



# **Decoding bystander behaviour: Actions to address violence against women**

A research study summary

**Breakthrough**



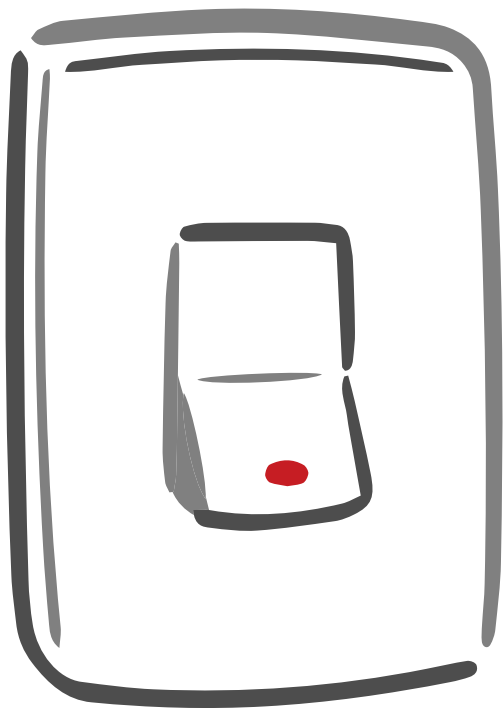
**Act. End Violence Against Women.**

## About Breakthrough

Breakthrough works towards making violence and discrimination against women and girls unacceptable. We transform gender norms by working with adolescents and youth, their families and communities, as well as by using media campaigns, the arts and popular culture to build a more equal world around us.

## Background of the study

Promoting positive bystander action to address violence against women has been a consistent focus area for Breakthrough. From our **Bell Bajao** campaign which encouraged people to intervene in cases of domestic violence by taking simple actions like ringing the bell to our most recent **Ignore No More** and **Dakhal Do** campaigns, bystander action has been at the centre of our work.



We realized that, for us to be able to achieve this goal, it is essential that we better understand the factors which motivate bystanders to intervene or prevents them from doing so, especially in the context of violence against women. The lack of existing literature on the issue, especially in the Indian context, further confirmed our rationale for undertaking the study.

# Research questions

- What motivates people to intervene to prevent or stop an ongoing violent act in public spaces which they witness?
- What factors prevent people from intervening to stop violence in public spaces that they witness?
- What is the experience of persons facing violence in public spaces and transport?

# Methodology

## Methods of data collection:

- **In-depth qualitative interviews:** To understand the nuances of a bystander's thoughts and experiences when they witness violence and how these inform their decisions about whether or not to intervene.
- **Digital survey:** To understand larger trends on the issue.



## Sample:

The approach to selecting study participants considered the fact that the categories of participants should reflect the target audience of Breakthrough's work on bystander intervention- young people in the age-group of 19-25 years. This is reflected in the first two categories of participants. Due to the significant importance attributed to age in Indian societies and its potential as an advantage while intervening in cases of violence against women, we thought it might be useful to include older male and female participants.



- Girls/women in the 19-25 age group
- Boys/men in the 19-25 age group
- Men in the 26-40 age group
- Women in the 26-40 age group
- Women older than 40<sup>1</sup>

The interviews were conducted either through internet-based video-calling platforms or individual and conference phone-calls as the research team could not travel for data-collection during the Covid-19 lockdown.

We interviewed a total of **91 participants** across the following locations:

- Rural Hazaribagh district (Jharkhand)
- Rural Gaya district (Bihar)
- Rural Jhajjar district (Haryana)
- An informal urban neighbourhood of Delhi
- A group of college-going women from urban Delhi and Haryana.
- Kolkata
- Hyderabad
- Mumbai
- Delhi

The first five locations were chosen as these are the areas where Breakthrough works on-ground. The last 4 metropolitan areas were chosen to get pan India, urban insights.

The digital survey was disseminated through our social media handles and a total of **721 people responded**.

