

‘Women Silently Suffer’¹ :

Understanding eve-teasing, its drivers and solutions, through the viewpoint of Mahila Mitra members in Vijayawada City

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Abstract

Women in India suffer from societal scrutiny ‘right from womb to tomb’ (Himabindu, Arora and Prashanth, 2014, p.3). The prevalence of ‘eve-teasing’ in society, a euphemism used to describe the sexual harassment of women in public spaces, continues to rise, affecting the mobility, access to education, ability to work, and even the psyche of many women. Previous literature has aimed to explore the profiles of eve-teasers, causes, and consequences of eve-teasing on women’s psychological and emotional well-being, but few studies have drawn from the opinions of people on the potential solutions to eradicate eve-teasing in their communities.

This research will explore the understandings, drivers and solutions of eve-teasing, according to members of the Mahila Mitra programme in Vijayawada City, India. By illustrating secondary sources with the vivid accounts of participants, it will argue that the ambiguity surrounding what ‘eve-teasing’ means, alongside the patriarchal structures that suppress women, and an inadequate legal and police system, account for the permanence of the problem. The solutions will suggest that a combination of transformative education and a structural reform of the law and order, are necessary in order to guarantee the safety of women in public spaces.

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Introduction: 'Violence is everywhere'

(Mahila Mitra Woman, 1)

Gender-based street harassment, defined by Stop Street Harassment as 'comments, gestures, and actions forced on a stranger in a public place without their consent', and often directed towards people perceived as heterosexual women², is a historical demonstration of intrinsic gender inequalities in society (Kearl, 2015, p.xi). From ancient Greece to nowadays, street harassment has served as a reminder for women to stay within the household and leave the public spaces to men (ibid., p.xii). During the 21st Century, urbanisation has created new opportunities for harassment to hide itself, with the busyness of cities protecting the identity of predators; but for the past twenty years, awareness on the impact street harassment has on women has also increased (Kearl, 2015, p.2; Mowly and Bahfen, 2020, p.280; Fairchild and Rudman, 2008). Street harassment has come to be recognised as the most 'ubiquitous and insidious form of violence against women, because it is considered normal behaviour and not an assault to females' (Akhtar, 2013, p.168).

Often unreported and undermined, street harassment plagues many societies, but in particular, the Indian one, where it is known as 'eve-teasing'. Eve-teasing is a euphemism used across South Asia, where the issue affects 50% to 100% of all women (Mowly and Bahfen, 2020, p.279; Talboys et al., 2017, p.1). The term was first mentioned in a 1958 'The Times of India' report about a non-official bill that aimed to introduce severe penalisation for those molesting women (Misri, 2017, p.305). While the bill was rejected by both houses, it established eve-teasing as a colloquialism to refer to the 'sexual harassment of a woman by a man in a public place' (ibid.; OED online). In 1984, the expression had its first appearance in the Delhi Prohibition of Eve-Teasing Bill (Misri, 2017 p.305), and has since become widely used in the media.

This sort of harassment initially became popular in the 1950s and 60s due to the increased presence of young, middle-class women in higher education, and thus the public space (Misri, 2017, p.305). Nowadays, it continues to remain most prominent in buses and bus stops, followed by the metro, and crowded spaces frequented by working and studying women, where proximity can make it easy for men to harass them (Akhtar, 2013, p.172; Dhillon and

² It must be noted that people whose gender identity and sexual orientation is different can also be victims, yet this dissertation will focus on those who are perceived as heterosexual women.

Bakaya, 2014, p.4). Eve-teasing impacts women and girls' lives to the extent of affecting their participation in public life, school and work attendance, and opportunities in society, as well as their physical, psychological and emotional well-being, often causing humiliation, distress, fear, anxiety and depression (Talboys et al., 2017, p.2; Fairchild and Rudman, 2008).

Women in India suffer from societal scrutiny 'right from womb to tomb' (Himabindu, Arora and Prashanth, 2014, p.3). Unsurprisingly, the literature addressing eve-teasing is extensive, yet studies have exclusively focussed on its prevalence, the characteristics of the harassers and victims, as well as how it emotionally affects women. To this day, hardly any literature on the issue has placed emphasis on people's opinions on the drivers and solutions of eve-teasing. Academia addressing the causes of the harassment draw their conclusions from existing literature on Indian culture and society, often generalising it, rather than the people's and even victim's views, who have a better understanding of their specific society and community.

In the aim of contributing to this gap in the literature, this dissertation will analyse the understandings, causes and potential solutions to eve-teasing by combining the opinions voiced in the existing literature, with the viewpoints of women, men, and reformed eve-teasers of the Mahila Mitra programme, in Vijayawada City, India. The first chapter will analyse the project, methodology used, and the potential reach of this study, while subsequent chapters will focus on the causes and solutions to eve-teasing. Chapter two will start by assessing diverging definitions of eve-teasing. It will then address education as a solution, and analyse the role of private vs. public spaces and patriarchal norms in driving the prevalence of eve-teasing and the need for transformative education in the first place. Chapter three will begin by illustrating the role the legal system and police play in naturalising eve-teasing into society, and will then assert whether reforming the legal system is a better solution than education. The dissertation will conclude that due to the deeply embedded nature of eve-teasing in society, a combination of transformative education, alongside a reform in the law and order is necessary to both uproot the practice from everyday life, and ensure justice is enforced.

