It's Late, The Streets Are Empty. An Auto Approaches. Do You Get In?

A third of Indian women described being sexually harassed on the road. How safe are auto-rickshaws?

The sky was crashing down the morning of August 14th, as the 19-year-old girl approached an auto-rickshaw that she saw had been waiting for one more passenger to start off. It was the only one in sight. The backseat was crammed, but she had a test that day, and needed to catch the metro. She got up in the front seat beside the driver.

Rain was coming down hard on the morning of August 14. The 19-year-old waved down an auto-rickshaw, which was the only one around. The backseat was crammed, but she had a test that day, and needed to catch the metro. She got up in the front seat beside the driver.

A few minutes into the ride, she felt the driver's elbow press against her breasts. She shifted away, uneasy, and pulled her backpack up as a barrier. He pressed against it anyway. She realized he was doing it on purpose.

When she tried to resist, he grabbed her thigh and yanked her closer. She froze.

After a passenger got off, she moved into the back. Eventually, the other seats emptied, and before long, it was only her and the driver. He refused to go further unless she agreed to a higher fare. This sort of bullying tactic is a shared experience amongst day-to-day commuters. You either pay, or you walk. It was raining harder now and the streets were blurred. In the next few hours, the rain would disrupt traffic throughout the National Capital Region of India.

She agreed.

En route, the driver tried to strike up a conversation. He asked about her college. She answered, as vaguely as possible—"D.U."

At her stop, she handed him a 200-rupee note. She hadn't had any change. The driver kept it, and asked for 100 more—a total of 300 rupees. She didn't know what to do at this point and blurted out that she knew what he had done to her, but she didn't want to escalate, and asked him to return 100 rupees. He refused. She pleaded for at least 50 back. He returned her 40, saying he had no 10-rupee note.

Later that morning, she posted about the incident on r/india, the country's largest left-leaning subreddit, which had just marked the 78th Independence Day. Many users asked whether she had taken a picture of his license plate. She hadn't.

She fears retaliation if she tries to “call him out”—including acid attacks and rape—which is what several desperate men did to women, when they turned down their sexual advances. She recalled how the auto-operator kept staring at her face the whole ride. He knew where she lives, and might as well have figured out the route she takes to her college.

Others in the thread said she should have screamed, or that they would have fought back—had it happened to them. One male survivor wrote that when it happened to him, his mind went blank.

I texted her later that day, with a few resources and the number of a social worker. But she never replied.

Had she answered, among the key questions that I’d have asked: Why didn’t she feel safe to go to the police, and file a complaint? Why hadn’t she thought of calling the women’s helpline? And why not report it to her university?

Surely, it couldn’t have been that difficult for the authorities to pull CCTV footage and identify the perpetrator.

Plus, at 19, most students in India live with their parents, who hold enormous sway over what their adult children can and cannot do. Why didn’t she turn to them, instead of confiding in Reddit?

Analysing a number of such experiences reveals the pattern: In Indian societies, the first question people ask a victim of sexual harassment is—what were you wearing that made him act like that?

A 20-year-old woman—whom I'll call S—recounted a similar story.

One night, she and her mother were riding home in an auto-rickshaw. Halfway through a dark alley, the driver stopped, said there was a problem, and began to fix something under his seat. Then he apologized, and asked S to hold something that felt like a rope. She did as he asked, and the next thing she sensed was an arm rubbing up on her thigh. She let go of the rope and told her mother to hold it instead. “Don’t be stupid,” her mother beseeched.

She picked up the rope. And again, he groped her. He then tried to touch her chest. “I froze. He fucking smirked at me and asked to hold it properly,” she said. “When I told my mother, she yelled at me.”

She shoved him and stepped out. “My mother shouted at me to get in,” she said. “And he just kept smirking.” She told her mother she’d walk home herself and she could stay if she wanted.

At home, she told her mother what had happened, and why she was acting that way. But instead of consoling her, she got angry. “She warned me not to tell anyone—especially my father,” the young woman said. These things happen with women, her mother told her, and advised to wear a *kurti* next time.

