



International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

Journal homepage: www.ijrpr.com ISSN 2582-7421

Everyday Safety and Struggles: Understanding Women's Perceptions of Safety in Urban Slums

Sumaiya Sharmin¹, & Dr. T. Kavitha (Corresponding Author)²

Masters in Social Work in Disability & Empowerment, Madras School of Social Work, Chennai.

Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, Madras School of Social Work, Chennai.

ABSTRACT :

Safety is more than the absence of danger; it is the presence of dignity, belonging, and the freedom to move, speak, and live without fear. According to this study, many women living in urban slums experience safety as a daily negotiation shaped by narrow lanes, shared spaces, limited infrastructure, and complex social conditions. Women's perceptions of safety are influenced not only by physical surroundings but also by gender roles, economic vulnerability, and the level of community support.

The study aimed to understand how women living in selected urban slums of Kolkata perceive their safety. It examined women's sense of safety in both private and public spaces and explored how social, environmental, and community factors influence these perceptions. By focusing on the experiences of women, the study attempts to understand safety within the broader context of gender, vulnerability, and empowerment.

The study used a quantitative descriptive research design. A total of 50-60 women from selected slum communities were chosen using purposive interview schedule to gather demographic information.

The findings of the study highlight the everyday experiences of women living in marginalized communities. According to the study, women's safety is influenced by environmental conditions, infrastructure, and social support systems. These findings can contribute to gender-sensitive social work practice, community development programs, and policy discussions aimed at improving safety, empowerment, and overall well-being.

Keywords: Every day, Women, Struggles, Safety, Perception, Slum, Community.

Introduction

In many policy discussions, safety is reduced to numbers like crime rates and police records. While important, these figures do not reflect what safety truly means for women living in marginalized urban settlements. For them, safety is a lived, everyday experience felt in dark streets, long walks to distant toilets, overcrowded transport, and the silence that follows unreported harassment.

In the 400-meter roadside settlement observed in this study, families live in fragile shelters without street lighting. After sunset, the area becomes a space of uncertainty. A single communal latrine at one end forces many women to walk through poorly lit paths, and some are left with no option but to use the nearby sewage canal. Though facilities technically exist, they are not equally accessible.

Poor lighting, sanitation, and drainage are not gender-neutral problems. They turn basic needs into risky situations and restrict women's mobility and freedom. Women adapt by limiting movement or depending on male escorts, but this adaptation reflects constraint, not empowerment.

Here, safety is not just the absence of crime; it is about dignity, autonomy, and the right to occupy public space without fear.

Objective of the Study

General Objective

1. To explore and analyze women's perceived safety in selected urban slum communities of Kolkata within the framework of gender, spatial inequality, and structural vulnerability.

Specific Objectives

2. To examine the socio-demographic profile of women residing in the selected urban slum communities.
3. To assess women's perceived safety in relation to everyday activities, including:

- Walking alone during the daytime and night-time
 - Accessing sanitation facilities
 - Using public transportation
 - Navigating community and public spaces
 - Reporting incidents of harassment or violence
4. To explore the avoidance behaviors and coping strategies adopted by women in response to perceived insecurity.
 5. To identify key environmental and infrastructural factors including street lighting, sanitation placement, drainage conditions, and spatial layout that influence women's perceptions of safety.