Definition

Notwithstanding that the second chapter will address the contrasting definitions often given to ‘eve-teasing’, to clarify, this essay will define ‘eve-teasing’ according to the Indian Government’s definition, but will remark that the use of the words ‘to the annoyance’ are not adequate, and that ‘that results in the sexual harassment’ would be a more accurate phrase to use. Eve-teasing occurs...

‘When a man by words either spoken or by signs and/or by visible representation or by gesture does any act in public space, or signs, recites or utters any indecent words or song or ballad in any public place to the annoyance (that results in the sexual harassment) of any woman.’ (Government of India; Dhillon & Bakaya, 2014, p. 1).

Chapter 1:

Mahila Mitra, Methodology and Reach

Mahila Mitra

Vasavya Mahila Mandali (VMM) is a secular, Gandhian, women-led, non-profit organisation, established in 1969 and registered in 1975 in Vijayawada City, in the south-eastern district of Andhra Pradesh, India. The organisation fights for the improvement of women, children and youth's social, economic and political lives. Currently led by Dr Bollineni Keerthi, VMM takes pride on its 52 years of seeking justice in the region, and believes its vision can be accomplished through the strengthening of social, political and legal systems, and the improvement of governance.

On the 24th of January 2017, Mahila Mitra was launched, an initiative hoping to make Vijayawada a women-friendly city. Mahila Mitra, which means a 'friend to all women' in Telugu, the local language, was inaugurated in partnership with the Vijayawada City Police to help empower women in a number of issues that are key to achieve their equality in India.

The main objectives of the initiative are creating awareness on the rights of women and girls, forming women support groups to cooperate in the solving of problems, empowering women from all backgrounds to get rid of social stigma, and instilling confidence and self-security among the women. It aims to achieve this by turning Police Stations into women-friendly spaces with Mahila Mitra Committees, formed by 10-12 trained women and a few men, at every police station in the city. Each of the stations also counts with two Mahila Mitra coordinators whom act as women constables and coordinate with the leading inspector. By becoming a 'bridge' between the community and the authorities (as described by a Mahila Mitra woman), Mahila Mitra volunteers hope local women's fear of the police will mitigate, and more victims of domestic violence, child marriages, eve-teasing and other types of harassment will feel comfortable enough to speak up.

This dissertation will exclusively focus on Mahila Mitra member's opinions and partnership with the police to eliminate eve-teasing from the streets, which the following activities target:

- Mahila Rakshak, which refers to the tours that police conduct around areas that are frequented by eve-teasers, such as schools, roadsides, bus stops and outskirts, where they bring any eve-teasers they find to the police station.

and

- The counselling of eve-teasers, when the eve-teasers brought to the police station undertake counselling on respecting women and women's rights by trained Mahila Mitras in the station so that a case does not get filed against them.

Methodology

In consultation with Vasavya Mahila Mandali and my supervisor, the research question below will guide the structure and aims of this paper:

Exploring the understandings of eve-teasing, its drivers and solutions, based on a case study of the Mahila Mitra programme in India

In order to provide the best answer, this research was conducted through a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative and qualitative data was collected remotely through a questionnaire and online group discussions with Mahila Mitra members and reformed eve-teasers. Vasavya Mahila Mandali provided secondary data, reports, and media clippings with appropriate contextual information on Mahila Mitra.

Firstly, a closed-answer questionnaire aiming to assess different Mahila Mitra members' and reformed eve-teasers' opinions on eve-teasing, its causes, and the effectiveness of various Mahila Mitra activities, was distributed through Qualtrics to the participants. Translations into Telugu for the questions and consent forms were provided by Mahila Mitra organisers. During the space of 2 weeks, a total of 51 Mahila Mitra women, 12 Mahila Mitra men, and 52 reformed eve-teasers, who VMM sent the link to, completed the questionnaire. Age-wise, the reformed eve-teasers were all aged 18-24, 31 of the Mahila Mitra women were under the age of 45, and 20 of them over 45 years-old; 9 of the Mahila Mitra Men were under 45, and the other three over 45 years-old. The Mahila Mitra women and men participating were, or had been, counsellors or constables at various police stations across Vijayawada City after

joining the programme, and the reformed eve-teasers had been counselled by Mahila Mitra and hadn't been brought to the police station on new accounts of eve-teasing. By distributing the questionnaire to both Mahila Mitra members and reformed eve-teasers, the results provided the opinions of both people who had entered the programme as volunteers, and young men who had been obliged to undertake counselling and activities with Mahila Mitra, providing a better account of how eve-teasing is regarded by both sides of the coin.