“I was wearing jeans and a full-sleeved top,” she wrote. “It wasn’t my clothes and it wasn’t my fault.”

In his 2020 study on sexual harassment in Chennai, Michael L. Valan found that 35 per cent of 530 women quizzed had been victims of some form of sexual harassment in public transport, including groping. Similar surveys by the World Bank estimated the number to be higher: In Delhi, 88 per cent of women alleged sexual harassment in public transport. In Chennai, Pune and Mumbai it was well over 50 per cent.

According to L. Valan, 81 per cent of the victims were between the age group 18–22. 73 per cent of the young women said they were scared at the time of violation—the majority of which occurred in rush hours, on their way to work, college, or home. Over half of them decided to walk away, and 12 per cent stared back at the offender—all of whom were strangers. Only 6.5 per cent of them lodged a police complaint.

But these figures barely cover buses, trains, and taxis. There are no firm statistics on how often women are sexually harassed in auto-rickshaws. Nor are any government agencies charged with data collection and oversight. Law enforcement is not required to keep records of where the victim was harassed—only the various forms of harassment. The Central Motor Act, in fact, with all its amendments, does not even mention auto-rickshaws.

Section 75 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), lists specific acts by men, such as, “physical contact and advances involving unwelcome and explicit sexual overtures,” as sexual harassment, punishable with up to three years of imprisonment—or with fine, or with both. But there is no separate law to deal with harassment on public transportation.

As of early September, the National Commission for Women had recorded 1,565 complaints of molestation or outraging a woman’s modesty; 1,447 cases of rape or attempted rape; 1,033 of sexual harassment; and 920 complaints of police apathy toward women.

The numbers are a conservative record of reality. Studies show that only 1–6 percent of those harassed ever go to the police. Dr. Disari Roy, assistant professor of Women’s Studies at Diamond Harbour Women’s University, says a vast number of cases go unreported under pressure from patriarchal family values—because of the shame if families find out, and the fear of retaliation.

In the end, S chose to keep quiet. “Had my father found out,” she said, “he’d never let me go out again.”

“This normalises harassment as part of women’s everyday life,” Dr. Roy told me recently. “It keeps the cycle going.”

The nature of the crime also makes it difficult to document. Did it happen?—Yes. But when it’s a man leaning too close, angling his pelvis such that every bump of the ride presses him against her body, or stroking her arm while exchanging money and tickets—each gesture can be dismissed as accidental. When confronted, the harasser would feign obliviousness and deny their intent. Other acts, like groping, leave less room for denial. This, of course, leads to a follow up question; a better one: If it didn’t happen, what are the chances that a woman would fabricate such an allegation in a culture that blames the victim and barely acknowledges sex?

The ambiguities are part of the reasons why women harassed in transit are less likely to file complaints than women harassed in other circumstances.

Other surveys—beyond the sub-continent—listed the lack of system credibility as one of the main reasons why women do not seek legal help, which applies to this country too. Several women told me they had not reported because they thought the police wouldn’t believe them.

In 2012, Abhishek Bhalla and G. Vishnu of the *Tehelka*, an investigative magazine, posed as research scholars and spoke with more than 30 police officers from two dozen police stations across the National Capital Region. Over half of them showed clear gender bias and insisted that sexual assault and rape areren’t especially common in the region. “Only 10 per cent are real, forced rapes,“ a sub-Inspector of Sector 40, Gurgaon, told them. “10 per cent are genuine.” Another officer dismissed media reports and asked them to stick to the facts. He estimated it to be 1–2 per cent.

Rape victims were often viewed with skepticism. “If a girl asks for a birthday party, and she’s alone with two or three boys, and they’re drinking; she knows what’s likely to happen,” one officer said. “If she still choose to be there, she has no right to call it rape.” It’s the good-woman, bad-woman rhetoric: step out of stereotypically appropriate behavior, and you are labeled bad.

