



Women's Safe Mobility for Viksit Bharat: A Cross-State Qualitative Study on Everyday Travel, Public Space Safety, and Gender Inclusivity in India.

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Abstract

India's Viksit Bharat 2047 vision places strong emphasis on women's empowerment and self-reliance as key pillars of national development. However, it gives limited attention to the everyday mobility conditions that enable women to participate in education, employment, and public life. According to Census 2011, nearly 84 percent of women's work-related travel in India depends on public transport such as buses. Despite this high dependence, public transport systems are not traditionally designed to accommodate women's distinct mobility patterns and safety needs. These conditions raise critical questions about how women's mobility shapes their ability to become economically and socially self-sustaining. This study examines women's everyday mobility experiences across six Indian states using a qualitative research design. In-depth interviews were conducted with 34 women from diverse socio-economic and occupational backgrounds, including students, salaried employees, and informal and daily wage workers. The study explores perceptions of safety, use of public transport, and daily travel decisions. The findings show that women's mobility is shaped by constant negotiation rather than free choice. Fear functions as a persistent condition that influences travel timing, route selection, and mode of transport, even when no direct incident has occurred. These constraints are particularly severe for women in informal employment who have limited flexibility and fewer alternatives. Public transport and public spaces often operate as gendered environments where responsibility for safety is placed on individual women rather than institutions. The study suggests that women's safe mobility must be recognised as a foundational requirement for self-sustaining and inclusive development within the Viksit Bharat 2047 framework.

Keywords: *Viksit Bharat 2047, Mobility Justice, Gendered Public space, Women's safety, Gender inclusivity, Public transportation.*

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

India's vision of Viksit Bharat places inclusive growth, social justice, and equitable development at the centre of national progress. Among its core priorities is the empowerment of women, particularly through access to education, employment, healthcare, and public participation. However, meaningful empowerment cannot be achieved without safe and equitable mobility, a fundamental condition for exercising citizenship, dignity, and social participation.

This study argues that women's safe mobility is not a peripheral transport concern but a foundational condition for meaningful participation in public life, and that its persistent neglect constitutes a structural gap within India's development vision.

Mobility enables individuals to access work, education, healthcare, and social networks. For women, however, mobility often involves constant negotiation shaped by safety concerns, social norms, and infrastructural limitations. Research across India consistently shows that women's mobility is restricted by fear of harassment, inadequate public transport, unsafe public spaces, and gendered expectations around behaviour and visibility (Phadke, 2013; Viswanath and Mehrotra, 2007).

Despite policy recognition of gender equality, women continue to experience exclusion in everyday mobility. Urban transport systems often prioritise efficiency over inclusivity, overlooking the specific needs of women who engage in complex, multi-purpose travel linked to caregiving and informal work. As India undergoes rapid urbanisation, these inequalities are becoming more pronounced, particularly in semi-urban and peri-urban areas where infrastructure development remains uneven (UN Habitat, 2020).

Mobility, therefore, must be understood not simply as movement from one place to another, but as a social process embedded within power relations, cultural expectations, and institutional structures. Understanding women's mobility requires attention to lived experiences, emotional responses, and everyday negotiations that shape how women engage with public spaces.



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1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite increased policy focus on gender equality and urban development, women's mobility in India remains deeply constrained. In many cities and towns, inadequate lighting, poorly maintained footpaths, overcrowded public transport, and weak surveillance systems contribute to persistent feelings of insecurity.

Women frequently experience harassment, unwanted attention, and verbal or physical intimidation while travelling, with such experiences are often normalised, underreported, and treated as individual problems rather than systemic failures. As a result, women adapt their behaviour by avoiding certain routes, limiting travel after dark, altering clothing choices, or depending on others for mobility.