Review of Literature

- i. Dubey, Bailey, and Lee (2025), in their narrative review titled *Women's Perceived Safety in Public Places and Public Transport*, published in *Cities*, examined the factors influencing women's perceived safety in urban public environments. The study adopted a narrative review design and analyzed 32 scholarly articles using an intersectionality framework. The main objective was to understand how environmental, social, and individual factors shape women's perceptions of safety. The findings revealed that built-environment factors such as street lighting, visibility, and street design were the most consistent determinants of perceived safety. At the same time, community familiarity and social presence also influenced feelings of security. The authors conclude that women's perceived safety requires integrated and inclusive urban planning strategies.
- ii. Gupta, Ashtt, and Monga (2025), made and analyses on challenges and policy interventions in the NCT of Delhi on safety of women in public spaces, the study adopted mixed method research design, data were collected using semi-structured interview schedule, the research findings revealed that, Metro stations were considered comparatively safe by 72% of respondents, whereas deserted roads (29%), bus stops (48%), and public parks (51%) were commonly perceived as unsafe. A large proportion of women reported concerns related to sexual harassment (82%), inadequate street lighting (75%), unsafe public transportation (68%), and insufficient security presence (64%). The authors conclude that women's safety should not be addressed solely through policing measures; rather, it requires gender-responsive urban planning, improved infrastructure, stronger institutional accountability, and community-based interventions.
- iii. Sinclair and colleagues (2025), in their article "Sanitation-related withholding and suppression among women in urban Uganda and India," published in *Nature Water*, examined how privacy, safety, and health concerns influence sanitation-related coping behaviors among urban women. The study adopted a secondary analysis of cross-sectional data from the MUSE project, including 2,173 women from Kampala and Tiruchirappalli. The main objective was to assess the relationship between perceived risks and sanitation-related behavioral adaptations. The findings showed that 38% of women in Kampala and 16.4% in Tiruchirappalli reduced food or water intake to avoid sanitation use, and suppression behaviors were widely reported. The study concludes that women's perceptions of privacy and safety significantly shape sanitation practices beyond mere infrastructure availability.

Methodology

The present study adopted a quantitative descriptive research design to examine women's perceived safety within an urban slum settlement in Kolkata, West Bengal. The study was conducted in the slum area near Ruby General Hospital, South Kolkata, selected due to its dense population and infrastructural vulnerabilities affecting women's daily mobility. A total of 60 women aged 18 years and above were selected through non-probability purposive sampling. The technique ensured that participants were residents of the area and directly exposed to the environmental conditions influencing safety perception. Women's perceived safety was measured using the Personal Safety Perception Scale developed by Dabbous et al. (2025). The scale consists of items assessing mobility, access to public facilities, institutional trust, and community support, rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Poor) to 5 (Very Good). The instrument was considered appropriate for assessing multidimensional safety perceptions among women in vulnerable urban settings.

Data Analysis**PART I: SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE**

Sl No.	Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1.	Age	20–30	24	40%
		31–40	20	33.3%
		41–50	7	11.7%
		Above 50	9	15%
2.	Educational Qualification	No Formal Education	13	21.7%
		SSLC	13	21.7%
		Higher Secondary	15	25%
		Undergraduate (UG)	16	26.7%
		Postgraduate (PG)	3	5%
3.	Religion	Hindu	39	65%
		Muslim	18	30%
		Christian	3	5%
4.	Marital Status	Married	42	70%
		Unmarried	14	23.3%
		Separated	2	3.3%
		Divorced	2	3.3%
5.	Family Type	Nuclear	42	70%
		Joint	18	30%
6.	Family Size	2 Members	3	5%
		3–4 Members	26	43.3%
		5–6 Members	24	40%
		6–7 Members	7	11.7%
7.	Occupation	Not Working	23	38.3%
		Self Employed	21	35%
		Government Employee	5	8.3%
		Daily Wage Worker	11	18.3%
8.	Family Income	Below ₹10,000	8	13.3%
		₹11,000–20,000	13	21.7%
		₹21,000–30,000	18	30%
		Above ₹30,000	21	35%

Interpretation of Socio-Demographic Details (N = 60)**1. Age Distribution**

- The majority of respondents (40%) belong to the 20–30 age group, followed by 33.3% in the 31–40 age group.
- This indicates that most participants are in their economically and socially active years.
- Younger and middle-aged women are more engaged in mobility-related activities, making safety perceptions particularly relevant for this group.
- Only 15% are above 50 years, suggesting limited representation of elderly women.