Another officer described allegations of rape as a lucrative business for women. “Everyone knows,” he said. The claim that money is the biggest factor in rape cases, was also repeated by the only female investigating officer the reporters spoke with.

Authorities further blamed the victims. “If girls don’t dress decently, men naturally feel attracted,” a sub-inspector of Greater Noida surmised. “It makes them just do it.” There were also frequent stereotypical remarks, and ethnic prejudices among officers.

Tehelka summarized the conundrum: police believed women are raped because of their own behaviour.

When families and formal systems so routinely cast doubt on women’s accounts, the disbelief seeps inward: many begin to downplay sexual harassment as a “social nuisance” that they have

to put up with. “There is also a lot of inconvenience, time and energy required in reporting a crime and subsequent follow ups,” one study observed.

Many stay quiet to avoid making a scene. “He was friendly with everyone else. I knew no one would believe me," a friend told me recently; an elderly man had stared at her through the entire train ride.

Others have no clear idea of where to report abuse—or how to access medical and legal support once they do. A 2022 study by the World Bank found that 75 per cent of women railway commuters in Mumbai were unaware of women helpline numbers. (India has 3 national hotlines, plus each state operates its own.)

Auto-rickshaws are one of the most common ways to get around in Indian cities. They are essential for last-mile travel as major transit stops are often more than a walk away from home or work. Auto-operators, who are almost always men, queue their three-wheelers outside these stops, and frequently carry more than five passengers at a time.

How they operate varies from place to place, depending on the local laws. In Kolkata, for instance, they operate within a fixed route permitted by the regional transport authorities, while in Delhi, they operate on meter basis and have no fixed route. According to the latest Economic Survey of Delhi (2023–2024), the number of auto-rickshaws in the period were a little above 93 thousands—down from 1,98 thousands in 2015–2016. (A large number of other passenger vehicles operate within the city.)

Mostly, people of the middle-income category, with an average monthly earning between ₹20,000 to ₹25,000, commute through auto-rickshaws. At times, private vehicle owners also prefer autos. The drivers earn less, around ₹10,000 to ₹15,000 a month; they work all seven days a week, for punishingly long hours, and rarely take leaves. But money is only one axis of difference. “Public transportation systems operate as a zone of contact between diverse social groups in the city,” Romit Chowdhury wrote in *City of Men: Masculinities and Everyday Morality on Public Transport,* which provides a detailed account of Kolkata’s auto- and taxi-drivers—based on 18 months of interviews with them.

They are not gender neutral zones. These rides are shaped by, what he called, the “gendered politics of copresence,” where “masculinity operates as an invisible structuring principle.” In other words, men set the rules.

Nearly all the drivers Romit spoke to were aware of how women are harassed in public spaces, especially inside an auto-rickshaw. Most of them said they step in as soon as they notice inappropriate touching; others admitted they wait until the woman speaks up. “If the woman does not object, it is not right for us to say anything,” one auto-driver told him. “But if the woman raises an objection then we chime in and say, ’Please sit properly’.”

Another driver said he always carries a stick, and acknowledged that, at times, it's the drivers themselves who are the harassers. "There are some drivers too whose left arm is diseased," one driver said. "I ask them too: brother, is your left elbow alright? I'm sure they don't leave any women."

"But precisely what about sexual harassment makes it seem wrong to them," Romit noted, "was because the woman is someone's sister, daughter or wife, and therefore needs to be given due respect," even as many of them insisted that woman also has the right to consent.

###

One evening, a 20-year-old woman in Mumbai was walking home from work. She had only been in the city a few weeks, on a short internship. An auto-rickshaw pulled up, and she got in, like she always did.

A few meters down the road, a man—whom she assumed was the driver's acquaintance—climbed in, and sat right next to her. He began asking strange questions, such as her name and where she worked—even though they had never met. She lied about her name. But when he asked if she worked at XYZ company, she couldn't keep up the lie, and said:

"Yes."

"What do you do?"

"Internship," she told him.

He prodded her waist, and asked to share her contact number. She was starting to feel uneasy. She tried calling her mother, but the call didn't go through. He continued to act creepy, and after a few minutes they dropped her on the side of an interior road without charging money.