The second part of the study involved 3 semi-structured group discussions, each lasting approximately 1 hour, carried out with two groups of Mahila Mitra women, one English-speaking and one Telugu-speaking (for which a Mahila Mitra organiser provided on-site translation), and one group of Mahila Mitra men. The two groups of women had 4-6 women each throughout the hour, as Wi-Fi kept fluctuating and participants kept reconnecting, and the group of men had two participants. The meetings were conducted via zoom from the safety of each participants' home, to avoid COVID-19 related risks, and at least one member of VMM was present in each of them, both for translation and to ensure all the women were connected and could understand what was being asked. The discussion questions were open-ended, allowing the participants to guide the conversation and shape the follow-up questions. For most part, the meetings revolved around what aspects of eve-teasing still need the most support, what ideologies prevent gender equality, and how well Mahila Mitra has catered for the elimination of eve-teasing. Results from both the questionnaire and the discussions were used to guide further research into secondary sources, including academic articles, books, reports and media clippings.

This research has been approved by the University of Edinburgh's School of Social and Political Science Ethics Department.

Limitations and Positionality

The most notable limitation of this study is the fact it was carried out remotely, amidst a global pandemic, when India was suffering one of the worst surges of COVID-19 (Pandey, 2021). This entailed added complications for both VMM, which had health and safety priorities that surpassed my research, and for participants, who had to remain at home and potentially face difficult life changes. The completion of the questionnaire through Qualtrics and engaging in the discussions via Zoom required respondents to have a computer, stable Wi-Fi connection,

and privacy in their own homes, requirements which might have limited who could become a participant. Furthermore, participants were prescribed by the organisation, meaning it is unclear the extent to which the sample is representative of Mahila Mitra as a whole, and the discussion times were also decided by VMM, potentially impeding certain Mahila Mitra members from becoming a part of the study.

Social power-relations and tensions when communicating might have affected the data collection process. Besides the communication difficulties that working remotely with an organisation entails, time differences, Wi-Fi interruptions, and misunderstandings when trying to convey ideas via email slightly delayed the data-collection process. Additionally, the participants' relationship with VMM organisers who were present during the group discussions may have affected their responses. Their position as volunteers and beneficiaries of Mahila Mitra services may have been an obstacle when wanting to get honest, un-biased and subjective responses from the members in the presence of their superior. My positionality as a foreign, female, young, white researcher who they have never met in person may have also had an influence on participants' answers, as well as my own interpretation of the results.

Finally, because this is a small participant-sample case-study carried out in Vijayawada city, results do not intend to be considered universal, but rather to contribute to existing literature on the drivers eve-teasing and the lack of research on potential solutions for it. The two following sub-chapters will analyse the extent to which the results are generalisable to the demographics of Vijayawada, and the overall structure and nuances of Indian society.

Background and Scope

To understand the robustness of this study and nature of eve-teasing in Vijayawada City, it is vital to analyse the demographics and trends of the area and population researched, as well as the roles caste and religion play in perpetration and reporting of eve-teasing cases. This section will start by introducing the relevant characteristics of Vijayawada City for this study, and will continue to discuss the Indian caste system, and how it may impact different women's circumstances of eve-teasing.

Demographics and People

Vijayawada City, home of Vasavya Mahila Mandali, is a Municipal Corporation City in Krishna District, in the state of Andhra Pradesh (Census India, 2011). The city has a population of 1.03 million according to the Indian Census of 2011, and is divided into 59 political wards, with an 81.3% literacy rate (Government of Andhra Pradesh, n.d.; Census India, 2011). According to a government issued development plan of 2001, 20 years ago Vijayawada was the 34th largest urban agglomeration in India, and third largest city in Andhra Pradesh, comprising 3.91% of the country's total urban population (Government of Andhra Pradesh, n.d.).

What is most significant of Vijayawada's demographics for the purpose of studying eve-teasing, is its public spaces, roads and public transport routes. According to a 2006 Vijayawada City study on transport, there is an extensive amount of bus and railway routes connecting Vijayawada City Centre to nearby villages and towns. Almost 50% of the city's population is under 25 years old, and 32% of it comprised by students, meaning the demand for travel, especially public transport will be high due to increased mobility (ibid.). Household income is also an important factor in determining choice of transport; within the city, 68.81% of households are of low economic level (up to 5500 rupees per month), meaning walking (25% of the total trips), bus/2-wheeler trips (22%), and cycling (15%) account for the majority of trips within the city as they are the most affordable modes of transportation (Government of Andhra Pradesh, 2006). The city is also well-known for its amount of professional colleges and universities, as well as schools, which explains the high percentage of students.

This data is of vital importance when trying to comprehend the impact eve-teasing may have within the community. As previously explored, eve-teasing emerged in response to the increased percentage of women working and attending education in the city, and hence making use of public transport and spaces. The prevalence of both young students and public transport in Vijayawada City could explain the abundance of eve-teasing cases, as vast amounts of young women frequent parks, bus stops, schools, train stations, universities, and areas where eve-teasing is perceived to occur the most. Moreover, Vijayawada City's female-to-male ratio of 994 females for every 1000 males, is significantly higher than India's ratio of 900 (Government of Andhra Pradesh, n.d.; Census India, 2011; Government of India, 2015). This could influence the proportion of eve-teasing cases that occur in the city, as it is a type of harassment mainly

targeted towards women.