Existing research on women's safety is uneven, focusing on metropolitan areas while neglecting smaller towns. It relies on quantitative methods that overlook lived and emotional experiences, limiting comprehensive understanding of women's mobility constraints. This study addresses these gaps by exploring women's lived experiences of mobility across multiple Indian states. It seeks to understand how women interpret, negotiate, and respond to mobility challenges within diverse social and spatial contexts.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are:

- To explore women's lived experiences of everyday mobility across selected Indian states, with particular attention to safety perceptions, public space use, and gendered interactions during daily travel.
- To examine the socio-cultural, spatial, and institutional factors that shape women's everyday mobility patterns across diverse regional and occupational contexts.
- To identify the coping strategies women adopt in navigating mobility constraints and to assess their perceptions of gender inclusivity within public transport systems.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study makes two primary contributions. First, it centres the voices of women whose mobility experiences are frequently overlooked in research, particularly those in semi-urban and peri-urban areas and those engaged in informal and daily wage work. Second, it demonstrates that women's constrained mobility is not a personal adaptation but a systemic outcome, shaped by infrastructural failures, social norms, and the absence of institutional accountability. The findings carry direct implications for policymakers, urban planners, and transport authorities working toward gender-inclusive development. By documenting the hidden costs and cumulative effects of unsafe mobility, the study challenges the assumption that mobility is a neutral experience and argues that enabling women to move safely requires systemic change rather than individual adjustment.

1.5 Scope of the Study

The study focuses on women aged 18 to 52 from multiple Indian states. Participants include students, daily wage workers, salaried employees, and informal sector workers. The research examines daily mobility related to work, education, caregiving, and essential activities. It explores perceptions of safety, infrastructural challenges, emotional responses, and coping strategies. The study does not aim for statistical generalisation but seeks analytical depth and contextual understanding. Its findings are intended to inform broader discussions on gender, mobility, and inclusive development.



2. Conceptual Framework

This study conceptualises women's mobility as an outcome of interacting personal, social, spatial, and institutional factors. Individual characteristics such as age, occupation, and confidence interact with environmental conditions including lighting, transport availability, and spatial design. Social norms and gender expectations further shape how women navigate public spaces. These interacting factors influence women's perceptions of safety, mobility choices, emotional well-being, and participation in public life. The framework recognises mobility as both a physical and emotional experience shaped by power relations and structural inequalities.

2.1. Theoretical Framework

The study is grounded in feminist geography, gender and mobility theory, and intersectionality. Together, these perspectives provide a framework for understanding women's mobility as a gendered, unequal, and power-laden process rather than a neutral transport issue. (Massey, 1994). Gender and mobility theory emphasises that transport systems are not neutral but reflect social hierarchies and power relations (Hanson, 2010).

Intersectionality further explains how gender interacts with class, occupation, and location to produce varied mobility experiences (Crenshaw, 1991). Together, these perspectives allow for a nuanced understanding of how women navigate public spaces under unequal conditions. This theoretical grounding positions women's mobility as a social justice issue rather than a technical transport concern.

3. Methodology

This study used a **qualitative research design** to understand women's everyday mobility experiences in different parts of India. An interpretive approach guided the study, giving importance to women's own voices and recognising that experiences are shaped by social and local contexts.

Purposive sampling was used to include women from different social, economic, and geographical backgrounds. Participants were selected from six Indian states: Rajasthan, Haryana, Tamil Nadu, Madhya Pradesh, Kerala, and Karnataka. These states represent northern, southern, and central regions and differ in levels of urbanisation, transport facilities, and cultural settings. Including multiple states enabled comparison of experiences across urban, semi-urban, and peri-urban areas. The aim was not statistical generalisation but a deeper understanding of common patterns and differences.

A total of **thirty-four women** participated in the study. They belonged to different age groups and occupations, including students, domestic workers, daily-wage workers, sanitation workers, informal-sector workers, and public- and private-sector employees. Special effort was made to include women whose mobility experiences are often overlooked in research. This diversity helped capture a wide range of safety concerns, travel challenges, and coping practices. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting between ten and forty minutes. Interviews focused on daily travel routines, safety perceptions, access to transport, and strategies used to manage risks. Participants were encouraged to speak freely, and interviews were conducted in their preferred languages to ensure comfort and clarity.

Ethical principles were followed throughout the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, their voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Verbal consent was obtained, and confidentiality was ensured by removing personal identifiers. Interviews were conducted in places chosen by the participants to ensure privacy and comfort.



