SYMPOSIUM REPORT

kNOw Fear:

Rural Public Space for Women & Marginalised Communities

July 2-3, 2025
TISS Mumbai

SWATI
Society for Women's Action and Training Initiative

RE-IMAGINING FUTURES
TISS

ISST Institute of Social Studies Trust

TABLE OF CONTENTS

01 Introduction

Public spaces shape everyday experiences of citizenship, belonging, and empowerment. However, for rural and marginalised women, access and safety remain deeply fraught. The symposium, "Reclaiming Public Spaces for Women in Marginalised Communities: Voices from the Margin," confronted these realities head-on, offering a powerful platform to spotlight the long-overlooked need for safety, inclusion, and access in rural public spaces, often missing from mainstream gender-based violence discourse. With national narratives largely centred on urban experiences, rural women's voices remain fragmented and invisible due to systemic neglect. This symposium brought together researchers, activists, grassroots leaders, and practitioners to examine the structural roots of exclusion and to reimagine rural public spaces as not only sites of vulnerability but also of resistance, leadership, and possibility.

Grounded in the belief that public spaces are arenas where identity, agency, and rights are constantly negotiated, the event highlighted how Adivasi, Dalit, queer, and disabled women continue to be excluded by entrenched social norms and unequal systems. It called for an intersectional lens to better understand how multiple marginalisations compound violence and exclusion.

Held over two days, the symposium featured presentations, participatory dialogues, and roundtables that centred lived experiences and grounded research. The event followed a panel format, with each session featuring 2–3 speakers and a moderator. Panellists shared insights on reclaiming public spaces, followed by interactive Q&As. Open discussions at the end of each day fostered reflection, collaboration, and action, ensuring the event remained inclusive and participatory. (Refer Annexure A for detailed agenda.) Knowledge-sharing was framed as a means to drive action, innovation, and justice. Stories of grassroots resistance and everyday courage anchored the discussions, shifting focus from documenting harm to celebrating collective resilience.

The symposium had a total of 58 participants from across 13 states, along with four national-level organisations and two networks who brought broader regional and thematic perspectives. (Refer Annexure B for breakdown across organisation type.) The majority of attendees were from rural and peri-urban regions, reflecting the symposium's emphasis on grassroots realities. While detailed data on gender, caste, Adivasi, Dalit, or LGBTQIA+ identities was not formally captured, several speakers and participants self-identified or spoke from lived experiences shaped by these identities.

The symposium hosted participants from 13 states.

Led by Poonam Kathuria (SWATI[1]), Jahnvi Andharia (ISST[2]), and Shewli Kumar (TISS[3]), the opening session underscored collaboration, respect, and the value of diverse lived experiences. Kathuria called for public safety to be reframed as a fundamental citizenship right, essential to dignity. Andharia drew from ISST's legacy in bridging research, policy, and grassroots action, especially in making women's labour visible.

[1]Society for Women's Action and Training Initiative, [2]Institute of Social Studies Trust, [3]Tata Institute of Social Science

This report captures the momentum of a growing movement that invites us to reclaim public spaces as arenas of justice, empowerment, and belonging for all marginalised communities.

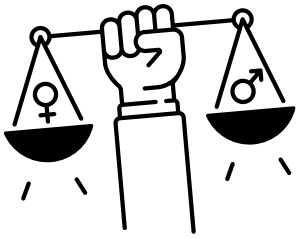
1.1 Purpose of the Symposium

The symposium aimed to bring the conversation on rural women's right to public spaces from the margins to the mainstream. By convening a diverse group, it became a unique forum for consolidating fragmented knowledge, sharing lived realities, and formulating collective responses to gender-based violence in rural India.

The symposium focused on the underreported and under-theorised challenges in villages and small towns. Through presentations and participatory discussions, participants examined barriers to inclusion, drivers of exclusion, and innovative grassroots efforts addressing safety and access. An intersectional approach shaped all deliberations, engaging with how caste, sexuality, disability, and other identities intersect with gender-based violence to create layered forms of marginalisation.

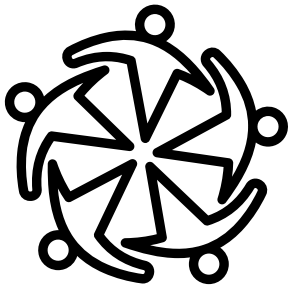
The symposium was designed not only to foster understanding but also to encourage action. By spotlighting local innovations and successful interventions, it aimed to inspire inclusive governance, challenge restrictive norms, and promote safer, more equitable public spaces for marginalised groups.

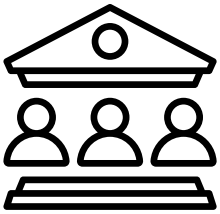
1.2 Significance of the Symposium



At its core, the symposium challenged systemic exclusion. By examining the structural roots of violence and inequality in rural public spaces, it moved beyond treating these as isolated incidents, instead placing them within broader frameworks of power, social norms, and institutional dynamics. This was paired with a celebration of resistance – centring stories of women and communities who actively contest and transform these spaces.

Amplifying marginalised voices was an explicit commitment. By ensuring Adivasi, Dalit, queer, and disabled women's perspectives shaped every session, the symposium resisted the erasure these communities often face in public discourse. This inclusivity enriched feminist knowledge and sparked new questions, collaborations, and context-sensitive solutions grounded in lived realities.





The symposium underscored the transformative potential of local governance. By highlighting the role of Panchayats and community leadership, it advocated for a vision of safety grounded in mobility, autonomy, and participation—shifting the focus from protection to inclusion and empowerment.

In sum, the symposium marked an important step toward reclaiming rural public spaces as sites where all women and marginalised people can belong, flourish, and lead.

Snapshots of Conversations & Dialogue

02 Symposium Highlights and Daily Overview

2.1 Day 1: *Mapping Violence and Community-Led Resistance*

2.1.1 | PANEL 1
General Violence Faced by Women and Girls in Rural Public Spaces

Moderator: Jahnvi Andharia (ISST)

2.1.1.1 Extent, Forms, Drivers and Impact of Public Space Sexual Violence against Women and Girls in Rural Gujarat

–Tara Nair (Work Fair and Free Foundation) and Poonam Kathuria (SWATI)

Based on research conducted in 2021, the presentation examined sexual violence against women and girls in public spaces in rural Gujarat, focusing on Patdi and Santrampur talukas. Challenging the notion that villages are safer than cities, it showed that public space violence is a serious concern in rural areas too. Drawing on household surveys and interviews, the study revealed how patriarchal norms, shifting forms of control, and growing female mobility shape experiences and responses to harassment.

Key Concepts, Arguments and Discussion Highlights:

Public spaces, shaped by social dynamics and power hierarchies, often exclude women especially in rural areas due to entrenched gender, caste, and class inequalities. Sexual harassment, legitimised by patriarchal norms that assert control over women's bodies, normalises everyday violence. Despite greater mobility and digital access, both traditional restrictions and new forms of surveillance continue to constrain women's freedom, particularly after puberty.

Harassment in rural spaces is widespread and routine. 88% of girls in Patdi and 63% in Santrampur reported experiencing violence, mostly through staring, catcalling, and verbal abuse in common spaces like markets, fairs, and transport. Severe incidents are often underreported due to fear, stigma, and the acquaintance and /or familiarity of perpetrators. Coping mechanisms typically involve avoiding unsafe areas, as institutional support is limited and trust in authorities remains low. This silence reinforces the idea that safety depends on male protection even for women deemed "independent."

Transformative change requires engaging men and boys as allies, while empowering women's collectives and local institutions to challenge the social norms that fuel violence and impunity.

Recommendations:

- Sexual violence must be addressed as a structural issue rooted in patriarchy, not merely as isolated incidents. This requires breaking the divide between private and public spaces, recognising that violence occurs across all spheres of life.
- Expanding gender-awareness education and actively involving men and boys as allies is key to shifting social norms.
- Strengthening local women's groups, improving governance structures, and ensuring effective use of gender-mainstreaming funds are essential steps toward sustained, community-led change.

2.1.1.2 Adivasi Migrant Women Workers' Access to Justice in Cases of Gender-Based Violence

– Keerthana S. Ragh (Aajeevika Bureau) & Ananya Iyer (Work Fair and Free Foundation)

This presentation examined the challenges Adivasi migrant women workers face in accessing justice in cases of gender-based violence. Banswara district of Rajasthan is the site of Aajeevika Bureau's decade-long intervention on the subject and that of a study recently conducted by the organisation. With limited local livelihoods, many women and girls from Banswara migrate for work, facing violence both at home and outside – from domestic abuse to workplace harassment and honour crimes. Although formal support systems like women's police stations, helpdesks, and legal aid exist, access is limited as the varied systems hardly consider informal migrant workers' contexts.

Key Concepts, Arguments and Discussion Highlights:

In Banswara, where Adivasis comprise 76.4% of the population and livelihood options are limited, economic distress drives large-scale migration of women and girls, often severing them from support networks and heightening vulnerability. Women and adolescent girl workers face overlapping forms of violence at various stages of their migration journey: domestic abuse, workplace harassment, public space violence, and severe crimes like rape. This violence persists and takes varied forms as women and/or adolescent girl workers move between source to destination. Migration of parents also renders adolescent girls at source vulnerable to violence. These intersecting threats undermine their safety, mobility, and economic independence.

Despite the presence of institutional mechanisms like WCD helpdesks, women's police stations, Saathin cadres, and legal aid, access to justice remains limited due to poor outreach, low awareness, procedural delays, and lack of coordination between departments. Fragmented handling of cases and the disconnect

between mechanisms across source and destination locations further hinders redress. Informal mechanisms such as Caste Panchayats, despite being the most accessible at source, often exclude women entirely or resolve cases in ways that reinforce inequity.

Workers unions like the Mahila Majdoor Sangh and civil society groups like Aajeevika Bureau help bridge some of these gaps by providing legal aid and building awareness, but their reach is constrained by limited resources. Ultimately, the justice system fails to respond to the deeply interconnected realities of caste, gender, and labour, providing fragmented support to survivors and leaving systemic vulnerabilities unaddressed. Tackling these challenges requires integrated, intersectional approaches that go beyond issue-specific or geographically isolated interventions.

Recommendations:

Integrated, context-sensitive interventions are needed to address the full spectrum of marginalisation faced by migrant Adivasi women. This involves enhancing coordination between institutional actors at both the source and destination of migration, ensuring women are meaningfully included in both formal and community-based justice processes, and expanding the reach and effectiveness of support services so that information and assistance are accessible and responsive to needs.