Police patrol during Mahila Rakshak the entrances of schools, colleges, and universities, as well as bus stops and train stations, to catch any eve-teasers who are harassing women and take them to the police station. A total of 160 ‘Mahila Mitras’, 140 women and 20 men, volunteer as constables at 21 police stations around the city (*figure 1*). The results of this study are limited to the accounts of men and women who counsel eve-teasers in these stations, within the limits of Vijayawada city, and to the reformed eve-teasers. While eve-teasing is infamous for occurring in the aforementioned spaces, it might also occur in areas where the police do not typically patrol. Furthermore, the nature of eve-teasing within Vijayawada City,

Police Station Name	Mahila Mitra Total	Male	Female
Bhavanipuram	9	0	9
One Town	4	0	4
Krishnalanka	7	1	6
Penamaluru	11	2	9
Ibrahimpattanam	5	1	4
Nunna	13	3	10
Ajithsingh nagar	8	0	8
Governorpet	17	3	14
Satyanarayanapuram	10	1	9
Machavaram	7	1	6
2 Town	3	1	2
Suryaraopet	6	2	4
Kankipadu	5	0	5
Patatmata	10	0	10
Vuyyuru Urban	10	0	10
Vuyyuru Rural	5	0	5
Pamidimukkala	5	0	5
Thotlavalluru	5	0	5
Unguturu	5	0	5
Gannavaram	10	5	5
Atkuru	5	0	5
Total	160	20	140

Figure 1: Mahila Mitra members per police station

given its unique proportion of students, young population, and women, is expected to be different to that of other cities in India.

Caste, Education and Women

Inevitably, the stratification of Indian society significantly impacts the generalisability of studies targeting Indian communities. One must take into consideration the thousands of castes society is organised in, as well as the importance of religious affiliation and language when exploring the socioeconomic, educational, and cultural dissimilarities of India (Chauhan, 2008, p.217).

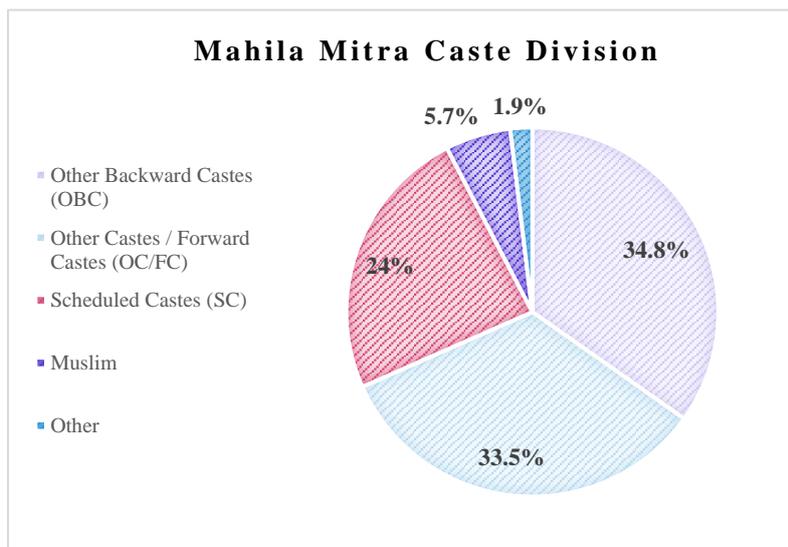


Figure 2

Amidst all the nuances in Indian society, caste has the sturdiest historical roots (Chauhan, 2008, p.217). The original *Varnas* (or castes) in Indian society were organised according to labour into *Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas*, *Vaishyas* and *Shudras*; these were then subdivided into *Jatis*, which were hereditary

and occupation-based endogamous groups, and into *Gotras*, or clans (ibid., p.218). With time, the caste division has radically diverged from the four original branches, into three major socio-economic caste categories (ibid., p.217). Forward Castes (FCs), often labelled as Other Castes (OCs), represent the economically and educationally privileged; Other Backward Castes (OBCs) would be comparable to middle-class, with some economically prosperous families but generally backward in education; Scheduled Castes (SCs, also known as *Dalits*) and Scheduled Tribes (STs, or *Adivasis*) are the deprived populations (ibid.). The significant gap between these socio-economic castes is a source of concern for the Indian government and an impairment in the fight for an inclusive society (Shah and Lerche, 2018, p.4). Thus, Indian Constitution introduced special provision to aid the upward mobilisation of OBCs, SCs and STs, indistinctively labelled as the ‘disadvantaged’ groups (Chauhan, 2008, p.219; Raju, 1986, pp.477-484).

Censuses have shown that in total, 16.63% of Indian society belongs to SCs, and 8.61% to STs (Census India, 2011); the number of OBCs is estimated at 41% (The Times of India, 2007).³ As per the scope of this study, *figure 2* shows the castes different Mahila Mitra members identify as in percentages. When comparing it to the nation-wide statistics, and taking into consideration SCs and STs are undifferentiated, all grouped under the SC label, Mahila Mitra members offer a similar caste demographic to that of India, with 24% belonging to SCs and STs, and 35% identifying as OBCs (marginally close to the India-wide estimation of 41%).