She dialed up her mom again, and told her she's walking back home. On the way, she talked with her best friend about the encounter through voice notes—and later, posted it online.

A quick web search for "sexual harassment in auto-rickshaw" digs up dozens of cases. The first three I found are:

In 2018, a Delhi student was molested by an auto-driver. She called the police many times, but no one showed up. Shortly after, she posted about the incident on Twitter. And the authorities took action. A case was filed against the auto-driver, and two policemen were suspended for their delayed response.

In 2020, an 18-year-old college student in Mumbai posted a video of a driver masturbating while staring at her through the rearview mirror. He refused to stop the vehicle despite her repeated protests. Mumbai Police reviewed the footage, and filed a case at the local police station. The man was later arrested.

This March, in Thakurpukur, Kolkata, an auto-rickshaw driver was arrested following an extensive manhunt and analysis of CCTV footage. He had attempted “serious sexual offences” against a 15-year-old girl, as she was returning home from her evening classes.

The pattern is obvious: it’s always a young woman traveling alone—or the only female in the auto—as she is harassed, either by fellow passengers, or by the driver himself. Sometimes she resists; sometimes she can’t. And the perpetrator continues until she manages to get off.

The 2012 nationwide protests over the gruesome, highly publicized gang-rape and murder of Jyoti Singh—a 22-year-old physiotherapy intern—became one of the most defining upheavals of modern Indian life.

In the aftermath, both central and state governments announced a series of measures to safeguard women commuters. Among them was a gender-sensitisation program for public service vehicle drivers in Delhi, including auto-rickshaw operators.

The program was run by the Manas Foundation, a mental health NGO, in partnership with Delhi authorities. It was a two-hour course with interactive media and had open question-and-answer sessions. Drivers who enrolled in it often admitted that their stereotypical thought-process was the reason women feel unsafe—and that it would have to change. By 2014, Delhi required all drivers to complete the course to receive the fitness certificate.

Then, on October 20, 2023, the transport department abruptly revoked the Manas Foundation’s authorization. Officials cited delays in issuing certificates as the reason, and said it caused a bureaucratic hurdle throughout the process. Per local news, there was supposed to be an online version of the course. But I could not find anything. (Manas Foundation did not respond to my requests for comment.)

Since the past decade, a number of Indian cities have rolled out pink auto-rickshaws to provide a women-only service. Local governments in power often permitted drivers of either sex—albeit with better background checks.

And yet, the results were uneven. Routes were often misaligned with actual demand. In Allahabad, for instance, the designated routes bypassed schools, offices and commercial centers. The ridership dropped, and the vehicles ran half-empty. By 2019, according to union leader Vinod Chandra Dubey, the scheme was unsustainable. The expansion of private two-wheelers among women further undercut demand. And so, the plan never gained traction, he said.

The story is much the same elsewhere. Pink auto-rickshaws have either been rolled back entirely or reduced to such few numbers that you might spend a month in these cities, and never see one.

In her 2025 paper, "*Challenges of Pink (Women) Auto Drivers*," Neha Prasad, a research scholar in the Department of Economics at Ranchi University, observed that most pro-women schemes fail because of flawed design and inadequate implementation.

Ranchi was the first city to introduce pink autos. But it was not a government initiative. In 2013, a local entrepreneur named Sanjay Sahu began training women from lower socio-economic backgrounds. He trained around 50—free of charge—and helped them obtain commercial licenses.

Of these women, 24 still drive pink autos; 14 had left after repeated harassment. Sanjay had also recently stopped the training program because of declining health. No government office or NGO has stepped in to continue it.

Neha found that nearly half of these auto-drivers were single mothers. The rest lived with their husbands. Most had come from neighbouring states. They lacked food security cards, and had only partial access to social welfare schemes.

And yet, all of them earned more than they had in previous jobs, and for the first time, had steady incomes.