2.1.1.3 Feminist Application of Complex Adaptive Systems: Unpacking Safety and Social Change

– Niveditha Menon (Centre for Budget and Policy Studies)

This presentation speaks about the manner in which Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) framework can be used through a feminist lens to explore the nature of social change. Based on fieldwork in Rajasthan, Telangana, and Gujarat, it challenged linear notions of change, highlighting safety as dynamic, contextual, and continuously shaped. Centring women's voices and everyday strategies, it called for research and interventions that engage with the complexity, contradictions, and agency in their lived experiences. Safety emerged not as a fixed state, but through fluid, interdependent relationships among individuals, norms, and institutions.

Key Concepts, Arguments and Discussion Highlights:

Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) framework views all change as non-linear, unpredictable, and constantly evolving, with individuals adapting to shifting rules, contexts, and opportunities through everyday actions. As such, it provides the space to centre women as strategic, adaptive agents resisting, negotiating, and sometimes, reinforcing the systems around them. In the context of gender violence, therefore, safety emerges as a dynamic, ongoing process shaped through daily negotiations with social norms, where safety and violence often coexist. What protects in one context may produce vulnerability in another, making safety fluid and contested. Women navigate these tensions using silence, strategic compliance, or rule-bending to create moments of safety, while being highly aware that these same tactics can reproduce risk elsewhere. Essentially, safe spaces are not permanent or stable; they are continuously negotiated across relationships with families, communities, employers, and institutions.

A key feature of the feminist CAS approach are the twin ideas of emergence and reflexivity. The first highlights the principles of 'the whole is greater than sum of its parts', and the second highlights the political positions and identities of all actors, including the researchers. This twin-focus strengthens both ethical commitment and analytical depth, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of women's lived realities and the complexity of social transformation.

Recommendations:

A nuanced understanding of women's diverse lived realities calls for interventions that are flexible, adaptable, and rooted in context rather than relying on one-size-fits-all models. Supporting platforms for women's self-representation and agency is crucial, while embracing the realities of inherent contradiction and complexity is integral to meaningful social change.

2.1.1.4 Questions Raised and Panel Responses

Q1. How can researchers set boundaries in Complex Adaptive Systems research, where constant change and interconnection challenge clear start and stop points? How does researcher bias influence this process?

Niveditha: The CAS framework was adopted to reflect the complexity of social change, which resists rigid boundaries. For the first six months, the team used an open-ended, immersive approach before designing research tools, akin to "painting the background before the details". Bias and subjectivity were acknowledged, with the iterative process focused on depth rather than objectivity. Practical boundaries were shaped by time and resource constraints, while ethical commitments like confidentiality and privacy remained central throughout.

Q2. How are insights from CAS research integrated into partner organisations, and how are these learnings translated into programmatic action?

Niveditha: The team co-developed "process indicators" with partners, focusing on measuring change beyond static outcomes. Organisational learning was facilitated by regular feedback workshops. The process indicators remain in development, and the team is seeking collaborators for broader testing and refinement, while noting that actionable programmatic data often differs from research data used for developing indicators, highlighting the importance of methodological integrity.

Q3. In contexts where terms like "violence" or "empowerment" carry diverse meanings, how did the SWATI team translate community-level understandings and ensure shared meaning among diverse actors?

Tara: Recognising local context was key, especially across diverse tribal communities. The field level data collection by 17 tribal young women MSW students was supported by intensive training in gender concepts, data collection, trauma sensitivity, and ethical interviewing. Additionally, trigger protocols and debriefing workshops ensured participant care and team reflection. Innovative methods, like written testimonies, helped include reticent and marginalised voices.

Q4. Why was the violence continuum scale structured as it is, and what does it reveal about domestic and public violence?

Aajeevika Bureau: The continuum illustrates the range and not severity of violence, with domestic violence placed first due to its prevalence. It reveals how forms of violence are interconnected, as seen in cases where workplace suspicion escalated to public humiliation without recourse. Cultural norms and weak institutional support further compound the outcomes for women seeking justice.

2.1.2 | PANEL 2

Community-Led and Survivor-Centred Approaches

Moderator: Trupti Jhaveri Panchal (TISS)

2.1.2.1. Count Us: Highlights of Women's Collectives Building Local Accountability Against Violence

– Bandana Sharma (Akanksha Seva Sadan)

This presentation traced the organic growth of Akanksha Seva Sadan, a grassroots collective in rural Bihar that empowers women across castes to recognise, confront, and demand accountability for violence. Rooted in everyday interactions and trust-building, the movement emerged from women's lived hardships under poverty, caste, and patriarchy. Through sustained engagement, solitary endurance grew into collective action spanning homes, villages, religious spaces, markets, and ultimately, women's political participation and rights.

Key Concepts and Highlights:

Akanksha Seva Sadan's journey began with building trust through daily interactions, where women accustomed to normalised abuse gradually learned to name and share their experiences. These conversations laid the foundation for reflection, organising, and collective action. The initiative deliberately bridged divides among Savarna, OBC, and Dalit women, and grew into an inclusive space for Dalits, Muslims, transgender persons, and gender-diverse youth. Education became a key entry point to empowerment, with the collective helping open schools and Anganwadi centres, supporting over 250 children and boosting women's confidence. From education, the focus expanded to rebuilding skills and leadership among survivors of violence. The 2001 Bihar Panchayati Raj elections, with 50% reservation for women, marked a major shift, though many newly elected women required ongoing peer support, training, and affirmation to navigate governance roles. Akanksha also challenged the divide between private and public spaces, recognising that exclusion often begins at home. Activities were intentionally held in religious sites, markets, and clinics; spaces which are traditionally off-limits to women. Public initiatives like girls' football, menstruation discussions, and "Sleep to Meet" campaigns helped normalise women's presence in such spaces. Through integration with Self-Help Groups, JEEVIKA, and Panchayati Raj collectives, Akanksha scaled its work to include health, sport, and taboo subjects like menstruation – creating grassroots platforms for economic opportunity, advocacy, and shared learning, and ultimately reclaiming public space with pride and solidarity.

Recommendations:

Effective women's groups grow from household realities outward, with Panchayat representation requiring sustained mentorship and awareness to create real impact. Government programs must partner with grassroots groups to build accountability and trust, while locally tailored activities like sports, sleep-outs, and vernacular theatre foster pride, agency, and ownership.

2.1.2.2 Strengthening Rural Women's Participation in Local Governance: Insights from Mahila Gram Sabha Processes in Gujarat

– Karen Piniero (Society for Women's Action and Training Initiatives - SWATI)

This presentation explored the evolving impact of Mahila Gram Sabhas (MGS, women-only village assemblies) in empowering rural women to influence local governance in Gujarat. Based on four years of fieldwork with SWATI in Patdi and Santrampur, it shows how MGS creates gender-safe spaces that help women, especially younger women express their priorities, build confidence, and engage with Panchayats. While MGS moves women from symbolic presence to active participation, gaps remain between involvement and real power, underscoring the need to strengthen both process and accountability.

Key Concepts and Highlights:

Despite over three million women elected to rural local bodies nationwide, a significant gap remains between participation and actual power. Women's attendance in Gram Sabhas rarely exceeds 20% and even when present, many hesitate to speak, highlighting the disconnect between formal representation and real authority. Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) often lack mechanisms to record or act on women's demands, leading to frustration and disengagement. Mahila Gram Sabhas (MGS) offer critical gender-safe spaces for women to raise issues like sanitation, mobility, and public safety, and to build solidarity. Their impact, however, depends on the strength of women's collectives; strong groups persist and coordinate follow-up, while weaker ones face fragmented leadership and limited influence. Participation remains uneven, shaped by caste, class, geography, and procedural knowledge gaps. Informal leadership and women's emotional labour often go unrecognised. Priority concerns like roads, drinking water, drainage, and safer public spaces emerge consistently through participatory mapping, yet follow-up is typically driven by collective effort rather than institutional accountability. Written applications and presentations are common, but systematic feedback and digital tracking remain absent. Symbolic leadership, family gatekeeping, discomfort in mixed forums, and bureaucratic opacity continue to constrain women's voice and visibility, particularly in marginalised hamlets.

Recommendations:

Inclusivity in Mahila Gram Sabhas (MGS) has been shaped by participatory preparation processes and attention to emotional support. Women's unpaid organising efforts have often gone unrecognised, though public acknowledgment and honoraria have emerged as meaningful affirmations of leadership. Strengthening governance links involves clarifying the roles of elected women representatives (EWRs), integrating peer mentorship, and formalising collective input into decision-making. Accountability can be enhanced through regular Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) feedback loops and joint redressal platforms with line departments. Building collective capacity includes training women to escalate demands and use equity tools to address exclusion effectively.

2.1.2.3 Backlash and Belonging: Women's Leadership and Everyday Violence in Rural India

– Camellia Reja (ISST)

Part of the Sustaining Power: Women's Struggles against Contemporary Backlash in South Asia (SuPWR project), this presentation examined the persistent, systemic backlash faced by Adivasi women leaders in rural Rajasthan, focusing on the Kotra Adivasi Vikas Manch (KAVM). It showed how gendered and caste hierarchies fuel stigma, surveillance, violence, and exclusion, while highlighting KAVM women's strategic resistance and leadership innovations.

Key Concepts and Highlights:

Backlash against women's leadership is systemic and deeply embedded across institutions such as families, communities, political parties, markets, and the state, manifesting through surveillance, gossip, respectability politics, and delegitimisation, often escalating to violence. It begins at home, where women's public engagement is framed as neglect, triggering suspicion and restrictions. In communities, women, especially Dalit and "outer jaat" leaders, face intensified stigma, public shaming, and exclusion. Political structures sabotage women's agency through co-optation, proxy male leaders, and targeted threats, particularly during elections. Civil society and markets also contribute to undermining independent leadership. These intersecting forces compel women to constantly prove their legitimacy while navigating real risks of physical violence and displacement. In response, KAVM women are reclaiming power by reviving Gaon (village) Sabhas as inclusive, feminist spaces and building leadership through collective consciousness and sustained capacity-building.

Strategies for Resistance and Transformation:

Reviving Gaon Sabhas as inclusive, women-led forums has created space for local decision-making rooted in collective experience. Residential, women-only spaces have supported capacity-building in governance and legal rights, while also fostering a shared feminist consciousness that challenges stigma. These efforts have strengthened engagement with the state through rights advocacy, resistance to political co-optation, and participation in protests and campaigns.

2.1.2.4 Questions Raised and Panel Responses

Q1: Was there any backlash encountered in your work? How do you perceive issues such as child marriage and school dropout among young girls?

Bandana: Addressing child marriage is deeply challenging, as the topic is often cloaked in silence. Biological changes, love, and relationships are rarely discussed at home, in schools, or in healthcare settings. Many girls elope seeking autonomy, but such choices are seldom openly addressed with families. As a result, families often conflate education with the risk of elopement, further silencing both issues. Reframing conversations around love, marriage, and agency is essential to help girls understand and navigate their rights and choices.

