



Reuter's Report and Women Safety in India

The issue of women safety has been once again in the debates as Thomas Reuters Foundation has published an international survey ranking India as the most dangerous place on the planet. While the credibility of the survey has been questioned by people who are associating the matter with national pride, there is no doubt in the fact that women in India are far from feeling free and safe outdoors and even indoors.

Insights from the Survey

- This perception poll was conducted by "Thomas Reuters foundation" which is one of the leading news organizations of the world.
- 548 experts on women issues were asked about the level of safety of women in 193 United Nations member states.
- 43 out of 548 women respondents were based in India.
- The parameters on which respondents were polled were: access of women to healthcare, discrimination against women, repressive cultural traditions, sexual violence against women, non-sexual violence against women and human trafficking.
- India topped the list, followed by Afghanistan and Syria.
- A similar poll, conducted in 2011, had placed India at fourth place, behind Afghanistan, Congo and Pakistan.

Criticism of the survey

- It is being said that the survey is only a "perception poll" and does not show the true picture.
- The National Commission for Women (NCW) has dismissed the perception poll by pointing out that the countries that have been ranked after India have women who are not even allowed to speak in public.
- The NCW has also said that that the sample size was too small and could not be representative of the whole country.

Recent scenario in India

In spite of various claims being made and voices being raised, the situation of women in India remains precarious.

- **Underreporting:** The increase in the number of cases reported is usually associated with high rates of crimes. However, it is not so. Data shows that in urban and relatively progressive societies the number of cases of crime against women is high as social taboo associated with reporting such cases is low. On the other hands, in societies where women are shamed instead of the perpetrators, such cases go unreported.
- **Misreporting:** Many of the cases reported under "sexual crimes" involved consensual sex between "inter-caste" or "interreligious" couple. The men are often detained by the police on provocation by the "family of the women" and wait in jails for years as undertrials.
- **MeToo Campaign:** The #MeToo campaign saw hundreds of women publicly accusing powerful men in business, government and entertainment of sexual misconduct, and thousands joined it to share stories of sexual harassment or abuse.
- **Marital Rapes:** Nearly all (98 per cent) sexual violence that women told surveyors they had

experienced was by their husbands. Marital rapes are still outside the purview of “sexual crimes” in India and it is important that legislation regarding this are formulated at the earliest.

- **Judicial delay:** Cases take years to come to trial and the rate of conviction is abysmal. Even sensitive cases like Nirbhaya took more than 4 years to deliver justice. Many women give up on their cases as they are constantly being terrorized by the offenders, the society and by the delay in justice delivery.
- **Lack of efforts on the part of government and bureaucracy:** The Nirbhaya Fund, created to ensure the dignity and safety of women, towards which the government has allocated 1,000 crore Rupees per year since 2013, has remained largely unspent.

The culture (or lack of it) in many states condones kangaroo courts, honour killings, female mutilation, child marriages and forced marriages. Add to it the poor state of healthcare, poor law and order situation, all of which affect women more because of their perceived low social status.

How do we need to look at the report?

While this report is being seen by many as an evidence of increasing violence against women in India, a more optimistic lens is needed to look at it. As stated earlier, this result might actually be capturing some progressive rather than regressive trends i.e. more women are coming out to voice their rage against sexual crimes and discrimination.

Pointing fingers at the methodology employed in the survey or the anonymity of the respondents combined with straightaway denial of the grave situation in our country is an indicator of the prevalent misogynistic attitude. Similarly, making this an issue of national pride is not going to lead us anywhere. Instead of scrutinizing the report, we need to react more positively and introspect the underlying causes of increasing violence against women viz. the inability of our patriarchal society to handle the challenge posed to male domination by independent women.

Likewise, it is important that moral education and sex education are made compulsory in school so that the next generation can be set free from the paternalistic attitude towards women and the social taboos that demean women.

In the short run, the police and judiciary need to be sensitised towards women’s issues so that no woman would be afraid to approach the police or the courts. This would prove more effective than bringing in more and more laws for women which are rarely implemented.

In the End

The report from Thomas Reuters Foundation has added just another spark to the already heated debate around the condition of women in India. However, it needs to be emphasized that the discourse should not end on making women “safe” but rather go on to redefining the patriarchal notions of “safety” and “freedom” of women. Given this, it is also important that the protectionist dialogues around emotive issues like rape, female foeticide and discrimination evolve to delve deeper into the issues of socio-cultural conditioning of women and also delve into the popular misogynistic narratives. Thus, we need to courageously challenge the systemic and social basis for the oppression of women.