³ No data post 2001 has been collected for Andhra Pradesh’s caste distribution, so more modern India-wide data has been used instead.

Regardless, this study doesn't collect data on variations within castes, such as socio-economic status, geography (urban or rural), religion, or language, and cannot therefore provide results that are generalisable to the experiences of castes as a whole.

Despite the extensive amount of research studying the caste system in India, the literature covering the overlap of caste and gender is scarce (Deshpande, 2007, p.735). A common misconception is the assumption that there is a positive correlation between material richness and social scrutiny, meaning that a poorer woman is less likely to suffer from immurement given her lower social status (ibid.). In fact, Deshpande asserts that women from lower-castes suffer both material deprivation and social stigma when entering the public life (ibid.), suggesting that they may have similar eve-teasing experiences as middle and upper-caste women (Misri, 2017, p.305). Nevertheless, Misri and Phadke assert that while they may encounter eve-teasing as often, lower-caste women face inequality vis-à-vis other women when reporting eve-teasing, as their public sexual harassment is considered unremarkable (Misri, 2017, p. 306; Phadke, 2013, p.50). This could potentially lead to the under-reporting of eve-teasing cases by certain women who believe they will be ignored, or regard themselves as inferior to their perpetrators.

Through her innovative method of a Gender-Caste development index (GCDDI), Deshpande found that SC and ST women are the worst vis-a-vis men in terms of land ownership, education, occupation, livestock, and consumer durables (2007, p.738). OBCs, on the other hand, are becoming the 'new elite' due to their increased political representation and are quickly catching up to the FCs (ibid., p.740). Notably, regarding education, SCs and STs women are receiving less education than women from other castes. For instance, in 1992-93, 77.3% and 69.7% of SC and ST women, respectively, had no education, compared to 51.6% of other-caste women (including OBCs and FCs) (Deshpande, 2007, p.749). These results are from over twenty years ago, yet findings suggest that while more women are accessing education every day, the gap between SC-ST, and other-caste women remains existent (ibid.). In the case of working, the roles reverse, as data from 1998/99 shows only 53.65% of SC and 36.8% of ST women reported 'not working', in comparison with 72.38% of OBC and FC women (ibid., p.753). Further disparities in the wages and employment opportunities of women are found between Northern and Southern states in India (Mahajan and Ramaswami, 2016), potentially indicating different experiences with the frequency and nature of eve-teasing.

In terms of our study, these findings suggest two different aspects. On the one hand, the rising number of women accessing both high school and upper education could indicate an increase in targetable victims from all castes for eve-teasers, who often frequent schools and colleges where women study. At the same time, the significant gap between SC-ST and other-caste women accessing education, would mean other-caste women (OBC and FC) are more often the targets of eve-teasing. Secondly, the increasingly large percentage of women that report 'working' outside the household also explains the continuous increment of eve-teasing incidences. In this case, though, ST and SC women are more likely to be the victims of street harassment, as a larger number of them work outside the house. Additionally, caste could play an important role in the reporting of eve-teasing, as SC and ST women's abuse could be disregarded by police and their communities, as concluded by Misri (2017). These statistics prove that women's experiences of eve-teasing are non-generalisable and can be significantly altered depending on nuances such as their caste and socio-economic status.

It must be recognised that demographics and caste are not the only divisions of Indian society; other factors, such as geography, religion, and language, must also be taken into consideration. Notably, religion limits freedom of expression and opportunities in many Indian communities (Singh, 2018, p.1). Hindu fundamentalism believes that ethno-religious minorities, as are Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhist and Jains, should not enjoy the same rights as Hindus, factor which could significantly alter the reasons for eve-teasing (Singh, 2018, p.2; Mahajan and Jodhka, 2012; Maizland, 2020). Given the extensive research analysing these religious tensions and other nuances would require, this essay cannot account for individual religions' and minorities' experiences. This study therefore illustrates the participants' individual views, being naturally limited by their cultural and socioeconomic status, caste, religion, language, and geography. While it does not intend to offer over-arching solutions to a complex problem, it does aim to contribute to existing gaps in the literature and be a source for comparison with future studies.

Chapter 2:

Structures, Spaces and Education

Eve-teasing appears defined in the Cambridge Dictionary as ‘the act of annoying a woman or women in a public place, for example, by making sexual comments’; the Oxford Dictionary gives it a much more severe significance, defining it as ‘(Verbal or physical) sexual harassment of a woman by a man in a public place’. The definitional debate isn’t limited to dictionaries, many academics have reflected upon the ambiguity surrounding the understanding of eve-teasing. Misri, for instance, includes ‘leering, catcalling, and singing filmi songs...menacing exposure of sexual organs, public masturbation and physical intrusions ... brushes, violent groping or even hitting women’ under the umbrella of eve-teasing. Talboys et al. go as far as describing email harassment, mobile phone harassment and cyber-bullying, too, as eve-teasing (2017, p.5). Other definitions, such as that of Akhtar (2013), provide a vaguer description of the term, ‘a euphemism used in India for sexual harassment or molestation of women by men...from sexually coloured remarks to outright groping’ (p.168). Not only do the interpretations of eve-teasing vary, but the terms ‘molestation’, ‘groping’, ‘harassment’ and ‘catcalling’ among others, have several definitions themselves.