Q2: Do you encounter backlash even as part of your sanghatna? How do you address it?

Camellia: Association with collectives like KVM offers support but does not shield women from backlash. Families and communities may still react negatively, and engagement with the state does not eliminate these risks.

Q3: Have religious concerns posed challenges in other collectives you have worked with?

Camellia: In this case, religion wasn't a source of backlash, but in other collectives I've worked with, religious concerns have at times posed challenges.

Q4: How does your collective learn from experiences of backlash?

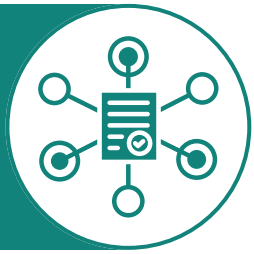
Karen: Initially, the main barrier was starting the conversation as people were not used to discussing such topics. Over time, comfort with speaking up grew. Traditionally, village discussions focused on non-gendered issues like schools and roads, not on sensitive or unfamiliar subjects.

Q5: Do women show interest in participating in politics? If not, should efforts be made to actively support their entry into mainstream politics?

Bandana: Women's participation in formal politics remains limited, with many still not making decisions independently. When women enter mainstream parties, there is concern they may assimilate into patriarchal structures, risking a disconnect from their original struggles and potentially reinforcing, rather than challenging, patriarchy. Some women from grassroots institutions join formal political parties like Congress or BJP without organisational resistance. Notably, some return after facing challenges within party structures or to reconnect with the values of their original collective.

2.1.3 | PANEL 3
Formal Institutions and Policy Frameworks

Moderator: Shewli Kumar (TISS)



2.1.3.1 Everyday Violence Against Women in Agriculture – Insights from the MAKAAM-FPC Study – *Sejal Dand (ANANDI) and Seema Kulkarni (SOPPECOM)*

This presentation by Mahila Kisan Adhikar Manch (MAKAAM) and the Feminist Policy Collective highlighted the often invisible violence faced by women in agriculture across Maharashtra, Telangana, and Gujarat. Drawing on fieldwork including focus groups, interviews, and key informants, it revealed how gender, caste, class, and migration status heighten rural women's vulnerability to exploitation and denial of rights. The study showed that lack of recognition as workers and farmers fuelled their economic and social marginalisation, underscoring the need for systemic reform and grassroots action to uphold their rights and safety.

Key Concepts and Highlights:

Despite being the largest group of agricultural workers in India, women's labour as unpaid family helpers, landless labourers, or wage earners remains largely unrecognised. This denial of worker or farmer status heightens their vulnerability to exploitation across fields, markets, forests, and homes. The study takes a broad view of violence, including not just sexual and physical abuse, but also systemic denial of entitlements, unsafe work conditions, livelihood loss, and everyday harassment like verbal abuse, surveillance, and sexual coercion – all of which erode dignity and safety.

Groups at heightened risk include sugarcane cutters, migrants, widows, suicide-affected households, and small or marginal farmers, whose vulnerability is compounded by caste, landlessness, informal employment, and irregular migration status. Sugarcane cutters endure months in makeshift settlements under surveillance, with no sanitation or privacy. Migrant women face exploitative work, unsafe travel, and assault, often remaining silent to avoid blame or losing income. Their children too are at risk of abduction and abuse. Disasters like pandemics and earthquakes further worsen their insecurity.

Violence comes from multiple sources such as family members, landlords, contractors, moneylenders, state officials, and dominant caste men, and is most severe where basic services like water and sanitation are lacking. Justice remains out of reach due to fear of retaliation, police apathy, low awareness of legal protections like the POSH Act, and lack of union support. Without formal recognition as workers, most women are excluded from statutory safeguards.

In response, women turn to collective strategies like working in groups, avoiding unsafe sites, and building solidarity through sangathans. While formal complaints are rare, they increase when support structures exist. These collectives offer crucial resources, confidence, and social capital, empowering women to resist violence and assert their rights.

Recommendations:

- Ensure legal recognition of women as farmers and workers with full rights, alongside basic infrastructure like housing, water, sanitation, and childcare.
- Collect disaggregated data by caste, migration, and widowhood, incorporating qualitative insights into lived realities.
- Promote awareness on workplace violence, strengthen unions and sangathans, and ensure women's participation in Local Complaint Committees (LCCs).
- Empower Gram Panchayats, Social Justice Committees, and elected women representatives to address and report violence.
- Enforce the POSH Act in rural areas by mandating LCCs for agricultural workers and holding governments and employers accountable for safe workplaces.

2.1.3.2 Comments, Questions Raised and Panel Responses

Poonam: Institutional, societal, and state intersections are key to driving change, yet the absence of political will and lack of monitoring have stalled meaningful transformation. As adaptive systems risk becoming maladaptive, the core challenge is – how to reframe our approach to enable real, lasting change?

Shewli: Transforming structures around women's work is both a policy and definitional challenge. Accurately defining work is essential to recognising diverse workplaces including the home. Making this visible and actionable is critical, and addressing women's work strategically requires urgent attention.

> ***The home is also a workplace.***
>
> *— Bandana, Akanksha Seva Sadan*

Q1: What do you mean by interlocked markets?

Seema: Interlocked markets in agriculture link input-output and labour systems, where women often enter early, buying seeds or machinery but lose autonomy as outputs are sold back to suppliers at a loss. Among sugarcane workers, exploitative, bonded labour-like practices persist, with advances turning into high-interest loans that deepen dependency.

Q2: When exploitative labour and continuous violence persist, do women internalise this violence and how does it affect their mental health?

Seema: Health issues are deeply linked to exploitative environments, with women's struggles often invisible even in death. Suicide data largely focuses on men, while women make up a small, delayed fraction (12–13%). Though suicides among housewives are significant, key context like location and personal history is often missing.

Q3: What are 2–3 key forces driving these mechanisms? And given the diversity in women's experiences, how can we develop actionable, inclusive strategies?

Seema: Recognising women as farmers is foundational, not just in name but in validating the skill and knowledge their work represents. Women's agricultural labour is a form of knowledge production and economic contribution. To advance, we must challenge the dominant paradigm that devalues their work and actively legitimise their practices and expertise.

2.1.4 | PANEL 4
Tools for Safety Audits and Inclusive Design

Moderator: Rekha Raj (ISST)

2.1.4.1. Shakti of Infrastructure and Influence to Address Gender-Based Violence: Learnings from a Safety Audit of Rural Public Spaces in Gujarat

– Pallavi Sobti Rajpal (UTTHAN)

This presentation shared key findings from a safety audit of rural Gujarat by Utthan and Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST), examining gender-based violence in public spaces. Through surveys, focus groups, interviews, and transect walks across 11 villages in four districts, the study explored how infrastructure, social norms, and institutional systems shape women's safety and mobility. It highlighted both ongoing challenges and the community-led strategies rural women use to reclaim public spaces and push for change.

Key Concepts and Highlights:

Violence in rural public spaces is shaped by intersecting factors such as gender, caste, class, and migration status, with marginalised groups especially migrant and lower-caste women facing heightened vulnerabilities. In a recent safety audit, 22% of women reported experiencing violence in the past year. Common forms include domestic violence, eve-teasing, and stalking, especially near schools, markets, and workplaces. Poor infrastructure like unsafe roads, lack of public lighting and toilets, and unreliable transport not only increases the risk of violence but also restricts women's mobility, access to education, healthcare, and economic participation. Girls, for instance, report fearing harassment while commuting through isolated or forested areas.

Entrenched patriarchal norms and family-imposed restrictions further limit women's visibility and voice in public life. Social taboos and fear of scrutiny discourage women from participating in Gram Sabhas or reporting violence. Only 12% of women seek police help, due to fear of stigma, mistrust of authorities, and inaccessible or ineffective redress systems.

Social exclusion and lack of awareness continue to bar women especially from certain communities from participating in local governance. However, grassroots initiatives like Mahila Nyay and Shanti Samitis (Women's Justice & Peace Committees) have created alternatives to formal justice mechanisms, offering survivor support and empowering women to assess risks and demand change. These efforts have led to tangible outcomes such as improved street lighting, better road maintenance, increased public transport, and have fostered a shift toward collective, gender-sensitive problem-solving within Gram Sabhas.

Recommendations:

- A feminist, intersectional approach to addressing gender-based violence must reflect the diverse experiences of women and centre their voices in planning and policy.
- Infrastructure like roads, lighting, transport, and sanitation plays a critical role in enabling safer mobility.
- Strengthening redressal systems including the capacity of police, committees, and collectives is key to building trust and ensuring timely justice.
- Community-led change through the involvement of Panchayats and local leaders in gender-sensitive development, along with support for grassroots women's participation, helps shift norms.
- Widespread education and awareness campaigns, paired with training for officials across levels, are essential to improve institutional responses to gender-based violence.

2.1.4.2 Rural Women's Safety Audit: Addressing Gender-Based Violence in Public Spaces in Gujarat – *Manorma & Bharti (SWATI)*

This presentation shared findings from the Rural Women's Safety Audit (RWSA) in Patdi and Santrampur, Gujarat, conducted by SWATI. Using participatory methods, the audit documented everyday safety concerns, examined how infrastructure and social norms shape GBV, and mobilised communities to reclaim safer public spaces.

Key Concepts and Highlights:

The Rural Women's Safety Audit (RWSA) places women and vulnerable groups at the centre of identifying safety risks and shaping solutions, using participatory methods to ensure their lived experiences inform local governance. In rural areas, where public and private spaces are deeply intertwined and governance relies heavily on Gram Panchayats, limited access to basic services like streetlights, toilets, safe roads, and public transport directly impacts women's safety, mobility, and participation. Poor infrastructure forces unsafe practices, leads to school dropouts, and increases harassment risks, particularly in remote or poorly lit areas.

Patriarchal norms, caste-based exclusion, and surveillance constrain women's freedom, often resulting in early marriage, school discontinuation, and limited engagement in public life. Widows and women from marginalised castes face additional barriers to entitlements and public visibility. Women and girls report frequent harassment, stalking, and abuse in spaces such as roads, markets, and water collection points, with the lack of sanitation facilities further endangering their safety and dignity.

The audit itself became a catalyst for collective mobilisation. Women and adolescent girls organised to voice their safety needs, engage local authorities, and demand change. Through Mahila Gram Sabhas and direct engagement with Panchayat leaders, they presented demands for improved sanitation, lighting, roads, and transport. Data and maps generated through the audit bolstered evidence-based advocacy, enabling integration of women's priorities into Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GPDP) and driving both infrastructural and social transformation.

Governance gaps, including limited resources, capacity, and gender-sensitive planning in Gram Panchayats, hinder the delivery of inclusive infrastructure. Cultural resistance, rooted in patriarchal norms and often reinforced by local leaders, further slows progress. With formal complaint systems remaining largely inaccessible, many women turn to informal networks or Mahila Nyay Samitis for redress. However, sustained women-led advocacy is driving gradual change.