Among them, Neha observed, the biggest challenge is in the form of harassment from male colleagues. Auto-unions, run entirely by men, blocked women from regular stands and imposed an unlawful restriction that they could carry only female passengers. This slashed their ridership and earnings, since they had to turn away women travelling with men.

This is hardly unusual.

In 2017, NDTV filmed a protest outside a police station in Thane; auto-drivers had gathered after one of them was arrested for hurling sexual slurs at a woman driver. Asked whether women should be driving auto-rickshaws, their collective reply was: "No they shouldn't."

"Family and social taboos are often cited, even though there's no evidence they affect women drivers," Neha told me recently. More pressing, she said, are structural and institutional barriers that remain largely unexplored.

For instance, instead of easy access to loans at cheaper rates, licenses, or route permits, women auto-drivers face extra scrutiny and arbitrary rules that their male counterparts do not. In Ranchi, local officials have mostly looked the other way, partly because meddling in auto-union affairs carries political consequences.

But, Neha added, that it would be misleading to assume that the government or administration is entirely apathetic; more often, genuine systemic obstacles stand in the way of effective intervention.

She urged the government to step in and fix these enforcement gaps, pointing out that more pink autos means more safety for women in public.

###

News coverage of sexual harassment cases largely focuses on whether the police have managed to arrest the perpetrator or not. Little is said about what goes on inside the victim's head—the intrusive thoughts, and the sleepless nights that come after.

How does she feel?

A 2024 study on the effects of harassment of women in Chennai's public transport suggested a score of 24 on the Impact of Event Scale–Revised as the threshold beyond which the risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder and depression becomes significant. Survivors averaged 33. In cases of physical harassment, such as groping, the mean rose to 58.

According to Kaitlin A Chivens-Wilson, writing in 2006 in the *Mcgill Journal of Medicine*, survivors of all types of sexual violence go through, what experts call, the Rape Trauma Syndrome (RTS).

RTS unfolds in three phases, starting with the Acute Phase; the survivor shakes, cries, and yells. But they can appear "outwardly calm and subdued" as well, Chivens-Wilson wrote.

Next comes the pretense of normal life—the Outward Adjustment Phase. With a high level of denial, the survivors distract themselves through ordinary routine.

In the final phase—Long-term Reorganization—the survivors confront the memory of assault and attempt to live with what happened. They "integrate the assault into their view of themselves and resolve their feelings about the assailant," Chivens-Wilson explained.

Intense psychological trauma such as sexual abuse fucks up how our body normally respond to stress. It increases levels of Corticotropin Releasing Hormone (CRH), which in turn stimulate the release of cortisol—the primary stress hormone, and also a major hormone of the Hypothalamus-Pituitary-Adrenal axis that regulates body functions and controls the neural, endocrine and immune system.

Under normal conditions, a negative feedback loop inhibits cortisol by acting at the hypothalamic and pituitary levels. But trauma disrupts this regulatory mechanism, and reduces

pituitary sensitivity to CRH. An increased level of Cortisol dysregulates neural systems causing inappropriate fear reactions and persistent mild depression among victims.

Sexual harassment in young adults leaves deeper marks. They live with a mix of shame, guilt, anxiety, and anger.

That day, after S was harassed while she was returning home with her mother—she showered ten times. But she still felt like it wouldn't go away. "I can feel his hands all over my body. I get nightmares about it," she wrote. "I feel miserable. I feel so, so bad. I hate it, I hate her, I hate being a woman."

She also didn't receive support from her mother, which only made those feelings stronger, and more harmful.

"I can't stop crying when I think about it," she said at the end of her post. "I honestly don't know what to do."

According to Chivens-Wilson, many women who told about their assault to others often experienced secondary victimization. She added that seeking help from professionals without any prior training in sexual assault trauma can increase psychological and physical distress, too, as they have a tendency toward victim-blaming behaviours.

"In India, police aren't trained to deal with trauma," a spokeswoman from Majlis Law, a Mumbai-based non-profit that provides legal aid to victims of sexual and domestic abuse, told me.