Data analysis followed a thematic approach. Transcripts were read several times, and open coding was used to identify common experiences and meanings. Codes were grouped into themes through comparison across interviews. Some participants reported relatively positive mobility experiences. These cases were examined carefully to avoid generalisation and to strengthen the analysis. The findings highlight how women experience, manage, and negotiate mobility constraints in their everyday lives.

4. Findings and Analysis

The findings are organised into five thematic areas that emerged from interviews with 34 women across six Indian states. Each theme presents participants' experiences, followed by analysis of patterns and variations across contexts.

4.1 Mobility as Continuous Negotiation

Women across all interviews described travel as something that requires constant thinking and planning. Going out was not a simple decision but involved considering time, safety, transport, and surroundings. A 21-year-old student from Rajasthan (RJ01) said:

"Before stepping out, I already think about many things. Is it too late? Will the road be crowded? Will I get a bus easily? Even going nearby is not simple."

This account reflects the internalisation of gendered spatial risk, in which precautionary calculation has become so embedded in daily routine that it is no longer consciously experienced as an unusual burden (Pain, 2001). The cognitive work involved assessing time, route safety, and transport reliability before any movement begins constitutes what feminist scholars describe as 'everyday insecurity': a persistent background condition that shapes spatial behaviour independently of any direct incident (Koskela, 1997).

For many women, this thinking had become routine. A bank employee from Haryana (HR01) explained:

"I do not even realise it sometimes. I just plan everything in my head before leaving. It has become a habit."

The narrative described here does not signal freedom from constraint but rather reveals the depth to which constraint has been absorbed into everyday life. When risk management becomes habitual, its structural origins become invisible, shifting responsibility onto individuals while masking the systemic conditions that make such vigilance necessary.

4.1.1 Differences Across Groups

This pattern was seen across all states and occupations, showing that it is a shared problem faced by many women. However, the impact was different for different groups.

Women with salaried jobs and higher income could manage their fear by changing routes, using cabs, or adjusting timings.

An IT professional from Tamil Nadu (TN05) said:

"I can usually take a cab if timing feels unsafe."

Women in daily wage or informal work did not have this choice. A domestic worker from Rajasthan (RJ04) explained:

"If I think too much, I will not go. Then there is no salary. So, I just pray and go early morning in the dark."

A garment factory worker from Tamil Nadu (TN07) added:

"Factory timing is fixed. Bus is fixed. If I miss it, salary is cut. Safety is a luxury I cannot afford."



These contrasting responses show how class position mediates the experience of gendered fear. Women with economic resources can convert risk perception into logistical alternatives; women without such resources absorb risk into their bodies and routines, treating danger as an unavoidable feature of working life. This aligns with Sheller's (2018) mobility justice framework, which argues that unequal access to safe movement constitutes a form of structural inequality rather than individual difference.

4.1.2 Role of Age

The data reveals how **class and employment type** fundamentally shape mobility negotiation. Women with economic resources converted fear into logistics such as route changes, private transport, flexible timing. Women dependent on rigid schedules and public transport converted fear into **fatalism and risk acceptance**.

Younger women reported this thinking developed over time through warnings and experiences. Older women said it had become normal.

A 52-year-old sanitation worker (TN08) said:

"I have been doing this for 30 years. Now I don't even think. My body knows which roads to take."

This testimony reveals a process of embodied habituation in which deliberate navigation has been replaced by somatic knowledge. Far from indicating safety or acceptance, this automaticity signals the extent to which spatial insecurity has been inscribed into women's physical and psychological existence across decades of constrained movement (Koskela and Pain, 2000).

4.2 Fear as Structural Emotion

Fear was described as something that stayed with women all the time, not only after bad incidents.

A student from Rajasthan (RJ02) said:

"Even when nothing happens, the fear is always there. You keep looking around. You cannot relax."

This narrative describes what feminist geographers term 'embodied fear', a chronic condition of heightened alertness maintained in public space, not in response to specific threats but in anticipation of possible harm (Pain, 2001). The emotional and cognitive labour this requires is continuous, largely invisible, and almost never acknowledged in policy discussions about women's participation in public life.