2. Educational Qualification

- A significant proportion (26.7%) have completed undergraduate education, while 25% have higher secondary education.
- 21.7% have no formal education, reflecting educational diversity within the sample.
- The findings suggest that safety concerns persist across different educational levels, indicating that education alone does not guarantee structural security.

3. Religion

- The majority of respondents (65%) are Hindu, followed by 30% Muslim and 5% Christian.
- The religious distribution reflects the demographic composition of the locality.
- There is no significant indication that religion alone determines perceived safety patterns.

4. Marital Status

- Most respondents (70%) are married.
- Married women often have increased mobility due to household and caregiving responsibilities.
- Their regular engagement with public spaces may influence their safety perceptions.

5. Family Type

- 70% of respondents live in nuclear families, while 30% live in joint families.
- The predominance of nuclear families may indicate limited extended support systems.
- In situations of insecurity, lack of extended family support may increase perceived vulnerability.

6. Family Size

- Most families consist of 3–4 members (43.3%) or 5–6 members (40%).
- Larger household sizes may increase dependency burdens and caregiving responsibilities.
- Increased responsibilities may require frequent movement in public spaces, affecting safety perception.

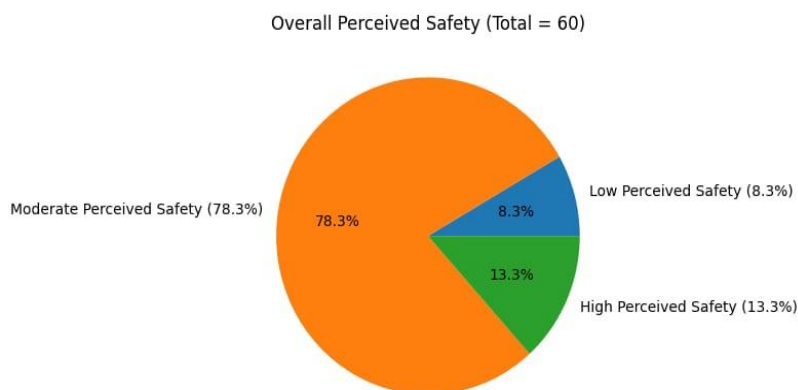
7. Occupation

- 38.3% of respondents are not working, while 35% are self-employed.
- 18.3% are daily wage workers, who are more exposed to public environments.
- Women engaged in informal or daily wage labor may experience higher vulnerability due to frequent mobility.

8. Family Income

- 35% of respondents earn above ₹30,000 per month, and 30% fall within ₹21,000–30,000 range.
- Despite moderate income levels, safety concerns remain prevalent.
- This suggests that perceived safety is structurally influenced and not solely dependent on economic status.

PART II: OVERALL PERCEIVED SAFETY:



Interpretation of Major Findings

The above pictorial analysis of the Perceived Safety Scale reveals mixed patterns in respondents' safety perceptions.

- The highest level of positive perception is observed in public transportation safety (63.3%), indicating that a majority of women feel relatively secure while using public transport services. This suggests comparatively better perceived safety in structured or regulated public mobility systems.
- More than half of the respondents reported feeling safe while walking alone during the day (53.3%), using public toilets (51.7%), and believing that police take women's safety seriously (53.3%). Additionally, 55% reported feeling comfortable reporting incidents to the police, indicating moderate institutional trust.
- However, significant concerns emerge in relation to infrastructural and environmental safety factors. Only 23.3% believe that adequate street lighting exists at night, making it the lowest-rated safety indicator. Poor lighting directly contributes to fear, restricted mobility, and increased vulnerability after dark.
- Similarly, only 26.7% reported not avoiding certain streets, implying that a large proportion of women modify their movement patterns due to perceived insecurity. Furthermore, 40% reported not worrying about harassment, meaning that the majority still experience anxiety regarding harassment in public spaces.
- Community-level support also appears moderate, with 48.3% believing that their community supports women facing violence or harassment. This suggests that social solidarity mechanisms are present but not uniformly strong.