Recommendations:

Integrating gender concerns into local governance requires embedding Mahila Gram Sabhas and women's safety priorities within Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GPDPs). Investments in basic infrastructure such as sanitation, lighting, roads, and transport can significantly enhance women's mobility and safety. Building the capacity of Panchayat officials through gender-sensitive training, while strengthening women's collectives as local leaders, lays the foundation for more inclusive governance. Strengthened redressal systems, including accessible reporting mechanisms and support for Mahila Nyay Samitis, are essential to connect survivors to justice. Equally important is encouraging adolescent girls' participation through platforms like Balika Panchayats, nurturing the next generation of local leadership.

2.1.4.3 Questions Raised and Panel Responses

Q1: How can Rural Women's Associations (RWAs) institutionalise audits and ensure findings are integrated into annual Panchayat plans, rather than relying on special allocations? Can this lead to meaningful impact?

Poonam: We advocate that RWAs conduct audits, with findings integrated into annual Panchayat plans instead of depending on special allocations. However, a key challenge is the unsustainable burden on villages, which often self-fund infrastructure like toilets due to delays or gaps in government support.

Q2: Given the poor state or absence of toilets, what funding is needed, what community contribution is expected, and how long can villages sustain this without government support?

Answer: Audit findings reveal major gaps in basic infrastructure, especially the absence or poor quality of toilets. Gram panchayats are often forced to use their limited resources, raising concerns about sustainability. Proper resource allocation and integration of these needs into official planning are urgently required.

Pallavi: GPDP audits in 11 villages revealed critical gaps in infrastructure, planning, and inclusion. While some villages self-funded electrification or solar lights, maintenance remains a challenge. Women's representation in Panchayats and planning bodies exists but with limited participation. Development efforts are often ad hoc, lacking coordination and climate or gender sensitivity, as most planning remains top-down. Initial resistance to participatory processes improves with demonstrated results, but collective community action especially by women proves more effective than formal audits. Marginalised groups like Bajania and Dalit communities are often excluded, highlighting the need for more inclusive, intersectional planning.

Manorma: Panchayat leaders may resist women's participation and a lack of support for women's groups can slow progress. However, collective action increases visibility and pressure, making demands harder to ignore. Change is slow but possible through persistent advocacy, regular follow-ups, and tools like women's Gram Sabhas, safety audits, FGDs, PRA, and awareness campaigns.

Q3: What about younger generation issues and financial understanding?

Pallavi: Young girls participated in safety audits, highlighting issues like tech-based harassment and restricted access to public spaces. Deeper youth engagement is needed. Ongoing activities aim to build financial awareness among women and youth by demystifying Panchayat fund flows and project costs.

NGO from Kolkata: In rural Bengal, women initially faced restricted participation and little support, but persistent effort brought gradual progress. Institutional resistance can last years, yet change is possible through sustained engagement. As Panchayats control all public services, women's involvement is essential despite resistance, especially in public finance. Mobilisation through Self-Help Groups is key to advocacy across regions. Change is slow but achievable through collective action, pressure, demonstrated results, and strong community solidarity.

Poonam: What is our main challenge? Change is slow and needs sustained collective action. In villages, Panchayats are the sole authority for all services, making engagement essential. Key to progress is building pressure, showing results, and sustaining community solidarity.

2.1.5 | PANEL 5
From Schooling Norms to Work Barriers

Moderator: Niveditha Menon (CBPS)

2.1.5.1 Schools as Reinforcers of Gender Inequality: Insights from School Safety and Gender Audits in Rural Gujarat

– Ponam Kathuria (SWATI)

This presentation by SWATI examined how rural schools in Patdi and Santrampur, Gujarat, continue to reinforce restrictive gender norms despite formal commitments to equality. Gender and safety audits of 24 schools revealed poor infrastructure, discriminatory practices, and a lack of safe reporting mechanisms, all of which undermine girls' safety and participation. The study called for comprehensive reforms to make schools inclusive and an enabling environment for all students.

Key Concepts and Highlights:

Audits of rural schools in Gujarat reveal that poor infrastructure like lack of girls' toilets, secure boundaries, lighting, and female teachers directly affects girls' safety and attendance. School practices often reinforce gender norms through segregation, gendered chores, dress codes, and surveillance. Instead of challenging caste and honour-based restrictions, schools mirror societal anxieties, limiting girls' mobility and participation. With no formal, trusted reporting systems, girls rely on peers or occasionally female staff, often using coded language to express distress. Schools miss opportunities to foster equality, instead acting as agents of control, where political and ideological pressures reinforce discipline over inclusion. These combined factors erode girls' aspirations, confidence, and well-being.

Recommendations:

- Implement gender-sensitive infrastructure and policies in schools.
- Create confidential, accessible channels for students to report harassment.
- Highlight local female role models to inspire and empower girls.
- Engage parents, teachers, and community leaders in regular gender sensitisation.
- Ensure strict enforcement of government guidelines on gender safety and inclusion.

2.1.5.2. Rising Against Gender-Based Violence: From Girls' Aspiration to Women in the Workforce

– Arty Kumari (Breakthrough Trust)

This session by Breakthrough Trust highlighted systemic barriers Indian girls face from early aspirations to entering the workforce. Using field stories and rural appraisals, it showed how gender norms, poor infrastructure, and social pressure restrict opportunities. Breakthrough focused on mindset change, adolescent empowerment, and community engagement to combat GBV and discrimination.

Key Concepts and Highlights:

Girls in India face discrimination from birth, seen in skewed sex ratios and lower school enrolment. Safety concerns, mobility restrictions, and domestic responsibilities lead to high dropout rates of up to 33% and early marriage. Despite progressive policies, entrenched norms continue to deprioritise girls' ambitions. Only 41% of women complete more than ten years of schooling, and less than a third participate in the workforce, with prevailing beliefs confining them to domestic roles. Breakthrough Trust uses a socio-ecological approach engaging individuals, families, communities, and institutions to challenge these norms. Their adolescent-centred strategies, including PRA and kishori groups, empower girls to assert their rights and challenge systemic barriers to education, mobility, and employment.

Gender norms are reinforced by families and communities, while poor infrastructure and underutilised policies further limit girls' participation and progress. In 104 Gram Panchayats, PRA and youth groups identified key barriers and mobilised resources such as transport and libraries. Community engagement and multi-level interventions spanning awareness, capacity-building, and advocacy helped sustain change and make girls' safety and aspirations visible.

Recommendations:

Foster change through local collaboration, youth-led advocacy, gender-sensitive planning, safe infrastructure, and adolescent leadership.




2.1.5.3 Questions Raised and Panel Responses

Q1: Is the circular shown only valid in Gujarat, or is it applicable for other states as well?

Poonam: I believe similar circulars may exist in other states, though not all have been checked. While the National Education Policy provides central guidelines, their implementation varies by state, depending on local interpretation, enforcement, and funding authority.

Q2: Are parents more willing to send daughters for higher studies if government systems like hostels or model schools are available?

Arty: Parental confidence in government institutions remains low. Even when hostels or special schools exist, many will not allow daughters to attend unless clear incentives like job prospects or free transport are offered. In rural areas, fear of social scrutiny and marriage prospects often outweigh education opportunities.

2.2. Day 2 – *Margins, Intersectionality, and the Digital World*

2.2.1 | PANEL 1
Breaking Boundaries - Women and Girls Redefining Possibilities

Moderator: Sejal Dand (ANANDI)

2.2.1.1 Beyond the Norm *– Shipra (ISST)*

This presentation examined how rural women and marginalised groups reclaim public spaces through non-traditional livelihoods and skill development. Case studies highlighted how aspiration and agency confront entrenched barriers, underscoring the need for gender-sensitive training and systemic change.

Key Concepts and Highlights:

Non-traditional livelihoods such as mobile repair, driving and solar energy offer rural women a path to economic autonomy by challenging gendered labour norms. Supported by Small Wins Evaluation Theory, the study shows how incremental gains, backed by gender-sensitive training and Civil Society Organisation (CSO) support, foster both personal agency and collective empowerment. While aspirations for income and independence drive women's participation, persistent barriers such as social norms, limited infrastructure, and policy gaps continue to hinder progress.

Recommendations:

Gender-transformative skills must go beyond awareness to challenge structural norms and promote intersectionality. Success depends on strong CSO ecosystems, family engagement, and policies that dismantle market barriers while scaling proven models with sustained support and mentorship.

2.2.1.2 How Invoking Girls' Agency: Journey from Powerless to Powerful: Experiences of Mahila Jan Adhikar Samiti (MJAS)

– Renu Arya & Krishna Rawat (MJAS)

This presentation by Mahila Jan Adhikar Samiti (MJAS) traced how adolescent girls and young women in Rajasthan, especially from Dalit and economically marginalised communities, were challenging patriarchy and asserting their rights through personal narratives, grassroots action, and collective leadership. It highlighted the role of feminist leadership and supportive ecosystems in driving this transformation from silence to agency.

Key Concepts and Highlights:

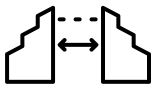
MJAS, a grassroots feminist organisation, empowers marginalised girls and young women in Rajasthan through its Triple-S Theory of Change focusing on Self, Society, and System. Girls build voice and agency, challenge discrimination, and lead collective action by organising community events, advocacy campaigns and digital storytelling. Safe spaces like sports and tech centres enable learning and confidence-building, while skill development and community engagement foster broader support for girls' rights and leadership.

Recommendations:

Empowerment is a gradual process driven by everyday courage and collective support. A holistic, intersectional approach is essential to address layered discrimination. Lasting change requires engaging families and communities, investing in safe, inclusive spaces, and amplifying girls' voices through storytelling and leadership platforms.

2.2.1.3 Takeaways from the Panel Discussion

Fear of Legal Recourse (MJAS): Many women avoid filing cases or pursuing divorce due to fear of police and societal backlash. There is a significant gap between access to rights and the ability to claim them safely.



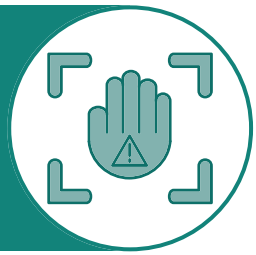
Intergenerational Challenges in Feminist Organising (MJAS): Young feminists navigate the gap between slow organisational processes and fast-paced digital activism. Patriarchy persists in new forms, including online violence. Meanwhile, rising mental health challenges among young women often go unacknowledged within organisations.

Child Marriage as Structural and Political (MJAS): Child marriage remains a social norm in Rajasthan, with police often refusing to intervene and annulments facing strong resistance. Yet, girls continue to push back through sports, digital literacy, and asserting their rights, even within marriage.

