

Stockton Professor's Study: 3 Out of 5 Women in India Have Experienced Sexual Harassment

Public Transit Areas Viewed as Likely Spaces for Sexual Harassment

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Galloway, NJ – A new research study by criminologist Manish Madan, assistant professor of Criminal Justice at Stockton University, found that nearly three out of five women (close to 60 percent) in India have been victims of sexual harassment in their lifetime, and about two out of five women have experienced it in the past year. Nearly 1,400 men and women in India's capital city, New Delhi, were surveyed for this study using multistage cluster and quota sampling techniques.

More than 85 percent of women respondents consider public transportation, such as buses, metro/railways, bus stops and taxis as likely venues for sexual harassment, and about 73 percent of women do not feel safe using public spaces as freely as men do, according to the study. Madan noted this to be a serious concern given that the majority of women respondents use public transportation for traveling in and around the city.

Madan conducted the survey research in one of the top 10 densest cities in the world to examine how men and women perceive the seriousness of sexual harassment in public spaces, the likelihood of where it occurs, personal experiences and patriarchal beliefs in the society. He led the study and co-authored the paper with Mahesh K. Nalla, a professor at the School of Criminal Justice at Michigan State University. The first study from this research was published online in the International Criminal Justice Review, a peer-reviewed journal that publishes research on crime and justice globally.

In just days, the study has been published globally by outlets such as the Times of India, NDTV, Yahoo News, MSN and Australian News Network.

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Madan, who received his doctoral degree from Michigan State University, specializes in international and comparative research, policy, policing, victimization and gender.

While sexual harassment has been a growing area of concern in India, there has been a lack of evidence-based systematic research on the topic. Specifically, the 2012 gang rape of a 23-year-old woman on a moving bus in New Delhi has called for increased attention to understanding the challenges that women face in public spaces.

The gang-rape incident in which the victim died has become known as Nirbhaya, which means fearless, since the Indian laws currently do not allow media to publish the names of rape victims. This study's findings come after the introduction of the Criminal Law (Amendment) Bill of 2013 that sought a higher level of punishments on crime against women after the Nirbhaya incident and also prompted the government of India to allocate 10 billion Indian rupees in its 2013 union budget to protecting the dignity and ensuring safety of women in India.

This study surveyed men and women on their views toward sexual harassment, such as stalking, flashing, whistling, asking for sexual favors, and various forms of touching the body. While the majority of men and women find these actions as very serious indicators of sexual harassment, there is a significant difference in how men view these actions as less serious compared to women. "There is an immediate need to have public dialogue on the subject and sensitize men about the seriousness of these actions," Madan said.

As India's economy develops, urbanization, migration into urban areas and overcrowding has also occurred simultaneously. Further, more women have entered the workforce and rely more on public transportation. Madan and Nalla state that public spaces "represent cities' ability to enhance the positive qualities of urban living, which include fair and equitable access and use to all residents without any discrimination, spatial exclusion or fear of victimization."

Madan noted, "the government has taken cognizance of the Nirbhaya incident and strengthened the laws, however, it is clear that some concrete steps need to be taken now to ensure women's safety in public spaces."

Madan recommends that the government adopt a "zero-tolerance policy against sexual harassment and displaying such sign-boards on highly visible areas like busses, metros, parks and bus stops."

Such display boards should also be used to educate both men and women about the legal recourse against sexual harassment, Madan explained.

Sustained educational programs, increased public awareness and public policy can create safe public spaces for women in the country. Given the gender disparity on some of the views reported in the study, it is important to involve both men and women in the discourse of promoting women's safety and reaching out for a collective action toward a safe community.

The authors concluded, "Women's use of public space or transport should neither lead to nor end in their harassment."