Between 2017 and 2020, and again in 2024 and 2025, the National Commission for Women conducted 31 gender-sensitization workshops for police officers across the country. The commission has further trained 1,031 officers in partnership with the Bureau of Police Research and Development. But the efforts remain far from adequate. I couldn't find any statistics to suggest whether any of it has changed how officers behave.

Meanwhile, constables and head constables, who make up the bulk of India's police force and are usually the first to meet victims, remain untrained in most cases.

Even in 2000, when the National Commission for Women introduced the country's first gender-sensitization curriculum for police, it warned that training so many constables at the district level was impossible. Training, it said, would need to be decentralized—taken down to sub-divisions and police stations.

For survivors, the situation is even bleaker. India has no national system of counselling or therapy. "One Stop Centres exist, but there is no real framework to provide counselling to survivors," the spokeswoman from Majlis Law said.

In absence of formal support, survivors often turn to informal networks. Online forums such as Reddit and Safecity have become popular among Indian women to share their experiences of sexual harassment.

Safecity, created by the non-profit organization Red Dot Foundation, collects reports of harassment in public spaces. Each entry, that can be anonymous, is plotted over a Google map. About 40,000 such dots have been plotted so far. The dots appear as clusters, and reveal patterns that can be valuable to “what people would rather not see,” Safecity states in its description, “and a tool for those who must decide what to do about it.”

###

The truth is that women are just as likely to be sexually harassed in auto-rickshaws as on any other vehicle. Some of the reasons often thought to make public transports such as buses safer—higher numbers of passengers, and the presence of other women—can just easily work against them. Overboarding, for instance, means more accidental contact, and more opportunities to harass.

In Delhi, a 2016 study by Manish Madan and Mahesh K. Nalla found that 79.2 per cent of female respondents had experienced sexual harassment at bus stops. In taxis or auto-rickshaws, the number was significantly lower: 38 per cent. And yet, the perceived likelihood of harassment was equal in either seetings—at above 85 per cent.

“A woman passenger is likely to have identifying information about the [taxi or auto] driver,” the authors explained, “creating fewer opportunities for victimization." She'll also likely be able to use her mobile phone and call someone, or share her location. A taxi or auto-driver, who depends on the profession for their livelihood, will likely see this as a high-risk situation, the authors said. The threat of being caught and potentially losing his income may lead him to make the “rational decision” not to harass a passenger.

But the result has a blind spot: it doesn't adjust for exposure. It says nothing about risk per trip, or about how often women use each mode of transport.

Put it this way: the data can't tell you whether one auto ride is riskier than one bus ride. Perhaps, autos look safer because fewer women use them. (A 2021 survey showed that 3 times as many women in Delhi preferred the metro to cabs and autos for late-evening travel. Between 2016 and 2020, metro ridership doubled; and after Delhi introduced free bus travel for women in 2019, the numbers swelled by a million a day. Yet in one recent study, women ranked autos nearly equal with buses and metro in terms of availability.)

An interesting finding in the 2016 study was that more women saw sexual remarks about their appearances as just as serious as physical acts like being poked with a penis or being patted on the buttocks. Both are familiar risks in the tightly packed spaces of buses and metros.

Auto-rickshaws, in contrast, present a different risk profile, because there is no way to measure risk in the same terms.

Women have had to adapt to these unsafe conditions, Dr. Disari Roy told me recently. Beyond using mobile phones strategically, she mentioned how women sit in certain ways in autos. One might choose the front seat if she feels uneasy with the passengers in the back. The driver, Romit Chowdhury observed in his book, would shift his posture away in response.

Yet, as one woman put it, there's the fear of "how he moves his hand," which makes many avoid the seat beside the driver.

A few days after she was harassed, S posted a rant before logging off her account.

The post was made up of short, broken sentences, stacked one after another—almost like free verse. Occasionally, she slipped Hindi into her thoughts, trying to sound casual.

One part stopped me, as I tried to process the words. She wrote: "Everything is just messed up, and idk how to go about it…"

"Can't I end it? All," she asked.