing. The text in the speech bubbles and the list below are as follows:

**What happens to survivors raising their voice against violence?**

- ✓ No one believes them
- ✓ They are stigmatised
- ✓ They face threats
- ✓ Their freedom is curbed
- ✓ All of the above

**When you try to stop someone from harassing girls, what is their reaction?**

- ❌ They think we are trying to be smart
- ❌ They think we are afraid of girls
- ❌ They think we are depriving them of their right
- ❌ They ignore us and stop being friends
- ❌ They express their displeasure at being stopped

# Conclusion

Approximately 15 million adolescent girls (aged 15 to 19) worldwide have experienced forced sex (forced sexual intercourse or other sexual acts) at some point in their life. In the vast majority of countries, adolescent girls are most at risk of forced sex by a current/former husband, partner or boyfriend. Based on data from 30 countries, only one per cent ever sought professional help<sup>12</sup>.

The analysis by adolescent leaders clearly reflects how the costs of VAWG are crippling not only to individuals, but to societies and economies. But what does it mean when adolescents are already wired to think or behave in set ways?

The survey by adolescent leaders gave them the opportunity to exercise their leadership in mobilising knowledge around perceptions towards gender, as the basis for taking action to rectify some of the problematic ideologies internalised by their peers. It is the first step in a long process of change, and the basis on which adolescent leaders can begin to understand their own and their peers' understanding of rape culture, male privilege, toxic masculinity to chart ways in which boys can grow up to be feminists.

It's difficult to 'see' fault lines in one's own life – as it is to challenge and attempt to change those closest to oneself – especially during adolescence, when peer group and peer bonding holds so much importance and generates social capital. The Fellows on June 17, 2020, led a youth leadership summit to deliberate on the findings and develop strategies and good practices to smash the patriarchy in their respective communities. Recognising that rape is the least likely to be reported of all violent crimes, they talked at length about how it needs to be easier for victims to approach police. Adolescents who participated were made aware of the fact that even when laws banning sexual offences exist, this does not mean they are always compliant with international standards and recommendations or implemented. They shared their experiences of being stalked online, of declining mental health during lockdown, and of the burden of household chores on girls, among others.

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## **Youth leaders outlined the following course of action:**

- Raise awareness in their immediate circles on issues like menstruation, mental health, online stalking and COVID+ 19
- To find the root causes of VAWG and raise awareness on the same through mass (online and offline) campaigns
- Demand comprehensive and inclusive sex education and digital literacy classes in school
- Gendered categorisation and distribution of work begins from home. It is crucial that adolescents start by equalising gender roles and assuring equitable distribution of work at home
- The power of communication is underrated. One-on-one conversations play an important role in finding a support system, and in mobilising knowledge on issues like mental and menstrual health
- Facilitate online sessions with children (of different age groups) and with parents to change their mind-set on prevailing issues
- Girls must be encouraged not to be compromised and instead challenge society's perceptions by being more vocal about their choices and raising questions
- Report peers who indulge in abusive behaviour online
- Support sustainable systems and inclusive causes (help migrant workers, domestic workers during the pandemic, etc.) in line with the ethos of intersectional feminism