Major Findings of the Study

i) Socio-Demographic Findings:

The socio-demographic profile of the respondents shows that a large majority (73.3%) are young and middle-aged women (20-40 years) who are actively engaged in earning activities, caregiving duties, and community responsibilities. Most respondents have completed at least secondary or undergraduate education; many belong to household earning above ₹20,000 per month. This suggests that extreme lack of education or poverty is not the main reason behind their vulnerability.

A majority are married (70%) and live in nuclear families (70%), with moderate to large household sizes (3-6 members). These family situations increase mobility needs related to caregiving, employment, and household work. A considerable number of respondents are self-employed or involved in daily wage labor, which exposes them to frequent use of public spaces and transport. Overall, the findings show that women's vulnerability in the settlement is not mainly caused by personal socio-economic disadvantage, but by structural urban inequalities and environmental neglect that affect women across different income and education levels.

ii) Findings Related to perceived Safety and Social Security:

The findings show that women's safety within the settlement is conditional and negotiated rather than properly ensured by systems or structures. While more than half of the respondents reported feeling moderately safe during the daytime, this sense of safety drops during the evening and night, mainly because of poor street lighting and badly maintained public spaces.

Public Transport and sanitation facilities are considered moderately safe, but concerns about privacy, harassment, and poor infrastructure still remain. Trust in the police is moderate but weak, with only a little more than half of the women feeling comfortable enough to report incidents.

A noticeable number of women follow avoidance strategies, such as staying away from certain places, which reflects coping methods rather than real safety. Fear of harassment during regular activities like going to markets or workplaces continues to influence their movement patterns. Although community support gives some emotional reassurance, overall social security in the settlement depends more on informal networks and personal adjustments than on dependable institutional or infrastructural protection.

iii) Findings on Women's Level of Well Being:

The study highlights that women's well being is strongly affected by environmental and psychological factors. Fear of possible harassment, especially while moving at night, limits their freedom of movement and influences daily decisions even when they have not directly faced victimization.

Poor infrastructure such as inadequate lighting, lack of proper sanitation facilities, open drainage, and mosquito problems creates stress related to dignity and negatively affects both physical and mental health. The need to rely on escorts or restrict movement shows limited autonomy rather than empowerment.

Although women reported moderate overall safety, this seems to reflect resilience and adjustment rather than the presence of truly secure structural conditions. Their well-being can therefore be described as adaptive but not fully secure, shaped by caution, negotiation, and structural

limitations.

Discussion

The findings show that women's perceived safety in the selected urban slum settlement is influenced mainly by structural and environmental factors rather than by personal socio-economic conditions. Even though respondents are young, moderately educated, and economically active, they still experience conditional safety because of poor infrastructure such as inadequate street lighting, badly located sanitation facilities, open drainage systems, and limited institutional response.

In line with existing literature (Dubey, 2025; Gupta., 2025), the study confirms that environmental design and infrastructural conditions greatly affect women's perceptions of safety. Moderate safety during the daytime stands in sharp contrast to increased insecurity at night, showing the importance of visibility and proper spatial planning.

The common presence of avoidance behavior and fear of possible harassment supports feminist urban safety perspectives, which explain that fear can restrict women's mobility even without direct victimization. While community unity provides some emotional security, trust in institutions remain limited, showing a gap between formal safety systems and lived realities.

Overall, safety in the settlement is not completely absent, but it remains structurally neglected, maintained more through women's resilience and adjustment than through fair and effective urban governance.