Women described being alert, walking fast, and watching their surroundings. A retail worker from Tamil Nadu (TN11) explained:

"I feel alert all the time. I hold my bag tightly, I walk fast, I avoid eye contact. It is tiring, but you cannot stop."

These micro-adjustments to gait, posture, and gaze constitute what the literature describes as spatial self-regulation: women modifying their own behaviour as a form of risk management in environments they cannot change (de Certeau, 1984). This exemplifies a form of 'spatial control' that operates through internalised surveillance rather than explicit prohibition, women police themselves in anticipation of how they may be perceived or targeted (Foucault, 1977).

4.2.1 Place and Time

Fear changed depending on place and time. Women felt more afraid after sunset, in empty areas, and when they were alone. Seeing other women nearby reduced fear.

A student from Kerala (KL01) said:

"Even the same bus stop feels different at 8 AM and 8 PM. During the day, it is just a stop. At night, it becomes something else."



The transformation of the same physical space across time demonstrates how temporal limits function as gendered boundaries. Sunset does not alter the bus stop's infrastructure, but it reorganises the social meaning of the space and the perceived distribution of risk. Time becomes, in effect, a mechanism of informal spatial exclusion, restricting women's access to public life through social norms rather than formal rules.

4.2.2 Class and Occupation-Based Variation

Women with fixed working hours could avoid travelling late. A salaried worker (HR01) said:

"I make sure to finish work before 6 PM, especially in winter."

Daily wage workers had no such option. A street vendor (TN06) explained:

"I sell till 9 PM because that is when people buy. Fear is there, but hunger is bigger than fear."

Even women who travelled daily at night said fear never disappeared. A hospital worker from Kerala (KL02) said:

"Every night for five years, same road, same timing. Still, the fear does not go. You just learn to carry it."

The persistence of fear despite repeated exposure underscores its structural character. It is not a response to unfamiliarity but a product of ongoing social conditions that render public space unsafe for women, conditions that remain unchanged regardless of how frequently women navigate them.

4.2.3 Fear Without Direct Experience

Most women had not faced serious violence, yet fear remained strong. A tutor from Tamil Nadu (TN09) said:

"Nothing has happened to me. But I have heard so many stories. And the way men look at you, you know you are being watched."

This shows fear generated through the cultural circulation of stories, warnings, and the normalised surveillance of women by men, confirming Pain's (2001) argument that women's fear of violence is shaped less by direct experience than by ambient social cues. The experience of being watched, even in the absence of overt threat, constitutes a form of spatial control that conditions women's sense of legitimate presence in public.

4.3 Public Transport as Gendered Space

Public transport was the place where women felt most unsafe. Buses and shared vehicles forced close contact with men. A sales executive (TN01) said:

"When the bus is full, men stand too close. You know it is not an accident, but you also know nothing will change if you say something."

The silence that typically follows such encounters is not passivity but a calculated response to anticipated institutional indifference. Women weigh the risks of speaking out, including disbelief, victim-blaming, and possible escalation, against the immediate imperative of reaching their destination safely. This reflects the well-documented credibility gap in reporting gendered harassment, where women's anticipation of secondary victimisation discourages formal complaint even when incidents occur (UN Women, 2022).

Many women refrained from reacting and focused solely on getting home safely. A student (TN02) said:

"I just look down or pretend to be busy on my phone. It feels easier than reacting."



4.3.1 Normalisation and Silence

Women described unwanted touching and staring as common. A garment worker (KA02) said:

"I don't even get angry anymore. I just want to reach home safely. And it happens to everyone, I'm not the only one, isn't?"

Women did not complain because they expected blame, lack of support, or embarrassment. A domestic worker (MP04) said:

"If I complain, they will ask what I was wearing or why I was there. So, I just keep quiet."

This normalisation of harassment is not incidental but systemic. When women expect to be disbelieved and blamed, silence becomes a rational strategy within a system that fails to hold perpetrators accountable. The burden of safety management shifts from institutions to individuals, a shift that this study consistently identifies as a core feature of gendered public space.

