

# Widespread sexual harassment persists in India

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Credit: Michigan State University

Sexual harassment remains a pervasive problem in India despite tougher laws enacted more than three years ago after a woman was gang raped on a bus and later died of her injuries, indicates new research by a Michigan State University criminologist.

About 40 percent of women surveyed in Delhi said they have been sexually harassed in a public place such as a bus or park in the past year, with most of the crimes occurring in the daytime. Further, 33 percent of women have stopped going out in public and 17 percent have quit their jobs rather than face harassment, or worse, in [public places](#).

"What this means is that women, despite Nirbhaya, are still afraid," said MSU's Mahesh Nalla. Nirbhaya became the pseudonym given to the gang rape victim whose death in 2012 brought worldwide attention to violence against women. "Women in India do not feel safe being in public spaces, which is clearly a [human rights](#) issue."

While [sexual harassment](#) is a problem experienced by women worldwide, it may be more prevalent in emerging democracies such as India and other countries in South Asia where women are becoming more involved in the workforce, said Nalla, MSU professor of [criminal justice](#) and a native of India. The problem is intensified by the existence of a cramped, inadequate public transportation system, massive youth migration to urban areas and the fact that India is a traditional patriarchal society where many still believe a woman's place is in the home.

Nalla and co-investigator Manish Madan, assistant professor at Stockton University, surveyed some 1,400 men and women in the capital city of New Delhi on a host of issues including perceptions and history of sexual harassment, use of public transportation, safety in public spaces and police effectiveness in dealing with these concerns.

The first paper from that research, published online today in the *International Criminal Justice Review*, finds that 40 percent of female respondents were sexually harassed in the past year and 58 percent were sexually harassed at least once during their lifetime.

Respondents were asked to gauge the seriousness of sexual incidents

ranging from whistling to asking a woman for sexual favors to patting her buttocks or squeezing her breasts. While both men and women generally considered all incidents serious, men considered them considerably less serious, illustrating "a disjunction between how males and females think," Nalla said.

Sexual harassment of women in public spaces in India and elsewhere in South Asia - known as "Eve teasing" - has long been a common occurrence, particularly by groups of young male perpetrators, Nalla said. The Dec. 16, 2012 rape and murder of Nirbhaya by a group of men on a moving bus in Delhi brought about new laws that doubled prison terms for rape and criminalized voyeurism and stalking.

But despite these efforts, sexual harassment continues on a broad scale, the study suggests. To address the problem, Nalla recommends:

- Better education on the consequences of sexual harassment and the principles of gender equality. This should start in grade school and be written into the curriculum.
- Implementation of public-awareness efforts. This should include public-service messages and the display of "zero tolerance on sexual harassment" signs at highly visible areas such as bus stops, buses and roadsides.
- More and better law enforcement and security in public places, including beefed-up police patrols and the installation of security cameras.

"The findings from this study," Nalla said, "highlight the importance and immediacy of addressing women's safety in [public spaces](#) and [women's](#) human rights."

Provided by Michigan State University

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