

# End Sexual Harassment During Holi

*A Walking Poll campaign by the Martha Farrell Foundation*  
March 28, 2021

## Background

Sexual harassment is a violation of an individual's fundamental rights, against the ethos of the provisions of the Constitution of India. It is defined as an unwelcome sexual behaviour that could be physical (touching, groping, invading personal space); verbal (comments, remarks, whistling), non verbal (winking, gesturing) and visual (showing of pornography, inappropriate messages and texts). It is a criminal act and punishable under sections 294, 354 and 509 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC).

Over the last decade, the issue of sexual harassment has become a more prominent part of public discourse, and the culture of silence around it has been slowly breaking down. After the #MeToo movement, and the 2012 Delhi gang-rape case, the issue has become more talked about.

Consequently, the festival of Holi, which is commonly used as an excuse by perpetrators to sexually harass and violate others, has also become a part of the public and legal discourse in relation to the issue of sexual harassment. Newspapers and publications have covered the issue extensively in the last few years, and law keepers have devised specific strategies and stricter measures to crack down on the prevalence of sexual harassment, especially of women and girls during the festival of Holi.

## Context

The Martha Farrell Foundation is committed to promoting safety in the public and private sphere of women and girls against sexual and gender-based violence and harassment. The Foundation is engaged with instituting practices to prevent SGBV across communities, organisations and governments through:

- Youth-led campaigns
- Compliance with the PoSH Act, 2013
- Funding research, scholarships and fellowships to institutionalise practices for greater safety and security across-the-board

Ahead of Holi 2021, the Foundation, in an effort to understand behaviours that make people feel unsafe during Holi and get individual recommendations for a safer, SGBV-free Holi, conducted a Walking Poll in five locations of Gurugram: Huda City Centre Metro Station, Vyapar Kendra, Supermart 1, Galleria Market and Harijan Basti, an urban village settlement nestled in the heart of DLF Phase 5.

People were asked to comment on whether they agree or disagree with the statement: ***Rubbing colour, touching and splashing water during Holi is okay.***

The poll was followed by one-on-one discussions on consent, safety, and appropriate and inappropriate behaviours during Holi.

Of the 50 people who took the poll, 14 people agreed and 36 people disagreed with the statement. Men and women made up the group of participants.

Many were unable to make the connection between the statement and the question of safety of women and girls, until prompted.

### Responses

The most significant quotes and rationale given by the participants on why they agreed or disagreed with the statements were recorded. Below is a summary of their reasons:

AGREE	DISAGREE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It's a festival that everyone wants to play, but people are shy to admit it</li> <li>• Holi is a great festival that we have all enjoyed. Girls should be cautious anyway.</li> <li>• It's okay only if there's consent and you're playing with people you know</li> <li>• It's fine if it's not too aggressive and there are authority figures present. Our RWA ensures it's safe for all.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Infection through the chemicals in the colour</li> <li>• Impact on environment</li> <li>• Men and boys take advantage to misbehave with women</li> <li>• People attack moving cars and road traffic, leading to accidents</li> <li>• In the name of fun, people lace others' drinks, throw semen filled balloons</li> <li>• There's no concept of consent</li> <li>• Sexual harassment during Holi is an urban issue, not to be found in villages, because women there never complain about these things</li> <li>• All of this is only okay if the person playing has given their consent</li> <li>• It's a wastage of water, and the whole city becomes unclean</li> <li>• We're groped in the name of rubbing colour</li> <li>• Holi also gives rise to hooliganism as people who celebrate do not take into account the fact that others aren't celebrating</li> <li>• It creates a culture of fear, as people are unable to leave their homes</li> <li>• There's a lot of aggression among people who celebrate Holi, which is scary</li> </ul>

### Inferences

Some critical observations from the interactions that brought out people's stories:

- Many participants, including women, did not make the connection between the statement and the prevalence of sexual and gender based violence. Even after being prompted, participants underscored skin problems, environmental concerns and

cleanliness issues as a greater issue than threat to personal safety. This could be indicative of the impacts of the culture of silence around SGBV as an issue, and even among women, a denial of the prevalence of inappropriate behaviours.

- One participant said “*Splashing water with a pichkari is fine, because it doesn’t involve any touching*” revealing there still continues to be a lack of awareness around sexual harassment not just being physical in nature.
- Two participants mentioned that this issue is an urban issue, or one that happens in ‘colonies’ and not among those who live in village setups. “*Have you ever heard a woman from the village complain about these things?*” asked one participant. This reveals that silence around the issue is often considered as proof of absence of the issue, rather than the reason behind its flourishing.
- Multiple participants said that it was okay to celebrate Holi and agreed with the statement as long as it was being done within family, or among people you know. Only two participants underscored that even among family and friends, there was a need to take consent, indicating that most people assume that sexual harassment happens because of “others” and not the people they know or are in close contact with.
- Multiple participants placed the responsibility of their safety and safeguarding on RWAs (Residents’ Welfare Associations), “hosts”, police, and other authorities. None of the participants spoke about one’s safety on the streets and in public places being anyone’s responsibility, beyond having police personnel arrest culprits. This reveals that most people don’t look at sexual harassment and violence as behavioural issues, entrenched in a systemic acceptance of patriarchal values. Instead, they’re still seen and referred to as ‘one-off’ incidents by ‘some people’, rather than a behaviour that could or couldn’t be picked up and practiced by anyone.
- Two participants mentioned that it’s alright for children to play Holi without consent, as they would not have negative thoughts. This clearly indicates a need for a change in attitudes, as sexual and gender based violence are behaviours, and once normalised at a young age, will likely continue to be a part of one’s actions, unless addressed.

## Recommendations

Participants were also asked to share their recommendations on how Holi could be celebrated to make people feel safer. Here are some of the key recommendations that came out:

- Normalise the practice of asking one another before rubbing colour or splashing water on someone
- Ban the practice of throwing water balloons on strangers, especially on the streets and from rooftops.
- Institute a culture where there’s respect for one’s personal space
- Stop normalising sexual and gender based violence by saying “bura na mano Holi hai”
- There should be some restriction on the amount of water being used, and colours with chemical and glass should be banned altogether

- Holi should be played in contained physical areas, where only people who wish to participate enter and play; it should definitely be kept off the streets and public spaces
- People should be mindful of their actions and damage to property
- Wine shops should be closed during Holi celebrations to reduce the number of intoxicated people on the streets
- Constant police presence and patrolling should be ensured, especially in sensitive areas
- Celebrating Holi by harassing animals and putting colour on them should be strictly banned and become punishable
- Posters, billboards and advertisements should be disseminated and popularised ahead of Holi, which should clearly have guidelines and rules for ensuring a safe and fair Holi for all
- Police should run a campaign to encourage people to complain in case of instances of sexual harassment and violence during Holi. This would create greater fear of getting caught among perpetrators.

*The Martha Farrell Foundation will be working on taking the above recommendations forward with local authorities in Gurgaon over the next year. If you would like to work with us to make the same happen in your city, contact us on [posh@marthafarrellfoundation.org](mailto:posh@marthafarrellfoundation.org) or +91 9205320408.*