> ***Discrimination ki dhaara badal rahi hai***

2.2.2 | PANEL 2
Structural and Intersectional Violence

Moderator: Poonam Kathuria (SWATI)



2.2.2.1. Denied Justice, Denied Space: Systemic Exclusion of Dalit Women from Justice and Public Space

– Manjula Pradeep (National Council of Women Leaders)

This presentation examines how caste and patriarchy intersect to marginalise Dalit women and girls, highlighting widespread violence, systemic injustice, and institutional apathy. Using data and survivor accounts, it reveals their exclusion from public life and movements, and calls for structural reform and stronger grassroots resistance.

Key Concepts and Highlights:

Dalit women face compounded marginalisation, excluded from public spaces, politics, and even feminist and Dalit movements. Spatial and institutional barriers deny them access to essentials like water, workplaces, and justice systems with only 1–2% representation in police forces and 14% in High Courts, and no Dalit woman ever in the Supreme Court.

Violence against Dalit women begins early, encompassing rape, assault, forced abortions, and intimidation. Digital platforms now extend this violence through blackmail and humiliation, with little protection in place. Institutional responses are fraught with FIR refusals, evidence tampering, and collusion, while protective laws like the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act and POCSO remain poorly enforced.

Despite this, Dalit and marginalised Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) continue to resist by filing FIRs, offering legal aid, supporting survivors, and documenting cases through community-based systems. Networks like the National Council of Women Leaders (NCWL) challenge systemic bias, amplify survivors' voices, and build solidarity when institutions fail.

Recommendations:

Justice requires strict enforcement of SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities and POCSO Acts, greater caste and gender diversity in institutions, and support for WHRDs and grassroots groups. States must provide trauma care, witness protection, and invest in survivor-led, community-based advocacy and evidence systems.

2.2.2.2 Margins Within Margins: Exclusion of Bedia Women from Rural Public Spaces

– Trupti Jhaveri Panchal & Archita Joshi (SAMVEDNA)

This presentation examined the exclusion of Bedia women, a Denotified and Nomadic Tribe due to colonial criminalisation, caste-gender hierarchies, and cultural erasure. Based on research from Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, and Rajasthan, it highlighted ongoing discrimination in schools, services, and governance, while also capturing grassroots efforts by Bedia women and girls to claim dignity, education, and inclusion.

Key Concepts and Highlights:
Bedia women face deep-rooted exclusion shaped by colonial criminalisation, caste-gender stigma, and cultural erasure. Once labelled hereditary criminals, the community still faces systemic discrimination and denial of services. Bedia art, historically expressive, is now a source of sexualised stigma, pushing young girls toward exploitation rather than pride. With just 43% school enrolment, girls face discrimination in classrooms and pressure to drop out. Public institutions often deny basic entitlements, citing caste or moral panic. Yet, grassroots resistance is growing where women are organising for rights, mothers are prioritising education, and girls are challenging early marriage and reclaiming agency.

Recommendations:
- Recognise DNT-specific exclusions through separate censuses and gender-disaggregated data
- Train frontline workers on DNT realities
- Invest in skilling, education, and alternative livelihoods for Bedia women
- Strengthen alliances with other marginalised groups for collective advocacy.

2.2.2.3. Beyond Rape: Examining the Systemic Oppression Leading to Sexual Violence Against Adivasi Women

– Shewli Kumar (TISS)

Shewli Kumar presented multi-state research conducted with NCWL partners revealing how sexual violence against Adivasi women stems from intersecting oppressions – patriarchy, state and non-state violence, and resource dispossession. Based on surveys and testimonies (2018–2024), the study exposed both the scale of violence and systemic barriers to justice, while underscoring the critical role of Adivasi women human rights defenders.

Key Concepts and Highlights:
Adivasi women face layered vulnerability due to gender, indigeneity, poverty, and displacement, heightening their exposure to violence. In militarised zones, state forces often abuse power with impunity, while dominant caste men exploit marginalisation. Justice is obstructed by FIR refusals, medical negligence, and criminalisation of survivors especially when accused are security personnel. Despite these barriers, Adivasi women human rights defenders play a vital role in supporting survivors, building networks, and documenting abuse. Violence is widespread even in state-run schools and survivors, including girls with disabilities, face extreme exploitation amid systemic neglect.

Recommendations:
Strengthen laws by enforcing bans on sexual violence by state actors, fast-tracking SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities and POCSO implementation, and setting up special courts with survivor-nominated prosecutors. Disaggregate data for targeted action and reinforce statutory bodies. Support Adivasi women human rights defenders with financial, legal, and psychosocial resources to sustain grassroots advocacy.

2.2.2.4 Takeaways from the Panel Discussion

Initial efforts to address caste discrimination in schools faced low community trust, but consistent engagement through sports and dialogue gradually enabled children to unlearn biases. While the SC/ST Atrocities Act offers legal recourse for both direct and indirect discrimination, its use remains limited due to poor legal literacy, especially outside formal sectors. Community-based solutions and sensitisation of state actors are essential, but lasting change requires the state to actively take responsibility for transforming social attitudes and enforcing accountability.

2.2.3 | PANEL 3
Unseen Geographies - Queer Feminist Narratives

Moderator: Tejaswi Sevekeri (Saheli Sangh)

2.2.3.1. Reimagining Safety: Queer and Trans Experiences and Survivor-Centred, Community-Led Responses

– Omkar Mahesh Shinde (Nazariya)

This session by Nazariya explored the safety challenges faced by queer women and trans* individuals, highlighting how state systems often perpetuate harm. Drawing from lived experiences, it advocates for survivor-led, community-based responses that prioritise dignity and chosen kinship over control and surveillance.

Key Concepts and Highlights:

For LGBTQIA+ individuals, safety is a constant negotiation shaped by visibility, vulnerability, and systemic exclusion. Homes and institutions often reinforce harm through surveillance, misgendering, and denial of services especially at the intersections of caste, gender, and class. Mental health struggles are widespread, yet queer-affirmative care remains scarce. In response, chosen families and peer networks offer emotional, legal, and practical support, reimagining safety as a community-rooted, consent-based practice built on dignity, shared care, and collective healing.

Recommendations:

Reimagine safety beyond institutions by centring survivor-led, community-based care. Uphold dignity, consent, and autonomy for LGBTQIA+ individuals, support chosen families and peer networks, address intersectional biases, and expand access to queer-affirmative mental health, legal aid, and housing.

2.2.3.2. We Were Always Here: Gender, Silence, and Mountains

– Don Hasar (GAWI)

Don Hasar (She/They) of GAWI highlighted queer and trans* lives in rural Himachal Pradesh, challenging urban-centric views through stories of exclusion, memory, belonging, and resistance. The presentation explored how queerness intersects with caste and rurality in the Himalayan context.

Key Concepts and Highlights:

Public space in Himachal extends beyond physical sites to include memory and ritual. However, queer, Dalit, and intersex lives are often erased or misrepresented. Structural inequality, bureaucratic gatekeeping, and urban-centric queer narratives deepen marginalisation in rural areas. Despite this, movements like rural Pride reclaim tradition, language, and visibility. Complex community ties can offer both exclusion and evolving acceptance. True allyship requires shared struggle, and rural queer activism thrives through intersectional solidarity and locally rooted resistance, even as systemic and funding barriers remain.

> ***See me the way I am telling you to, not the way you think I should be.***
>
> *— Don Hasar*

Recommendations:

Rural sensitisation must prioritise local language, lived context, and community-rooted expressions. Support should be trust-based, with funders and institutions listening to rural leaders and enabling organic organising. Allyship must be demonstrated through action, not self-declaration. Feminist legacies and interlinked struggles of caste, class, gender, and ability must guide efforts toward authentic inclusion.

2.2.3.3 Questions raised and Panel responses

Q1: What are the key vulnerabilities in public spaces, and how can they be effectively addressed?

Omkar: All public spaces carry potential vulnerabilities. Ensuring safety requires both individual and collective reflection and action, along with rethinking how we define and use these spaces.

Q2: What drives real change in safety and inclusion?

Don: Real change needs collective action solidarity across governments, communities, and organisations, despite challenges or uncertainty. Fighting together is essential and giving up is not an option.

Q3: How can allyship be strengthened in advocacy and the NGO sector?

Don: Allyship grows through active participation, skill-sharing, and collaboration – key to mainstreaming gender, sexuality, and safety in civil society.

Q4: What is the role of mentorship and intentional inclusion in building community?

Omkar: Mentorship as allyship fosters inclusive leadership by intentionally uplifting diverse voices and encouraging mutual engagement.

Q5: How should we approach identity politics within feminist and advocacy spaces?

Don: While identity is important, real progress comes from shared vision and open dialogue, not just merging identities. Alliances thrive on common ground, even amidst differences.

Q6: What challenges do feminist and ally networks face, and how can they be resolved?

Omkar: Feminist spaces still face exclusion, including transphobia and ideological divides. True inclusivity requires open dialogue, accountability, and visible allyship.

Q7: Which areas need stronger documentation and focused leadership development?

Don and Omkar: There is limited documentation on sexual violence against trans people. Leadership development in gender-diverse and intersectional communities needs urgent attention.

Q8: How do you see the way forward, and what should be prioritised?

Don and Omkar: Activism often extends beyond formal spaces. Prioritising workshops, research, and knowledge-sharing, especially in underrepresented areas can strengthen coalitions, deepen reflection, and make the movement more inclusive and impactful.

2.2.4 | PANEL 4
Digital and Governance Innovations for Inclusion

Moderator: Rukmini Banerjee (Dasra)

2.2.4.1. Online Gendered Harms and Internet Access: Insights from TechSakhi
– Ridhima Sharma (Point of View)

Based on TechSakhi's work, this presentation highlighted how gender gaps in access, literacy, and safety limit women's digital participation and expose them to online harms like harassment and fraud. Despite its potential, technology remains unequal without inclusive, safety-focused strategies.

Key Concepts and Highlights:

Women in India face major digital barriers where only 38% own smartphones and 39% use the internet. Beyond access, safety fears, low literacy, and "phygital" gender norms limit online presence. Tech-based violence like impersonation, doxxing, and intimate partner surveillance is widespread. Digital illiteracy worsens risks, making women more vulnerable. Services like TechSakhi offer critical support, but broader systemic change is needed: stronger reporting systems, inclusive platforms, and community-led safety approaches.

Lessons and Recommendations:

Improving digital safety for women requires ongoing, context-specific literacy support, confidential and culturally relevant services like TechSakhi, stronger platform accountability through user-centred policies, and peer-led community engagement for collective resilience and action. Ensure digital safety is integral to all inclusion efforts, using an intersectional lens. Empower communities through peer-led strategies and involve men in safety dialogues. Push platforms for survivor-focused accountability, and provide ongoing, adaptive digital literacy for women.