When talking to the Mahila Mitra women about defining eve-teasing, the disagreements became apparent. They all unanimously mentioned that it happened in schools, colleges, roadsides, outskirts and bus stops, but when discussing about where the line is drawn between eve-teasing and other types of sexual harassment, the boundaries became unclear. ‘It is like bullying on the roads, colleges and public places’ said one Mahila Mitra woman. Another tried to divert the conversation into domestic abuse, saying ‘eve-teasers mostly do it for fun. But there are some people that REALLY harass women’. The word ‘fun’ was mentioned the most when describing the women’s understanding of eve-teasers’ reasoning. This last quote implies eve-teasing is a trivial occurrence, and women should not complain about it. Similarly, a woman expressed that she believed ‘eve-teasers are only teenagers. When they grow up, maturity will come’. The women were unclear in what exact actions fell under the umbrella of eve-teasing, but most considered actions such as catcalling, making rude comments or whistling ‘not dangerous’.

‘Eve-teasing is a spectrum’, said one of the younger women in the group, ‘what I think is that passing a comment or talking rudely, that’s like very harmless, and those can be fixed

with counselling. When there's touching, I think they should take serious action'. Most women disagreed with the statement, defending that 'most of them are not criminals, they don't know that they're hurting others...until now we haven't seen rude eve-teasers. They just comment on the girls. Not more than that'. Eve-teasing doesn't have a common understanding, not even among the people of an organisation that unilaterally works to end eve-teasing. Yet Mahila Mitra's misunderstandings on what falls within the boundaries of eve-teasing, and to what extent an eve-teasing incident is significant in a woman's life, is not a product of their own disregard for women's safety, but rather a result of a much more complex social structure that allowed eve-teasing to be created, and then normalised, in the first place.

To comprehend why diverging understandings of eve-teasing exist, a backwards approach will be taken. This chapter will begin by assessing Mahila Mitra members' perception of education as a panacea for eve-teasing, before analysing its drivers. After addressing education, it will explore the patriarchal norms that divide the private and public spheres in Indian society, which allow for misconceptions of 'eve-teasing' to arise and call for the need to transform through education. The experiences of Mahila Mitra women and men will be intertwined with the academic research, to illustrate or refute existing arguments.

Transforming lives through education

'First we will change the mindset of the boys' (Mahila Mitra Woman, 3)

Education is not a narrow subject, learning is often multifaceted and complex (Kitchenham, 2008, p.104). For the purpose of this study, we will not refer to access, age, equality or any structural change in education as the solution to eve-teasing, but rather to a necessary transformation of minds and behaviours.

Many theories have pondered upon the transformative power education holds within society, yet perhaps one of the best-known recent theories is Mezirow's 'transformative learning'. Mezirow refers to transformative learning as 'learning that transforms problematic frames of reference—sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets)—to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change' (2003, p.58). The central element of transformative learning is critical self-reflection, through which the learner questions their assumptions and learns to

value what the alternative judgements are (Kitchenham, 2008, pp.104-106; Mezirow and Dirkx, 2006, p.124).

Kuhn's paradigm (1962), Habermas's 'domains of learning' (1971, 1984), and Freire's 'conscientization' (1970), have had significant influence in the shaping of Mezirow's theory (Kitchenham, 2008). Notably, Freire's conscientization defended the need to be conscious of one's own social reality and how it affects perceptions and actions (1970). Developing the power to transform one's reality can help break the chains of becoming too dependent on a teacher for knowledge, and not learning to think for oneself or question prejudice (Kitchenham, 2008, p.105). Conscientization therefore involves 'learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions...so that individuals can take action against the oppressive elements of reality' (Freire, 1970, p. 19). Particularly, the learning must not cease in the classroom, but permeate all elements of the learner's life (Kitchenham, 2008, p.106). While this is not a substantial assessment of neither 'transformative learning' nor 'conscientization', it suffices to understand why questioning one's reality, assumptions and valuing alternative insights into problems and society is essential to tackle eve-teasing in India.

Unless we expand world- and self- relations, as well as our morals and attitudes, we won't truly understand human behaviour (Koller, 2011, pp.375-378). When asking Mahila Mitra women about the reasoning behind eve-teasers' actions, they answered that 'they know no better'. The women spoke about how the boys had received no education on how to treat women, what behaviours are adequate and how to think for themselves; 'eve-teasing a girl is a fashion', stated a woman. Because eve-teasing is deeply embedded in India's societal structure due to historical hierarchical differences between men and women, to change this normality, deeply entrenched beliefs need to be uprooted from a young age (Talboys et al., 2017, p.2; Akhtar, 2013, p.168). Children must undergo a 'conscientization', by which their horizons, morals, attitudes and judgement are broadened, and they become self-aware of why harassing is wrong.