4.3.2 Variation by Location and Transport Type

Urban areas with denser transport networks offered marginally greater safety through women-only compartments (though often overcrowded), CCTV cameras (though enforcement remained weak), and more diverse passenger composition.

Semi-urban and peri-urban areas showed higher vulnerability due to less frequent buses requiring longer waits at isolated stops, shared autos with no regulation, and dependence on private jeeps and tempos, where harassment was common, but reporting was practically impossible (UN-Habitat, 2020; World Bank, 2023). A field worker from Rajasthan (RJ07) explained:

"In the city, at least there are more people. Here, sometimes there are only 5-6 people in the vehicle. If something happens, no one will help."

Early morning travellers, domestic workers, sanitation workers, and factory workers faced particular risks due to empty buses and dark streets. A cleaning worker from Kerala (KL03) described:

"At 5 AM, the bus is almost empty. Sometimes it is just the driver. That feeling is very uncomfortable."

Night-shift workers described similar conditions. A call centre worker from Karnataka (KA04) noted:

"The company provides a cab, but what about the walk from my house to the pickup point? That 10-minute walk at 11 PM is the scariest part."

These accounts highlight the failure of transport policy to account for the last-mile dimension of women's travel and the gaps between formal provision and the actual door-to-door journeys that define women's daily experience of public space.

4.4 Time as Gendered Boundary

Participants consistently described **sunset as a threshold** that transformed their relationship with public space. A student from Madhya Pradesh (MP01) explained:

"After sunset, I feel nervous even if I am with someone. I try to finish everything before evening."

A teacher from Rajasthan (RJ03) described the mental burden:

"If something ends late, I start thinking again and again. Sometimes I just cancel, even if it is important."



The cancellation of commitments to avoid night travel represents a concrete, largely invisible cost of unsafe mobility, one that falls disproportionately on women and accumulates across a lifetime. Foregone classes, missed meetings, and abandoned opportunities do not appear in employment or education data, yet they constitute real losses that compound gender inequality over time (Sheller, 2018).

4.4.1 Family and Living Situation

Women living with family had some support. Women living alone were more careful. An Anganwadi worker (TN10) said:

"I live alone. No one will come looking for me if something happens. So, I am very strict about timing."

Access to private transport also mediated experience. Women who could use personal vehicles reported considerably greater freedom of movement than those wholly dependent on public transport, illustrating how mobility inequality intersects with broader asset and income inequality.

4.5 The Cumulative Effects of Constrained Mobility

Women described feeling mentally tired due to constant fear and planning. A bank employee (RJ05) said:

"It is not only about fear. It is tiring to think so much every day. Sometimes I feel mentally drained."

A student from Madhya Pradesh (MP02) described gradual withdrawal:

"You slowly stop going out. Your world becomes smaller, not because you want it to, but because it feels safer."

This withdrawal reduction in the geographic and social reach of women's lives is frequently misread as personal preference or cultural conservatism. These testimonies instead reveal it as a cumulative response to unrelenting constraint: spatial contraction imposed rather than chosen.

4.5.1 From Restriction to Internalization

Several older participants described how decades of constrained mobility had fundamentally shaped their sense of self. An agricultural labourer from Rajasthan (RJ06) explained:

"Now I don't even think about going places. My mind has accepted that some places are not for me."

A domestic worker from Madhya Pradesh (MP04) added:

"When you live like this for years, you forget what freedom feels like. This becomes normal."

The internalisation described here is not simply psychological resignation but a form of spatially conditioned subjectivity: women come to understand certain spaces and times as structurally unavailable to them, not through formal prohibition but through the accumulated weight of experience, warning, and risk. This constitutes one of the deepest and least visible costs of unsafe mobility, which reshapes what women believe they are entitled to expect from public space.