---

<sup>1</sup> Requests for locating potential participants were circulated in the partner organisations' networks. This process of contacting and including study participants resulted in including some participants who were older than 40 years, which had been the planned upper age-limit for the study sample.

# Core findings

Most participants (particularly women) identified violence as a broad term incorporating a spectrum of experiences - physical, mental, verbal and sexual. It speaks of the endemic and acute presence of gender based violence in women's lives across spaces. The interviews also reflected how patriarchal practices were significantly influenced by cultural context and poignantly highlighted the correlation between poor mental health and everyday misogyny endured by most women we spoke to.

## Why do people intervene?

People who intervened provided a number of reasons for their actions:

- The **urge to do the 'right' thing** attesting to the presence of a strong moral component in speaking up.
- Some of our participants who were victims of child sexual abuse and domestic violence referred to unresolved **rage** at their own helplessness at the time of the incidents and how this pent up anger was triggered whenever they encountered abuse or sexual violence either themselves or witnessed others going through it.
- Some (both male and female) also talked about their own **journey towards better gender sensitisation**. Often it took them years to recognise certain kinds of violence and how it was symptomatic of skewed gender dynamics and patriarchal power.
- Some attributed it to their **association with gender rights organisations** either as volunteers, full time employees or general exposure to such spaces and issues.



Onil, a Mumbai based participant and social worker told us how the processes towards setting up a sexual harassment cell in office and conversations with one of his female colleagues helped him first think about the notion of 'consent'. This turned out to be instrumental as it propelled him to read extensively around the concept and how it was key to gender rights.

## How have people intervened?

From an 'active' bystander perspective, intervention strategies and methods were influenced by multiple factors such as gender, age, socio-economic standing, gender rights awareness etc. Participants (both cis male and cis female) who had experience of intervention shared interesting methods of helping survivors. Often, **speaking up and reprimanding the perpetrator** had a huge impact in terms of stopping the incident. Other immediate kinds of intervention included:

1. **Swapping seats** with survivors/victims: The importance of quietly dealing with a situation of gender violence was important, particularly from the perspective of the survivor.
2. **Giving one's mobile number** to connect later (particularly involving cases of intimate partner violence wherein the woman might need time to reflect on her next step).
3. Taking the survivor for **medical help**.
4. **Physically escorting someone home** when she is being harassed.
5. **Resorting to violence or employing patriarchal scripts** like *"Don't you have a mother, sister at home?"*

A few of our participants were also drawn to some other methods adopted as redressal mechanisms for the long haul. A long term intervention strategy shared by 30 year old teacher Shakeel in Delhi involved **community mobilisation**. On being told by his girl students about their difficulty of getting to school owing to eve teasing on the streets around the institution, he and some of his colleagues came together to patrol the streets around peak hours. They also roped in the help of the cops and ensured regular patrolling. He says that it helped the girls get to school with a feeling of security.

## The role of bystander action in enabling a survivor to speak up

### ▪ Social norms at play:

Numerous participants who had experiences of intervention expressed their exasperation at the 'silence' of most victims of abuse and sexual violence. A few of our participants did acknowledge the critical role played by **structural and social conditioning in influencing female behaviour and 'choices'**. Participants of our study pointed out how girls were taught from childhood to be submissive and not challenge their surroundings, at least not overtly. Yet it is important to unequivocally state here that though she is a product of larger processes she is not merely a hapless 'victim' but a complex being who negotiates these hurdles in multiple subtle and covert ways.

### ▪ Intersection of violence against women and violence against children:

As stated above, some of our participants who were victims of child sexual abuse and domestic violence referred to unresolved rage at their own helplessness at the time of the incidents and how this rage got triggered and pushed them to intervene in cases of violence against women. However, some participants also expressed deep distress even now if and when they faced abusive situations. One of our participants who is a survivor of child sexual abuse painfully narrated to us how every time somebody tried to inappropriately touch her **she 'froze' being unable to react** in any manner.