'It should start in schools', they said about women's rights and respecting women. 'They should start from elementary schools onwards, make a subject for women's safety and about gender discrimination... they may face less harassment'. Mahila Mitra women called for a transformation of Vijayawada City's education, through which new subjects would teach boys and girls to question societal norms and patriarchal structures. Many academics share these findings too. Mathur concluded that there was a vital need for a curriculum on bodily

integrity in schools to eliminate eve-teasing and enable women to become empowered in their own bodies and self (2007, p.18), while Talboys et al.'s results suggested parents and boys should be educated on eve-teasing, and girls should receive more support on behalf of teachers (2017, p.8).

It is not only young students that must go through 'transformative learning' to reach 'conscientization', but Mahila Mitra women called upon the education of the parents as a necessary step to close the generation gap, which they consider a barrier to the child's development of their own self-awareness. A Mahila Mitra woman voiced how 'through schools we can abolish gender discrimination, in the house also'. This points to Freire's idea of learning not remaining within the classroom, but in every aspect of life. Mahila Mitra women believe in the transformative power of education, and support that teaching boys and girls about equality, respecting women, and making them question patriarchal structures at home can provide a long-term solution for the issue of eve-teasing.

Nonetheless, Mezirow and Freire's idealistic theories must acknowledge the complications that often impede 'transformative learning' and 'conscientization' from occurring in the first place. Patriarchal norms, and the public vs. private space dichotomy that drives the popularity of eve-teasing in India and maintains women as subordinates of men, both fuels the need for transformative education, and prevents it from occurring in the first place. The following section will explore this issue in depth.

'If they go to prison, what if their life is spoiled?'

(Mahila Mitra Woman, 1)

Patriarchal norms that place the maintenance of family honour above the wellbeing of women and girls are one of the main factors sustaining the popularity of eve-teasing in India, and more broadly sexual harassment (Talboys et al., p.2). According to Akhtar, violence against women is so invisible in India because of its embedment within the 'historically unequal power relations between men and women', and their respective positions in the public and private spheres (2013, p.168). Historically, sons are preferred over daughters given the fact they are the leaders of public life, while expenditures regarding daughters' education are viewed as wasteful, as the women are expected to remain within the household for most of their lives

(Ambhore and Ashok, 2011, p.60). Publicity and privacy are therefore not merely definitions of spaces, but have a social character, and describe how power relationships work in every space of Indian society (Kilian, p.116 in Crouch, 2009, p.139; Srivastava, 2012, p.26).

Besides patriarchy, which refers to the social system which is built on the assumption of men's superiority to women, masculinity also plays a significant role in maintaining this gendered division of public vs. private space. According to Srivastava, masculinity refers to the traits society has constructed as characteristic of being male, including speech, gestures, behaviour, task division, social life, and any position which places masculinity as superior to femininity, perceived as its opposite (2012, pp. 13, 14). This discourse of masculinity has specific consequences on women's freedom. Windsor defines masculine traits as 'powerful, strong, independent and emotionally detached', and feminine characteristics as vulnerable, non-violent, maternal, caring, and compliant (2015, pp.803-894). Femininity aims to teach women how to be sexually attractive to men, and positions them in a hierarchical inferior position where they receive constant societal messages that suggest they won't have a successful marriage, job, or deserve respect if they do or say anything outside the limitations of feminine traits (ibid., p.895). Men expect to have exclusive access to public life, while women are forced to become obedient wives and daughters, who 'carry the burden of honour and shame for their families and communities' (Mathur, 2007, p.3).

The discourse of eve-teasing is not only problematic in the way it portrays women as fragile, obedient, and otherwise deserving of harassment, but also in the manner it portrays potential solutions. Phadke has highlighted that discussions surrounding eve-teasing do not prioritise women's right to feel safe in public spaces, but rather portray cities as spaces that may threaten a woman's safety, and that therefore they shouldn't enter at all (Phadke, 2013, 50). Eve-teasing is used as a means through which to promote other types of discrimination, namely that of marginalised populations in the streets of India, by depicting them as the source of eve-teasing and the problem to be eliminated (ibid.). By using this non-inclusive discourse, ensuring women's safety has focussed on eliminating other 'marginal' citizens, who are often lost causes, sex workers, bar dancers, the unemployed or lower-caste men, from the streets, rather than truly making the streets safer for women (ibid., p.52). Both those viewed as the problem, and the women deemed in danger, are prohibited from enjoying public spaces (ibid.). 'Public space is classed, communalised and casted, along with being gendered', and so freeing the streets from these 'lost causes' is not a benevolent act women should be thankful for, but

rather proof of a much larger structural problem within Indian society (Phadke, 2013, p.52). For instance, some of the responses by the state following scandalous rape incidents, have included passing orders stating that establishments in the city should not allow women to work after 8pm (ibid., p.50). These responses fail to adequately introduce women to public life, and position large cities and public spaces as unwelcoming, so women resort to avoid frequenting these spaces altogether (ibid., p.51).

When discussing with Mahila Mitra women the reasons why they considered counselling and educating eve-teasers as important, the position of men as leaders of public life and household heads became apparent. Rather than relating the importance of eliminating eve-teasing with maintaining women safe and achieving equality in the streets, the women were concerned that the ‘boy’s’ life would be ruined if a case was filed by the police. ‘If they go to prison, what if their life is spoiled?’, voiced a woman. Another woman defended that ‘most eve-teasers are college students only. If we punish them their studies may be affected, and their life might also be affected’. These opinions place men as the leaders of public life in India and ruining their reputation as the worst outcome that can occur from eve-teasing.

