

kNOw FEAR MAKING RURAL PUBLIC SPACES SAFE FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS

An operational research for addressing public space sexual violence against women and girls

Project Brief

Program Partners



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Context

Violence – within and outside the home – is an ever-present threat and an everyday reality for many women and girls across India. The fear of sexual violence against women and girls (SVAWG) in public spaces is a significant barrier to equitable development. Women and girls continue to have restricted mobility and lack equitable access to education, employment, healthcare, civic amenities and development infrastructure – all of which are impediments to achieving gender equality as enshrined in the Indian Constitution

and commitments such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

While domestic violence has been a topic of public discourse and research, addressing sexual violence faced by women and girls in public spaces has not been equally highlighted. In the past decade, safety of public spaces in cities has gained attention, but the issue remains unacknowledged in rural areas.

Aim

To develop and evaluate a model of rural public space safety, the **kNOw Fear** program mobilized women's citizenship and youth participation toward catalyzing local governance structures — the *gram panchayat* — to prioritize and respond to violence faced by women and girls in public spaces.

Geography

Select villages of **Dasada** block, **Surendranagar** district, Gujarat, India

Program Coverage

- 723 women (aged 20-45 years) reached through safety audits, *mahila gram sabhas*, community meetings, campaigns, dialogues and trainings
- 672 adolescent girls (aged 15-19 years) reached through community meetings and campaigns
- 496 young men (aged 18-22 years) reached through community meetings
- Elected representatives from 11 *gram panchayats* reached through training and sensitization programs

Partners

International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) and **Society for Women's Action and Training Initiative (SWATI)**, with support from **International Development Research Centre (IDRC)**.





Governance structures at the local level, particularly the *gram panchayats*,¹ have been constitutionally mandated to undertake equitable development and address gender issues. However, these structures have largely neglected this mandate, considering these to be “women’s issues” and therefore, matter and concerns to be dealt with “privately”.²

Approach

Program Outcomes

- Evidence on the **impact** of the **intervention model** through a quasi-experimental evaluation design
- **Learnings** on **program strategies** and **processes** that can be effective in engaging various stakeholders on SVAWG issues and addressing the same

The intervention was led by SWATI, while ICRW led the evaluation study. The intervention used the following interlinked but distinct strategies to meet its objectives:

Empowering Women’s Collectives

- Organize and build capacities of women’s collectives to inform *gram panchayat* planning processes and to

mainstream public safety concerns through evidence generation by using tools such as safety audits

- Convene women’s assemblies (*mahila sabhas*) to prioritize agendas for engaging with *gram panchayats* in order to make them gender sensitive and responsive
- Support active participation in main village assembly *gram sabha* and present demands for action

Engaging Gram Panchayats

- Train *gram panchayat* members, particularly elected women representatives, to ensure effective and gender-responsive leadership
- Use the evidence generated to develop specific interventions for public safety and security through the **Gram Panchayat Development Program** – a government initiative.

Enabling Young People to Advocate for Public Safety

- Make adolescent girls and young men more aware of SVAWG-related issues in public spaces
- Train 22 peer leaders (11 male and 11 female) as **Gyan Sahayaks** (infomediaries) to support safety audits and increase community awareness on public safety through their knowledge and skills

¹ Smallest unit/body of local governance in India, democratically elected through vote every five years; one *gram panchayat* typically covers one or a few villages.

² Das, P., Kashyap, A., Nandi, S., Bhatla, N., & Pal, P. (2018). **Potential and Possibilities – Panchayati Raj Institutions as a Platform for Addressing Intimate Partner Violence in India: A Synthesis Report**. New Delhi: ICRW.



Evidence

Formative research was conducted to contextualize the issue in the specific geography, which in turn informed program design and evaluation. A cross-sectional quasi-experimental mixed-method design was used for evaluating program effect.

The program had a positive effect on women's **gender equitable attitudes, feeling of safety** while traveling in private buses, and **increased knowledge of specific laws** in relation to **public safety**. A significant increase was noted in women's **knowledge on functions of the gram panchayats** and **awareness about the gram sabhas**.

The quantitative evaluation noted a significant effect on **gender equitable attitudes** of **adolescent girls**. Insights

from the qualitative study with **Gyan Sahayaks** also show changes in **personal agency** and **empowerment**, particularly increased confidence, knowledge and mobility.

The program intervention with young men did not materialize as planned due to high rates of migration and non-availability of this group. Hence, they were not included in the evaluation. Nonetheless, qualitative interactions with **Gyan Sahayaks** indicate better understanding and sensitivity of young men toward issues of public safety. Interviews with elected women representatives and other members of the **gram panchayats** revealed greater acknowledgement of the role and accountability of the **gram panchayat** in addressing issues and concerns related to gender and SWAWG.



ICRW Asia

C-59, South Extension, Part II,
New Delhi – 110 049
Tel: 91-11-46643333
email: info.india@icrw.org

 www.icrw.org/asia
 @ICRWAsia
 @ICRWAsia

ICRW Headquarters

1120 20th St NW, Suite 500 North,
Washington, D.C. 20036
Tel: 202.797.0007
e-mail: info@icrw.org

 www.icrw.org
 @ICRWDC
 @ICRWAsia



Society for Women's Action and Training Initiatives (SWATI)

Banglow No. 2, Trimurti Society, Nr. National
Park Society, Behind Government Polytechnic,
Gulbai Tekra, Ahmedabad – 380015
Tel: 91-79-26300409
email: swati.org@gmail.com

 www.swati.org.in
 @Swati Gujarat
 @swatiorg