2.2.4.2. Feminist Digital Pathways for Empowerment: Women & Girls Leading Change in Rural Karnataka
– Chinmayi (IT For Change)

Based on IT for Change's Field Programs and Tech Interventions

This presentation highlighted IT for Change's feminist, community-led efforts in Karnataka to bridge the digital divide for rural women and girls. Through women-run info centres, Kishori Clubs, and school mentorships, the initiative builds digital skills, confidence, and collective power—reclaiming public and digital spaces for empowerment.

Key Concepts and Highlights:

Only about a third of Karnataka women have ever used the internet, with only 25% of them being rural women. (Sources: NFHS-5 and Times of India 2021) Dalit women, religious minorities, single women, and elderly women face compounded marginalisation in accessing digital spaces. Digital illiteracy increases

vulnerability to scams, harassment, and exclusion. IT for Change addresses this through women-led Information Centres and Kishori Clubs that promote digital skills, safe expression, and collective empowerment. Sakhis and sensitised teachers foster supportive, feminist spaces both online and offline, helping girls challenge taboos, resist surveillance, and build resilience across multiple marginalisations.

Recommendations:

Local women leaders like Sakhis are reshaping norms around women and technology. Investment in local women leaders like Sakhis—who are supported by women's collectives—is essential to bridge the physical-digital divide and normalise taboo topics through community dialogue. Both the women-led model and the institutional approach via school-based interventions offer enormous potential for sustained, community-rooted change.

2.2.4.3: Question raised and Panel response

Q1: What barriers do young people face with new digital state schemes and EKYC processes, and how are they navigating support and redressal?
Ridhima: Frequent changes in state scheme requirements and multiple EKYC demands have led to widespread exclusion. Young people's engagement with these systems varies, and efforts are underway to understand how they navigate enrolment challenges and seek local grievance redressal.

Q2: Are people aware of EKYC challenges, and how are they being supported in navigating shifting digital requirements on government platforms?
Ridhima: While there is general awareness about helping people access schemes and portals, the EKYC process remains poorly understood. Constant updates to portal requirements demand quick adaptation, adding to the confusion.

Q3: How does Tech Sakhi respond to evolving digital requirements? Does it handle individual cases, and how are knowledge updates and partnerships managed?
Ridhima: Tech Sakhi regularly updates its knowledge base and trains responders based on emerging queries. While it provides information and referrals, it does not handle individual cases, instead directing callers to partner organisations as per policy.

Q4: Do boys or men call Tech Sakhi? How is caller privacy and data protected?
Ridhima: Many callers to Tech Sakhi are men. While no identifying data is collected, conversations reveal that many male callers report issues like financial fraud or hacking. Some are queer men or male survivors facing harassment related to gender identity. Others call on behalf of sisters, wives, or friends who are hesitant to seek help themselves.

Q5: How was the Sakhi model for information centres developed, and what role do collectives play?
Chinmayi: The Sakhi information centres emerged during Mahila Samakhya's exit from Mysore, serving as resource hubs to support that transition. Sustained by women's collectives, the model thrives on intergenerational knowledge-sharing. When needed, collectives mobilise women to act together, such as during application submissions.

Q6: How is community engagement and collective ownership ensured at information centres?
Chinmayi: Panchayat and village men are involved to ensure women can run the centres, with community ownership reflected in some centres being near Panchayat offices. While departments sometimes over-rely on Sakhis for outreach, efforts are made to keep the focus on the most marginalised. The model's impact is clear in improved access to ration cards, Aadhaar, and farmer support through Sakhi-facilitated connections.

Q7: Are state digital systems themselves posing problems, and is any difference observed in Karnataka?
Chinmayi: The core issue lies in systemic failures within state-run digital infrastructure, rather than lack of awareness or access.

Q8: How do Sakhis and collectives adapt when faced with restricted access or faulty digital systems?
Chinmayi: Challenges like restricted portal access—e.g., only ASHA workers having logins—are navigated through informal rapport, with Sakhis gaining access via ASHAs. Even small tasks, like checking Aadhaar linkage, require effort, highlighting the importance of collective support over individual leadership.

Q9: How is the distinction between private and public space addressed in relation to digital inclusion for women and adolescents?
Chinmayi: Mediated public spaces are essential for women and adolescents to access support and opportunities, as homes lack true privacy. While Karnataka's planned digital libraries aim to serve all, they are currently primarily used by men and boys, highlighting concerns around inclusive access.

Q10: What is the reach and evolution of IT for Change's intervention model in Karnataka?
Chinmayi: IT for Change operates across 60 villages via 7 centres. The original two-tier Sakhi model (village and taluk level) was revised as responsibilities flowed both ways. Centres now also support adolescent girls, which the earlier model couldn't accommodate.

Q11: Are information centres physical spaces, and is cybercrime handled directly?
Chinmayi: Information centres serve as physical hubs. While they do not directly handle cybercrime, digital literacy sessions for adolescents cover it. Teachers have supported girls facing harassment, using tools like the e-box and forming collective support networks to manage backlash.

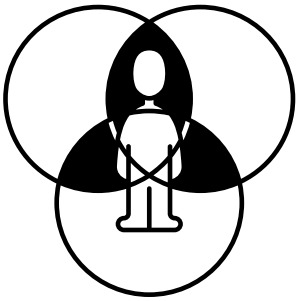
Snapshots of

Conversations & Dialogue

03 Reflections and Key Insights from Open Discussions

3.1 The Fluidity and Contestation of 'Public' and 'Private' Spaces

Participants challenged the rigid public-private binary, showing that space is fluid and experienced differently. Homes, often seen as private, can be sites of control or violence, especially for marginalised groups (women, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and those facing familial abuse). A continuum framework better reflects how caste, gender, sexuality, and class shape spatial experience. Legal ambiguity allows selective state intervention, often reinforcing societal control over the most vulnerable.



3.2 Intersectionality and Lived Realities

The symposium underscored how caste, gender, class, sexuality, and age intersect to shape exclusion and access across spaces. For queer and trans individuals, safety often lies outside natal homes in collectives or support networks. Narratives from Dalit, Adivasi, rural women, sex workers, and others revealed how mainstream definitions of public and private erase their lived realities.

3.3 State, Law, and Control Over Space

The legal system often reinforces patriarchy through arbitrary definitions of space, such as forcing women back to unsafe homes. For many, especially migrants and the homeless, private space remains inaccessible, and the idea of ownership is unstable, leaving them without real safety or control.

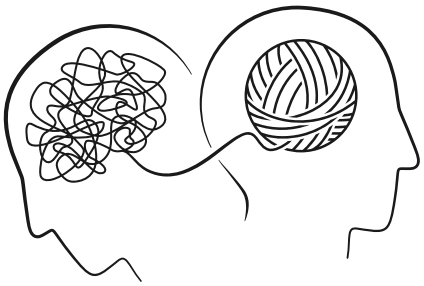
3.4 Language, Advocacy, and Strategic Adaptation

Participants noted that terms like "feminist" and "gender-transformative" are often co-opted by institutions without real change. To navigate this, advocates adapt language – for example, using terms like "pro-women" to gain access while carefully preserving core principles. This code-switching is both a survival tactic and a political strategy.

3.5 Education, Schools, and Social Pressures

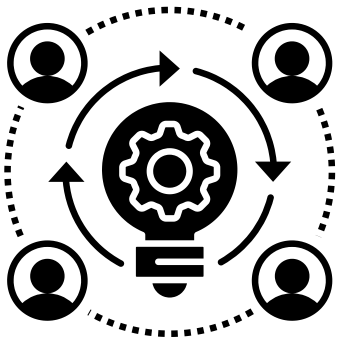
Schools are both sites of empowerment and social control, where the schools/teachers may tend to reinforce gender norms owing to their own social beliefs and gender norms and in response to community pressure. While the NEP aims to address discrimination, its impact hinges on state implementation, funding and ability to confront entrenched community norms. Though primary enrolment gaps have lessened, girls still face major barriers to secondary education due to distance, poor infrastructure, and social norms.

3.6 Mental Health, Burnout, and Emotional Labour in Activism



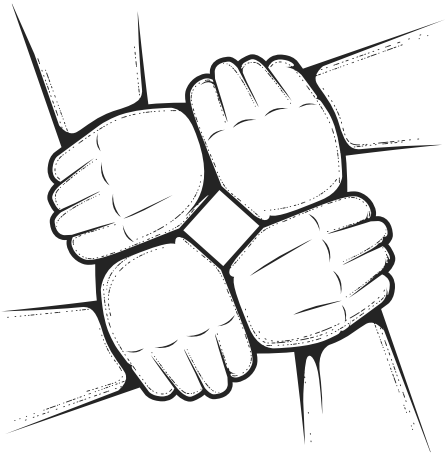
Feminist and queer collectives stressed the need for mental health support, highlighting how burnout, trauma, and emotional labour are often neglected even as structural advocacy continues.

3.7 Knowledge Sharing, Documentation, and Dissemination Strategies



The group agreed on the importance of inclusive documentation that captures not only shared insights but also contested and unresolved perspectives, recognising this as essential for honest reflection and learning. To reach diverse audiences, they proposed a range of outputs: compendiums and resource guides for NGOs and practitioners; modular books or monographs offering in-depth analysis for policymakers and researchers; and accessible formats like podcasts, reels, and comics tailored for youth and rural communities. Special journal issues were suggested to support global advocacy, while a living digital archive would host bios, photos, reflections, and remain open for ongoing contributions.

3.8 Intergenerational and Cross-Movement Solidarity



Bridging generations and movements emerged as key strategies. Intergenerational collaboration fosters continuity and innovation, while cross-sector and rural–urban exchanges build stronger, more connected advocacy.

3.9 Recommendations and Policy Directions

Key next steps include prioritising qualitative, intersectional research that captures lived realities and documents emerging practices around privacy, safety, and collectivity. Legal and policy advocacy must centre the recognition of spatial experiences as a spectrum beyond binary definitions and protect the rights of those living outside conventional family structures. This requires a balanced approach to language and practice: remaining adaptable without compromising on core principles, identifying institutional allies, and engaging across multiple levels from grassroots mobilisation to formal consultations. Regular meetings, reflective exchanges, and contributions to a living archive will sustain collective learning and action.

For final reflections and next steps, the group emphasised the need for urgency and adaptability, while staying grounded in core values. Immediate action points include uploading materials (like bios and photos) to a shared folder, scheduling a follow-up call to plan the concept note and logistics, and forming editorial teams to lead output development across formats.

