On India being labelled the world's most unsafe country for women

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Is India merely dangerous for women or is it the most dangerous place for women? Is measuring that on the basis of people's perception of danger and fear any less significant than on the basis of recorded statistics?

In light of India's labelling as the 'world's most dangerous country for women' in a recent global poll conducted by the Thomson Reuters Foundation (TRF), these questions have important bearing. In particular, the poll ranked India as the least safe country for women — ahead of Afghanistan, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Somalia — with regard to sexual violence, persecution from cultural and religious traditions and human trafficking.

The ruling government has been quick to dismiss this shameful ranking as "unscientific" based more on "subjective opinion" than any real "data". But TRF maintains that theirs is a perception poll entirely based on expert opinion — and it's not meant to replace official data, but merely complement it with a snapshot of a situation at a given time.

If by hard data the government means officially reported crimes against women, then let's just say that data will never show us the full picture. As Livemint's analysis of National Family Health Survey (NFHS) data, collected in 2015-16 and released this year, reveals that an estimated 99.1% of sexual violence cases are never reported — and in most instances, the perpetrator is the husband of the survivor. Even if one excludes domestic violence by the spouse, still only 15% of sexual violence committed by others is reported to the police. The reasons for this usually are poor trust in the justice machinery and low conviction rates in sexual assault cases. While rape accounts for 12% of all crimes against women in India — almost 39 rapes per hour — only 1 in 4 rape cases ends up securing a conviction.

So if reported data is only giving us a minuscule image of the larger problem, it might actually help if we looked at the perceptions and fears that women and girls harbour about violence, danger, and unsafe spaces. That may tell us more where the problem lies. These perceptions are not based on figments of imagination but rooted in the everyday lived experiences of being women, of being disciplined as women/girls, of being taught fear, of accessing public spaces and specific realities of their village/town/city.In fact, another survey exploring safety perceptions among adolescent girls across six Indian states, released this week by Save the Children in India, an international non-governmental organisation, reveals how much these perceptions shape the reality of young girls. According to their report, titled 'WINGS 2018: World Of India's Girls', across urban (47%) and rural (40%) areas, young girls, aged 11 to 18, reported feeling more susceptible to molestation or abuse while using public transport. This finding was particularly true for girls from higher income groups (53%), who possibly lead more sheltered lives, and girls from medium/small towns (51%).

Narrow roads leading to school, local markets or private tuition were also regarded as being unsafe and 28% of young women from large cities, especially from low-income groups and slums, said they felt unsafe in cinema halls. Few left home to meet friends, took walks or played in parks, but generally more urban — though only approximately 20% — than rural young girls and women used public spaces, the report said. For both urban and rural girls, "going to school" was the most universally accepted safe public space (96%) and after that attending private tuition — significantly higher for urban (54%) than rural (32%). In the gender-space workshops we do, many young women talk of the 'perceptual maps' that they carry around in their heads which help them negotiate public space, not only in terms of safe-unsafe, but also where they could be seen as 'respectable' and where not. Danger is not just reported incidents of sexual assault, it's also present in the perceived threats and fears that dominate a woman's life. In India, that's every day.