4.5.2 Emotional Labour Across Generations

Younger participants (18-25) expressed frustration and resistance, describing feeling "trapped" or "controlled." Older participants (40+) expressed resignation, describing constraints as "just how life is." This generational difference suggests

- Continued exposure normalises restriction
- Younger people hold higher expectations due to the changing social discourse around women's rights
- Yet structural conditions remain largely unchanged across generations



4.5.3 Hidden Losses

Participants identified costs that remain unrecognised in policy discussions:

- Reduced spontaneity: Inability to accept last-minute invitations, attend events, or make unplanned stops
- Limited social networks: Narrower circle of friends and colleagues due to mobility constraints
- Foregone opportunities: Jobs not applied for, courses not taken, promotions not pursued
- Constant vigilance: Mental exhaustion from continuous risk assessment

A private tutor from Tamil Nadu (TN09) captured this invisibility: *"People see me going to work and coming back. They think I am independent. They don't see all the calculations I do in my head every single day."*

These losses are invisible in conventional measures of women's participation. Employment rates, enrolment figures, and public space usage data do not capture the decisions that were never made. Safe mobility is therefore not only a gender justice issue but a development measurement issue: current indicators systematically undercount the mobility-related costs that women bear.

5. Discussion

This study examined women's everyday mobility across six Indian states to understand how safety, infrastructure, and gender norms shape daily travel. The findings show that mobility is not a neutral activity. Instead, it is closely linked to inequality, where women's movement is constantly shaped by fear, social expectations, and limits on time and space. Women's access to public spaces is not denied openly, but it is controlled through everyday conditions that make movement difficult, tiring, and risky.

The findings confirm that women's mobility constraints are structural rather than individual. Public spaces are informally understood as male-dominated, while women's presence is treated as acceptable only at certain times and under certain conditions. Many women described feeling that spaces become unsafe after sunset, even when those spaces are physically unchanged. This demonstrates how time itself acts as a gendered boundary that limits women's freedom, a finding consistent with feminist geography's argument that spatial access is always socially mediated (Massey, 1994). Such time-based restrictions affect education, employment, and social participation, as women avoid evening classes, overtime work, and public meetings, thereby reinforcing gender inequality over time.

The study also demonstrates that fear plays a central and structural role in shaping women's mobility, even in the absence of direct violence. Most participants had not experienced serious physical harm, yet they described living with constant alertness and anxiety while travelling. Fear was produced through shared stories, social warnings, and everyday interactions such as staring and unwanted closeness. This confirms that safety cannot be understood solely through crime statistics: a place can have low reported crime and still feel persistently unsafe for women (Koskela and Pain, 2000). Fear becomes a normal part of daily life and leads women to regulate their own behaviour, a process that operates through internalised surveillance rather than explicit prohibition (Foucault, 1977).

Public transport emerged as the primary space where gender inequality was experienced most acutely. Women described harassment, overcrowding, and lack of support as routine features of daily travel. Although laws and policies exist to protect women in transit spaces, participants consistently reported that these protections were rarely enforced. Research across Indian urban contexts confirm that the gap between formal policy and lived experience is wide, with enforcement mechanisms poorly suited to the diffuse, everyday nature of gendered harassment (Bharathi and Kumar, 2020; UN Women, 2022). Reporting was avoided due to fear of blame, social stigma, or anticipated inaction by authorities, a structural failure that reproduces impunity.



The findings reveal clear class differences in mobility experiences. Middle-class women sometimes managed risk by using private transport or adjusting working hours, converting fear into logistics. Working-class women, particularly those travelling in the early morning or late at night, had no such flexibility. For them, avoiding risk often meant losing income or opportunity. This demonstrates that unsafe mobility is not only a gender issue but a development issue that directly affects economic participation and social inclusion, particularly for women in precarious employment (Sheller, 2018).

An important contribution of this study is the documentation of what might be called the hidden effort of safe mobility. Women constantly plan routes, monitor surroundings, manage fear, and adjust behaviour, an effort that is exhausting and continuous over the years. Many women described gradually reducing their movement rather than sustaining this daily struggle. This withdrawal appears as a personal choice but is in fact a structural response to cumulative stress. It reduces women's access to education, work, and public life in ways that existing indicators do not capture.