Suggestions

Based on the major findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

i) Installation of Adequate Street Lighting:

Immediate installation and regular maintenance of working streetlights throughout the settlement are necessary to reduce night-time insecurity and improve women's mobility and confidence.

ii) Expansion of Gender- Sensitive Sanitation Facilities:

More public toilets should be built at accessible distances, with proper lighting, privacy measures, and regular maintenance systems.

iii) Community-Based women's Safety Committees:

Formation of women's safety groups can strengthen collective action, encourage reporting of incidents, spread awareness about legal rights and available support services.

iv) Environmental Sanitation and Drainage Improvement:

Regular cleaning of drainage systems and cleanliness drives in partnership with municipal authorities can improve physical health and reduce environmental stress.

v) Strengthening Police-Community Engagement:

Periodic interaction programs, awareness campaigns, and the creation of women-friendly help desks can improve trust in institutions and make reporting easier.

vi) Awareness and Empowerment Programs:

Workshops on legal literacy, self-defense training, and access to support services can increase confidence, autonomy, and informed decision-making among women.

Conclusion

The study concludes that women's perceived safety in the selected urban slum settlement of Kolkata is shaped mainly by structural and environmental conditions rather than by personal socio-demographic disadvantages. Although women are young, moderately educated, and economically active, their safety remains conditional because of poor lighting, insufficient sanitation, environmental neglect, and limited institutional response.

While moderate daytime safety and community solidarity reflect resilience and social unity, night-time insecurity, avoidance behavior, and fear of harassment show limited autonomy and restricted freedom of movement. The findings highlight that safety in marginalized urban spaces is not only about the absence of crime, but also about dignity, mobility, and fair infrastructure.

Ensuring women's well-being and empowerment therefore required gender-sensitive urban planning, strong institutional accountability, and community-based interventions that can transform structural vulnerabilities into inclusive and supportive urban environments.

REFERENCE

1. Dabbous, M., Sakr, F., Safwan, J., Rahal, M., Fahs, I., Akel, M., & Salameh, P. (2025). Psychometric validation and correlates of the personal safety perception scale (PSPS-26) as a multidimensional measure of perceived safety. *Scientific Reports*, 15, Article 28376.

2. Dubey, S., Bailey, A., & Lee, J. B. (2025). Women's perceived safety in public places and public transport: A narrative review of contributing factors and measurement methods. *Cities*, 156, Article 105534.
3. Gardner, C. B. (1995). *Passing by: Gender and public harassment*. University of California Press.
4. Gupta, M., Ashtt, R., & Monga, A. (2025). Perceived safety of women in public spaces: Analyzing challenges and policy interventions in the NCT of Delhi. *International Journal of Environmental Sciences*.
5. Jacobs, J. (1961). *The death and life of great American cities*. Random House.
6. Loukaitou-Sideris, A. (2006). Is it safe to walk here? Design and policy responses to women's fear of victimization in public places. In R. B. Bechtel and A. Churchman (Eds.), *Handbook of environmental psychology* (pp. 542–557). Wiley.
7. Mahadevia, D., & Lathia, S. (2019). Women's safety and public spaces: Lessons from the Sabarmati Riverfront, India. *Urban Planning*, 4(2), 154–168.
8. Sinclair, E., Hüls, A., Patrick, M., Arun, S., Ramanarayanan, V., Sinharoy, S. S., & Caruso, B. A. (2025). Sanitation-related withholding and suppression among women in urban Uganda and India. *Nature Water*, 3(7), 782–792.
9. UN-Habitat. (2009). Women's safety audit: What works and where? <https://unhabitat.org/womens-safety-audit-what-works-and-where>
10. UN-Habitat. (2015). *Global public space toolkit: From global principles to local policies and practice*. United Nations Human Settlements Programme.
11. UN Women. (2019). *Safe cities and safe public spaces for women and girls: Global flagship initiative—International compendium of practices*.
12. UN Women. (2025). *Safe cities and safe public spaces for women and girls: Global initiative—Third international compendium of practices*.
13. Viswanath, K. (n.d.). *Creating engagement in public spaces for safer cities for women*. UN-Habitat.
14. World Bank. (2020). *Handbook for gender-inclusive urban planning and design*. World Bank.
15. World Health Organization. (2014). *Global status report on violence prevention 2014*.