### Male and female bystanders: Is there a difference in approach?

There is also an interesting difference in the way men and women responded and intervened. Most men we spoke to talked about the perils of being a 'stranger' while intervening for women unknown to them. Other passive bystanders questioned, often aggressively, the intervening man's "right" to speak up for a girl who was clearly not related to him. Some men also discussed concerns over their safety as an important factor. This reality motivated some male bystanders to assume kinship or romantic relationships with the survivor to **gain the 'credibility' to intervene**.

Some men also talked about the difficulty of dealing with survivors who weren't vocal about what was happening to them. A few highlighted how the situation turned messy when, despite their intervention, some women failed to acknowledge abuse had happened. A male bystander told us how such an experience had prompted him to think of **ways to quietly deal with a situation** without bringing attention to a victim- hence the rationale for his strategy. This is in contrast with a similar scenario in which a female bystander intervened a lot more overtly. On witnessing a girl being harassed by her male co-passenger in a shared auto 22 year old Aruna directly confronted the perpetrator.

In terms of women themselves dealing with sexual violence in public transportation they talked about using everyday objects such as **safety pins as armour**. Women travellers also demonstrated camaraderie with other fellow female co-passengers by strategically and **quietly asking victims to move forward or aside** without bringing attention to themselves. Avoiding potentially dangerous or violent situations is a common survival strategy employed by women while travelling.

A male bystander told us how such an experience had prompted him to think of ways to quietly deal with a situation without bringing attention to a victim- hence the rationale for his strategy. This is in contrast with a similar scenario in which a female bystander intervened a lot more overtly.



# Survey results



78.4%

respondents who identified as female or other said that they have experienced violence in public spaces (does not include public transport).



68.0%

respondents who identified as female or other said that they have experienced violence while taking public transport.



70.0%

70% of respondents said that they would ideally like to help in scenarios of gender based violence by intervening/speaking out (individually or in a group).

Those who intervened* and why?	Those who didn't intervene and why?
<p>54.6% of respondents said that they had intervened in an incident of violence against women in a public space.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>55.3% respondents observed the discomfort of the woman/girl facing violence.</li> <li>67.7% respondents said that their intervention resulted in the violence stopping.</li> </ul>	<p>45.4 % respondents said that they have not intervened in an incident of violence against women.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>38.5% respondents said that they did not intervene because they did not know what to do.</li> <li>31% of them said that they were worried about their own safety.</li> <li>11.5% of them feel that they would be dragged into police/legal matters.</li> </ul>

\* intervention can refer to any attempt to stop the violent act, e.g. physically ending it, speaking out or calling attention to it, or involving official authorities etc.

# What needs to be done to encourage bystander action?

- Shift from the protection approach to **investing in agency of women and girls**. Government should launch initiatives to promote individual action and behavior against violence against women. e.g. *Farishte Dilli Ke scheme*.
- Building accessible reporting systems, wide dissemination of reporting information, ensuring safety of the survivor and the bystander and setting up reporting tools in the transports, or other public spots. This will enable **a conducive environment for preventing violence in public spaces**.
- **Gender sensitisation for police personnels, citizen-police interfaces** for better community action.
- **Gender sensitive curriculums at the school level** education system. Introducing gender equal practices among parents.
- Need to bring in **systemic and policy level shifts** for prevention of violence against women and girls.



Shift from the protection approach to investing in agency of women and girls. Government should launch initiatives to promote individual action and behavior against violence against women. e.g. *Farishte Delhi ke*

**Breakthrough**



**Act. End Violence Against Women.**

**Data collection partners:**

Rangeen Khidki Foundation  
My Choices Foundation  
Habitat and Livelihood Welfare Association

**Report designed by:**

Anis Sayyed

**Supported by:**

Uber

IKEA Foundation



**[www.inbreakthrough.org](http://www.inbreakthrough.org)**

+91-11-41666101-06 | [contact@breakthrough.tv](mailto:contact@breakthrough.tv) | Plot 3, DDA Community Centre,  
Zamrudpur, New Delhi, Delhi - 110048  
Breakthrough India