At the same time, the study recognises women's agency. Women developed strategies such as travelling in groups, choosing familiar routes, and scheduling activities during daylight. However, these strategies should not be mistaken for empowerment. They reflect survival within limited options rather than genuine freedom of movement. Celebrating such adaptation without addressing the underlying conditions risks shifting responsibility from institutions to individuals, perpetuating rather than resolving the problem.

These findings have direct implications for India's Viksit Bharat vision. Encouraging women's education and employment without ensuring safe mobility creates a fundamental gap between policy aspiration and lived reality. Women cannot fully participate in development if they cannot travel safely to workplaces, colleges, and public spaces. Development policies that focus on infrastructure quantity, such as roads, vehicles, and stops, without addressing safety, dignity, and comfort, fail the women who depend on those systems most (Indian Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, 2021; World Bank, 2023).

The study argues that safe mobility must be treated as foundational to women's development, not as a secondary concern. Without safe and accessible transport, efforts to increase women's workforce participation, educational attainment, and leadership will remain limited. Women's freedom to move is not a personal privilege but a public responsibility. Addressing mobility safety is therefore essential for achieving meaningful and inclusive development under the Viksit Bharat framework.

6. Limitation

Existing policies addressing women's safety and mobility suffer from three primary limitations:

This study is based on qualitative interviews with a limited number of participants and therefore does not aim for statistical generalisation. The findings reflect women's experiences across selected Indian states but may not represent all regions or social groups. It relies on self-reported experiences, which may be influenced by memory, personal interpretation, or comfort in sharing sensitive issues. Some participants may have underreported experiences of harassment due to fear, stigma, or social norms. Data were collected at a particular point in time. Women's mobility experiences may change with shifts in infrastructure, policy, or personal circumstances, which this study could not capture.

While efforts were made to include diverse participants, some groups such as women with disabilities and those from remote rural areas were underrepresented.



7. Theoretical Contribution

This study contributes to mobility studies by empirically demonstrating what feminist theorists have long argued: mobility is not a technical problem, but a manifestation of gendered power relations embedded in spatial, temporal, and institutional arrangements. The findings support three key theoretical insights:

First, mobility operates as what researchers term a **compounding constraint**: each dimension of limitation (time restriction + unsafe transport + weak enforcement) intensifies others, creating multiplicative rather than additive disadvantage. This explains why piecemeal interventions such as installing cameras without enforcement, adding buses without addressing harassment which could produce limited change.

Second, the study demonstrates that **fear functions as decentralized governance**. Unlike explicit prohibition, fear works through anticipation and self-regulation. Women restrict their own behaviour based on perceived risk, making power appear absent even as it operates continuously. This extends Foucault's (1977) disciplinary power concept to gendered mobility contexts.

Third, the findings reveal what we call **tactical immobility**: women's strategic reduction of movement as a form of agency within constraint. While mobility literature typically equates more movement with more freedom, this study shows women sometimes choose less mobility to maintain safety, dignity, and mental well-being. This challenges mobility-as-freedom assumptions and suggests that **meaningful freedom includes the right to move less if movement itself becomes a source of harm**.

8. Future Directions

This qualitative study prioritized depth over breadth. While 34 participants across six states provide rich insight, findings cannot be statistically generalized. Rural areas remain underrepresented; tribal and religious minority experiences need dedicated focus. Future research should examine:

- **Disability and mobility**: How do physical disabilities intersect with gendered mobility constraints?
- **LGBTQ+ mobility experiences**: How do non-binary gender identities shape public space navigation?
- **Comparative analysis**: How do Indian women's experiences compare with those in other Global South contexts?
- **Institutional ethnography**: What organizational practices and assumptions produce mobility inequality within transport agencies?
- **Intervention studies**: Which policy approaches effectively improve women's mobility experiences and under what conditions?



9. Conclusion

This study shows that women's mobility in India is not just about travel, but about constant adjustment, caution, and emotional effort. Across different states and settings, women described moving through public space with fear, time limits, and lack of institutional support. These patterns appear everywhere, showing that mobility constraints are structural, not personal or local.