Snapshots of
Conversation & Dialogue

04 Conclusion

The two-day symposium, “Reclaiming Rural Public Spaces for Women & Marginalised Communities,” spotlighted the urgent, intersectional exclusions faced by rural women, Dalits, Adivasis, queer, and disabled individuals. Through 18 diverse contributions spanning research, field stories, and policy insights, it offered both a stark reflection of systemic barriers and a hopeful glimpse into the collective strategies reshaping public life with equity, dignity, and solidarity.

The symposium highlighted the widespread yet overlooked violence in rural public spaces—not just physical, but deeply rooted in caste, gender, and systemic exclusions. Presentations showed how adolescent girls limit their mobility due to fear, Dalit and Adivasi women face institutional neglect, and women in agriculture endure constant abuse with minimal support. It also emphasised how digital spaces, though promising, have become new sites of gendered violence, underscoring the urgent need for inclusive digital access, literacy, and accountability.

Intersectional digital literacy involves equipping marginalised individuals with the skills and awareness to safely access and benefit from digital spaces, recognising how caste, gender, class, and other identities shape digital exclusion. Yet, the symposium’s most powerful insights came from grassroots leadership and innovation. Through Mahila Gram Sabhas, youth-led forums, and survivor-driven initiatives, communities are reclaiming rural spaces. A standout example was SWATI’s Rural Women’s Safety Audit in Gujarat, which used community mapping to highlight badly maintained toilets in schools, dense bushes, roads and safe transport, as key safety issues leading to concrete improvements like construction and repair of toilets, roads, clearing of bushes, streetlight installation and greater freedom of movement for women.

Participants urged a shift from technical solutions to context-sensitive, lived experience-based approaches that centre safety, justice, and inclusion as core rights. The symposium highlighted local governance, feminist methodologies, and grounded evidence as catalysts for institutional change. It concluded with a call to action: sustain knowledge-sharing, deepen intersectional research, strengthen rural governance, and support the everyday acts of courage driving transformation in rural public and digital spaces.

Annexure A: Agenda

Day 1: Mapping Violence and Community-Led Resistance

Time	Session Title/Presentation	Abstract (Summary)	Presenter(s)
9:00–9:45 AM	**Welcome, Introductions, and Opening Remarks**	-	Collaborating partners
9:45–11:00 AM	**Panel 1: General Violence Faced by Women and Girls in Rural Public Spaces**		Moderator: Jahnvi Andharia (ISST)
	Rural Public Space Violence and its Gendered Impact	Examines how women and girls navigate fear, surveillance, and exclusion in rural public/educational spaces	Tara Nair (Work Fair and Free Foundation), Poonam Kathuria (SWATI)
	Extent and Impact of Public Space Violence	Links gender-based violence in transit to job insecurity and caste/language barriers that limit migrant women's access to justice and housing	Ananya Iyer, Keerthana Ragh (Aajeevika Bureau and Work Fair and Free Foundation)
	Feminist Application of Complex Adaptive Systems	Uses systems thinking to analyse exclusion patterns and design interventions	Niveditha Menon (CBPS)
11:00–11:30 AM	**Tea Break**		
11:30 AM–12:45 PM	**Panel 2: Community-Led and Survivor-Centred Approaches**		Moderator: Trupti Jhaveri Panchal (TISS)

Time	Session Title/Presentation	Abstract (Summary)	Presenter(s)
	Count Us	Highlights women's collectives building local accountability against violence	Bandana Sharma (Akanksha Seva Sadan)
	Reimagining Local Governance with Women at the Centre	Shows how Mahila Gram Sabhas empower women in grassroots decision-making	Karen Piniero (SWATI)
	Backlash and Belonging	Examines resistance faced by women claiming space and strategies for resilience	Camellia Reja (ISST)
12:45-1:45 PM	**Panel 3: Formal Institutions and Policy Frameworks**		Moderator: Shewli Kumar (TISS)
	Structural Violence in Agriculture	Exposes policy gaps devaluing women's agricultural labour	Seema Kulkarni (SOPPECOM)
	Everyday Violence in Agriculture	Documents verbal, physical, and structural violence in women's farm work across 3 states	Sejal Dand (ANANDI)
1:45–2:30 PM	**Lunch**		
2:30 -3:30 PM	**Panel 4: Tools for Safety Audit and Inclusive Design**		Moderator: Rekha Raj (ISST)
	Shakti of Infrastructure and Influence to Address GBV	Connects infrastructure, leadership and governance reforms to prevent Gender Based Violence	Pallavi Sobti Rajpal (Utthan)

Time	Session Title/Presentation	Abstract (Summary)	Presenter(s)
	Engendering Local Governance through Safety Audits	Women-led safety audits influence local planning, budgets and accountability	Manorma Bhagat & Bharti K (SWATI)
3:30–4:30 PM	**Panel 5: From Schooling Norms to Work Barriers**		Moderator: Niveditha Menon (CBPS)
	Reproducing Inequality in Rural Schools	Reveals how schools reinforce gender/caste norms for marginalised girls	Ponam Kathuria (SWATI)
	From Girls' Aspiration to Women in Workforce	Traces social norms restricting girls' education/economic mobility	Arty Kumari (Breakthrough Trust)
5:00-5:30 PM	**Synthesising Insights: Open discussion**		

Day 2: Margins, Intersectionality and the Digital World

Time	Session Title/Presentation	Abstract (Summary)	Presenter(s)
9:00–9:30 AM	Reflections on Day 1		
9:30–10:30 AM	**Panel 1: Structural and Intersectional Violence**		Moderator: Poonam Kathuria

Time	Session Title/Presentation	Abstract (Summary)	Presenter(s)
	Denied Justice, Denied Space	Discusses systemic exclusion of Dalit women from justice/public space	Manjula Pradeep (NCWL)
	Margins Within Margins	Explores layered violence against Adivasi/Dalit women in accessing space/justice	Trupti Jhaveri Panchal & Archita Joshi (Samvedna)
	Slipping Through the Cracks of Justice	Examines institutional failures in addressing violence against Adivasi girls	Shewli Kumar (TISS)
10:30–11:30 AM	**Panel 2: Occupational Safety in Informal and Rural Employment**		Moderator: Sejal Dand (Anandi)
	Beyond the Norm	Highlights women in non-traditional livelihoods (e.g., construction/driving)	Shipra (ISST)
		Adolescent girls reclaim agency, challenge patriarchy, and lead change through solidarity, leadership and grassroots innovation	Renu Arya and Krishna Rawat (MJAS)
11:30–12:00 PM	**Tea Break**		
12:00 -1:00PM	**Panel 3: Unseen Geographies: Queer Feminist Narratives from Rural and Semi Urban India**		Moderator: Tejaswi Sevekari (Saheli Sangh)

Time	Session Title/Presentation	Abstract (Summary)	Presenter(s)
	Queer & Trans Experience	Discusses queer/trans negotiation of public space and safety	Omkar Mahesh Shinde (Nazariya)
	We were Always Here: Gender, Silence and Mountains	Explores queer invisibility, belonging and resistance in rural Himachal through space, memory and everyday exclusions	Don Hasar (She/They) (GAWI)
1:00–2:00 PM	**Panel 4: Digital and Governance Innovations for Inclusion.**		Moderator: Rukmini Banerjee (Dasra)
	Evolving Nature of Online GBV	Analyses digital gender-based. violence and exclusion	Ridhima Sharma (Point Of View)
	The Safety Continuum: Bridging Physical and Digital Spaces for Women's Empowerment.	This Karnataka initiative combats digital/gender violence empowering rural women and girls to reclaim public and online spaces.	Chinmayi Arakali (IT for Change)
2:00-3:00 PM	**Lunch**		
3:00–5:00 PM	**Roundtable: Synthesising Issues, Learnings, and Way Forward**		All Participants

Annexure B: Breakdown of Participant Organisations

Type of Institution	No. of organisations	No. of participants
NGOs and grassroot organisations	23	36
Academic institutions & independent researchers	4	14
Government departments	2	5
Donors and foundations	2	3
TOTAL	**31**	**58**

Annexure C: Speaker Bios

(in order of presentation)

Poonam Kathuria *(SWATI)*

Poonam Kathuria is the Founder and Director of Society for Women's Action and Training Initiatives -SWATI. Poonam has over 25 years of leadership experience in the prevention of gender-based violence, women's health, and leadership. She has published in reputed journals such as IDR and EPW. Her latest work is a co-edited collection titled Indian Feminisms – Individual and Collective Journeys.

Dr. Tara Nair *(Work Fair and Free Foundation)*

Dr. Tara Nair is a prominent Indian researcher with nearly three decades of experience in research, teaching, and training. She is currently Director (Research) at Work Free and Fair Foundation. Dr. Nair has held various positions, including Professor at the Gujarat Institute of Development Research (GIDR), Head of Research at Friends of Women's World Banking (FWWB) India, and faculty positions at the Institute of Rural Management Anand (IRMA), Mudra Institute of Communications Ahmedabad (MICA). Her research focuses on small and microfinance, the social economics of fisheries, transdisciplinary approaches to labor and migration studies, gender implications in rural and agricultural economies, and the impact of financial sector reforms on household economies.

Ananya Iyer *(Aajeevika Bureau and Work Fair and Free Foundation)*

Ananya Iyer is a Research Associate with Aajeevika Bureau and Work Fair and Free Foundation interested in exploring the intersection of gender, migration and labour. She has a keen interest in understanding how varied forms of violence affect migrant woman workers at every stage of their migration journey – in transit, at workplaces and in living spaces. She has an MA in Women's Studies from TISS, Mumbai and worked previously on linking construction workers with benefits under the BoCW Act in Delhi.

Keerthana S Ragh *(Aajeevika Bureau)*

Keerthana S Ragh is a lawyer from Kerala working since 2022 with adolescent and women migrant workers from tribal communities in rural Rajasthan. Her work focuses on safe migration, violence against women—at home, in public, and at workplaces—and issues like early marriage, sexual offences, and cyber abuse. She supports the Mahila Mazdoor Sangh, a women workers' union active in Banswara (Rajasthan) and Gujarat as well as assists a community policing initiative by Aajeevika Bureau and the Rajasthan Police.

Niveditha Menon *(Centre for Budget and Policy Studies)*

Niveditha Menon has over 20 years of expertise in gender issues, focusing on violence, empowerment, public spaces, sexuality, and urban poverty. With a PhD in Sociology and Demography from Pennsylvania State University (USA), she leads impactful research at the intersection of gender and education, public finance, and governance. Prior to joining CBPS, she was associated with the International Institute of Information Technology (IIIT), Bengaluru, where she carried out research on technology and marginalised populations. She has also taught at Pennsylvania State University and has worked at the Centre for Study of Science, Technology, and Policy (CSTEP), Greenpeace, and IT for Change.