Fear shapes women's movement even without direct violence. Time also acts as a boundary, with evenings and nights limiting women's access to public space. To cope, women develop strategies such as changing routes, timings, or behaviour. While this shows resilience, they come at an emotional and social cost and should not be mistaken for empowerment.

For the vision of Viksit Bharat to be meaningful, women's safe mobility must be treated as basic development infrastructure. National and state planning should include clear indicators on women's safety in transport. Gender audits, better lighting, reliable last-mile transport, trained staff, and simple complaint systems are necessary to turn policy into daily safety. Women must also be included in transport planning so that services reflect real needs, including night travel and informal work timings.

Development cannot rely on women managing risk on their own. Responsibility must shift to institutions, urban governance, and transport systems. Until women can move freely across time and space with confidence, development remains incomplete.

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12. Declaration of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to this study. The research was conducted independently, and no personal, financial, or professional relationships influenced the design, data collection, analysis, or interpretation of findings.



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APPENDIX I
Participant Demographic Profile (N = 34)

Sl.No.	State	Participant ID	Age	Occupation	Employment Type	Area Type	Interview Duration
1	Rajasthan	RJ01	36	Home Maker	-	Rural	45 min
2	Rajasthan	RJ02	21	College Student	Student	Urban	15 min
3	Rajasthan	RJ03	34	Private School Teacher	Salaried	Urban	20 min
4	Rajasthan	RJ04	42	Domestic Worker	Daily wage	Peri-Urban	15 min
5	Rajasthan	RJ05	27	Bank Employee	Salaried	Semi-Urban	15 min
6	Rajasthan	RJ06	48	Agricultural Labourer	Daily wage	Rural	20 min
7	Rajasthan	RJ07	29	NGO Field Worker	Contractual	Semi-Urban	18 min
8	Haryana	HR01	31	Engineer	Salaried	Urban	25 min
9	Haryana	HR02	22	Student	Student	Semi Urban	25min



10	Haryana	HR03	42	Fish Vendor	Daily wager	Rural	20 min
11	Haryana	HR04	34	Pharmacist	Salaried	Semi-Urban	15 min
12	Tamil Nadu	TN01	29	Sales Executive	Salaried	Urban	10 min
13	Tamil Nadu	TN02	21	Undergraduate Student	Student	Urban	10 min
14	Tamil Nadu	TN03	38	Domestic Worker	Daily wage	Urban	25 min
15	Tamil Nadu	TN04	45	Govt School Teacher	Salaried	Urban	12 min
16	Tamil Nadu	TN05	34	IT Professional	Salaried	Urban	18 min
17	Tamil Nadu	TN06	41	Street Vendor	Daily wage	Urban	18 min
18	Tamil Nadu	TN07	26	Garment Factory Worker	Daily wage	Peri-Urban	20 min
19	Tamil Nadu	TN08	52	Sanitation Worker	Daily wage	Urban	20 min



21	Tamil Nadu	TN10	31	Anganwadi Worker	Contractual	Semi-Urban	22 min
22	Tamil Nadu	TN11	27	Retail Assistant	Informal	Urban	15 min
23	Madhya Pradesh	MP01	24	Student	Student	Urban	34 min
24	Madhya Pradesh	MP02	21	Student	Student	Urban	31 min
25	Madhya Pradesh	MP03	39	Street Vendor	Daily wage	Urban	20 min
26	Madhya Pradesh	MP04	46	Domestic Worker	Daily wage	Semi-Urban	22 min
27	Kerala	KL01	20	Student	Student	Urban	38 min
28	Kerala	KL02	33	Hospital Attendant	Contractual	Urban	25 min
29	Kerala	KL03	47	Cleaning Worker	Daily wage	Urban	20 min
30	Karnataka	KA01	23	Student	Student	Semi-Urban	29 min



31	Karnataka	KA02	36	Garment Worker	Daily wage	Urban	22 min
32	Karnataka	KA03	41	Vendor	Daily wage	Semi-Urban	18 min
33	Karnataka	KA04	28	Call Centre Worker	Salaried	Urban	15 min
34	Karnataka	KA05	34	Security Guard	Contractual	Urban	20 min