Bandana Sharma *(Akanksha Sewa Sadan)*

Bandana Sharma is a 58-year-old grassroots leader and Founder of Akanksha Seva Sadan, established in 1994 to create a space where rural women could speak, share, and dream. Married early under family pressure, she still topped her MA in Psychology and cleared the Assistant Jailor exam. In 1993, she left an abusive marriage, and after her husband's murder in 1998, she faced social stigma while raising two sons and running a small school. A turning point came in 2008 with gender and rights training, which helped her build a strong collective. She and her team challenged public violence and refused to be

silenced by widowhood or tradition. Wearing her bindi and anklets with pride, she continues to lead with strength, challenging patriarchy through lived resistance and community action.

Camellia Reja *(Institute of Social Studies Trust)*

Camellia Reja is a Research Associate at ISST, where she leads and supports qualitative research on gender, livelihoods, aspirations, and women's movements in South Asia. With a background in participatory and feminist research, she has conducted fieldwork across urban and rural contexts, working closely with community-based organisations. Camellia specialises in designing research tools, synthesising insights, and facilitating sessions for grassroots partners. Known for her strong documentation and analytical skills, she is a self-starter who thrives in collaborative environments and is committed to socially responsive, grounded research practice.

Seema Kulkarni *(SOPPECOM)*

Seema Kulkarni works as a Senior Fellow at SOPPECOM and has coordinated a three-state study on structural violence against women in agriculture most recently. She is engaged with the gender and rural livelihoods work in SOPPECOM.

Sejal Dand *(ANANDI)*

Sejal Dand is a founding member of ANANDI, a feminist collective, SAFA (South Asian Feminist Alliance), MAKAAM (Mahila Kisan Adhikar Manch), and Feminist Policy Group - India. She has worked with organising rural and tribal marginalised women in Gujarat, is a member of the UN WOMEN Civil Society Advisory Group for India, Bhutan, Maldives and Sri Lanka, and member of the National Steering Group for Beijing +30 (2024-25). She has been active in the state and national campaigns on Right to Food and also served as one of the National Advisors to the Commissioners appointed by the Supreme Court of India (2008-2017).

Pallavi Sobti Rajpal *(Utthan Trust)*

Pallavi co-leads Utthan, a grassroots institution empowering women and girls in rural Gujarat, as the Joint CEO. With 20+ years of experience in gender justice and sustainability, her work combines action research, policy reform, and grassroots innovation. She co-developed the model of grassroots Women's Justice & Peace Committees which has resulted in supporting 5000+ survivors, and contributed to landmark rape compensation judgements. She has co-conceived safety audits of women in rural public spaces, enabling women leaders to influence Gram Panchayat plans.

Arty Kumari *(Breakthrough Trust)*

Arty Kumari is the Deputy Director (Program) at Breakthrough Trust. She is from Bihar and has completed her Masters in Economics from Patna University. With 17+ years of experience of working with Tribe and Non-Tribe communities in multiple states of India on different thematic areas such as livelihood, land rights, forest land, SRHR, and youth leadership, she got the Bapu Award in 2024 from a Maharashtra-based organisation for her contribution to society. She has been featured in Doordarshan Bihar as an expert of social issues.

Shipra *(Institute of Social Studies Trust)*

Shipra is currently working as Research Analyst at ISST. Her doctoral thesis, employing qualitative methodologies, analysed the working conditions, work processes, and dynamics of control and resistance among women platform workers. She is currently working on a study that examines enabling environments which help women acquire non-traditional skills and earn through them.

Renu Arya *(Mahila Jan Adhikar Samiti)*

Renu (Rain) is a Program Manager at Mahila Jan Adhikar Samiti. A queer woman committed to social change and creative expression, she/they have 10+ years of experience working with rural and urban women to reclaim public spaces for marginalised communities. She/they use photography and facilitation rooted in a feminist perspective to amplify unheard voices. With a background in Political Science and Photography, her/their work focuses on gender justice, mental health, and emotional well-being, combining creativity, care, and community. She/they bring experience in program management, communication, and grassroots facilitation, and believe in building inclusive, healing spaces where stories, struggles, and solidarity can thrive.

Manjula Pradeep *(National Council of Women Leaders)*

Manjula Pradeep is a leading human rights defender with over 30 years of experience addressing caste- and gender-based violence in India. As the Chairperson of the WAYVE Foundation and National Convenor of the National Council of Women Leaders (NCWL), she has worked extensively with Dalit, Adivasi, Muslim, trans, and disabled communities to reclaim rights, dignity, and access to justice. Her work centres on survivor-led, intersectional approaches to rural safety, legal empowerment, and public participation. Through campaigns, research, and grassroots organising, Manjula challenges structural exclusions and reimagines rural public spaces as sites of justice, equity, and fearless belonging.

Dr. Trupti Jhaveri Panchal *(Samvedna)*

Dr. Trupti Jhaveri Panchal is the Chairperson of Samvedna and an Assistant Professor at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, specialising in social work and women's rights advocacy.

Archita Joshi *(Samvedna)*

Archita Joshi is a research officer at Samvedna, leading 2 national-level research studies on intergenerational prostitution among Denotified Tribes, focusing on gendered caste-based exclusion and institutional barriers to safety.

Shewli Kumar *(TISS)*

Shewli Kumar is an Associate Professor at the School of Social Work at TISS. Her work includes research, teaching and advocacy work with women from rural areas from marginalised communities like Dalits, Adivasi, Bahujan women.

Omkar Mahesh Shinde *(Nazariya: A Queer Feminist Resource Group)*

Omkar Mahesh Shinde is a Program Manager at Nazariya. Nazariya: A Queer Feminist Resource Group works at the intersections of gender, sexuality, and social justice, with a focus on centring the voices and experiences of queer and trans people assigned female at birth (AFAB). Since 2014, Nazariya has engaged in crisis intervention, community-led responses to gender-based violence, and advocacy around safety, mobility, and access to public spaces for LGBTQIA+ individuals. Through its ARRSH unit, Nazariya addresses natal family violence, forced mobility, and institutional discrimination, particularly in rural and peri-urban contexts. The group also conducts trainings, research, and resource creation to promote inclusive, survivor-centered approaches to justice and care.

Riddhima Sharma *(Point of View)*

Dr. Riddhima Sharma is an interdisciplinary feminist scholar and works as a Knowledge Specialist at Point of View. She received her PhD in American Culture Studies from Bowling Green State University and completed her postdoctoral fellowship at IIT Delhi. Her work focuses on digital media, feminist movements, digital labor, public pedagogies and gender-based violence in India. She has nearly a decade of experience in designing and teaching courses and workshops on gender, law, digital media, and gender-based violence.

Chinmayi *(IT for Change)*

Chinmayi is a seasoned communications professional with a multidisciplinary approach to her work. She has a deep-rooted passion for community engagement, having worked alongside rural women, adolescent girls, and tribal communities among others. This hands-on experience in the field shaped her understanding of social change and storytelling. An educator and a trained filmmaker with extensive experience in community media and short documentaries, she combines her visual storytelling skills with a strong foundation in design. She is currently the Head - Communications at IT for Change.

Tejaswi Sevekari *(Saheli Sangh)*

Tejaswi Sevekari, a postgraduate in medical and psychiatric social work, has 30 years' experience in the field. She is a certified trainer with the Empowerment Institute-USA and serves on the advisory boards of the National AIDS Research Institute, B.J. Medical CRS, and the Global AIDS Clinical Trial Network. Focused on HIV issues and the challenges faced by women in sex work, she founded Pune's Saheli Sangh, a community-based organisation, and supports the National Network of Sex Workers, India. A frequent presenter at national and international conferences, she earned her PhD from TISS Mumbai and has received numerous awards including the Savitribai Phule Award and Sharon Maxwell Award for Social Impact.

Bharti *(SWATI)*

Bharti, a Sociology graduate, works as a Field Coordinator at SWATI. She is deeply passionate about girls' education and has played a key role in designing and implementing SWATI's Sports for Empowerment program. Her current focus is on strengthening individual agency among adolescent girls, building their confidence, leadership, and ability to make informed life choices.

Manorma Bhagat *(SWATI)*

Manorma Bhagat is the Manager of Field Programs at SWATI. She holds a Master's degree in Social Work and brings over 24 years of experience in empowering rural women through livelihood generation, leadership development, and active participation in village-level governance. A skilled trainer and facilitator, she has led numerous capacity-building initiatives for women's collectives, frontline workers, and local institutions, fostering grassroots leadership and gender-responsive governance.

Dr. Jahnvi Andharia *(Institute of Social Studies Trust)*

Dr. Jahnvi Andharia has been the Director and Research Fellow at the Institute of Social Studies Trust since January 2021. She leads work across four key themes: Gender-Based Violence and Work, Gender and Digitalisation, Informality and Care, and Women in the World of Work. With over two decades of experience working with marginalised rural women in Gujarat and Maharashtra, she brings grounded perspectives on feminism, collective action, and leadership. Her work focuses on vulnerability, empowerment, grassroots leadership, capacity and evidence building, and strengthening organisational systems.

Annexure D: About the Organisers

Society for Women's Action and Training Initiatives - SWATI

A feminist organisation based in Gujarat, SWATI brings to this initiative over two decades of grounded, field-based experience, deepening understanding and strengthening accountability around violence in domestic and public spaces—especially in rural areas. Our work spans gender justice, gender-based violence, governance, and a system's led response interventions. Since 2017, SWATI has led the kNOw Fear model, working with Gram Panchayats, adolescent girls, frontline workers, and rural communities to embed the right to safe public spaces into local governance systems.

Institute for Social Studies and Trust - ISST

Established in 1980, ISST has played a pioneering role in advancing gender-sensitive research and community-based development programs. With a focus on the livelihood and well-being of vulnerable communities, ISST employs a gender transformative approach through critical inquiry and field engagement. The four themes that shape their work are Informality, Precarious Work and Care, Gender Based Violence and Work, Gender and Digitalisation of Work, and Women Powering the World of Work.

Center for Women Centred Social Work, School of Social Work, TISS

The Centre's underlying common thread is to enhance within social work epistemology and praxis, the realities of women in all their specificities of location (caste, class, tribe, disability etc.,) through gendered and women-centred social work. This requires a deepening dialogue on feminist theorisations, praxis models, praxis trajectories in the global and indigenous contexts. Particularly, the key areas so far based on faculty work and interests include the study of gendered construction women and their identities within specific axis of caste, tribe and religion, their labour, sexuality, fertility and violence, impact of development policies and development practice on gender relations and more specifically women in the mentioned diverse locations.

Snapshots of Conversations & Dialogue

Edited and Designed by AuxoHub

Contact Us:
Email: knowfear@swati.org.in, info@swati.org.in
Phone: +91 78628 10970

SWATI
Society for Women's Action and Training Initiative

RE-IMAGINING FUTURES
TISS

ISST
Institute of Social Studies Trust