Many women also voiced concerns to do with the men’s family. ‘It will be bad for their family’, mentioned a woman; another said that if a man was found guilty of eve-teasing, ‘the society will think her son is like that (referring to the mother), or his brother is like that’, and that could negatively affect the family’s honour. When asked how they approached eve-teasers on respecting women, the explanation was ‘we explain to them how it can affect his study, his career, his life and we try to bring change in them’. The men themselves are placed as the victims of a society that will judge their actions, and in return hurt their prospects within the public sphere. These views must not be seen as a carelessness for the women’s well-being on behalf of Mahila Mitra members, but rather as proof that the intrinsic public vs. private division of life in India transcends many boundaries, including that of organisations fighting for the safety of women. When asked about the importance of educating eve-teasers, Mahila Mitra members almost unanimously agreed on the need to teach them about gender equality and women’s rights (*figures 3 and 4*) and mentioned that the priority is changing ‘the mindset of the boys’, which could be potentially achieved through ‘transformative education’ and ‘conscientization’ . ‘If we counsel the boys, everything will be solved’ mentioned an elderly woman.

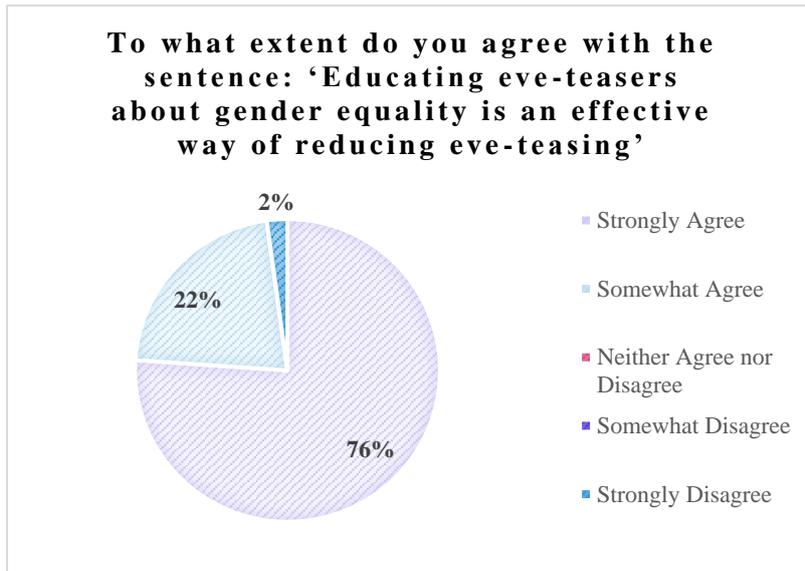


Figure 3

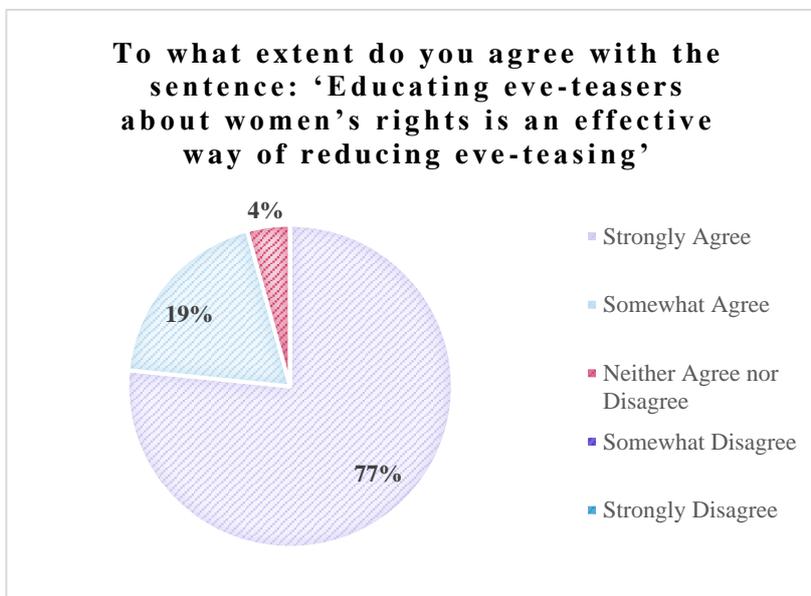


Figure 4

One of the women disagreed with the overall opinion, voicing that the men ‘having fun’ wasn’t the only reason behind eve-teasing. ‘They’re brought up like this. Especially in India, there’s discrimination in the household. Boys will see it in the father, the father behaving like the head of the patriarchal family. They lead the household financially. Women stay in the house.’, she expressed. An elderly woman went on to explain that it had been like that for decades, ‘if he sees that [discrimination in the household], he will do that outside also’. Her opinion hinted to the underlining patriarchal structures of Indian society. As Frye

points out, men assume they ‘have access to women’ in every aspect of their private, and public lives (1983, p.103). This woman sparked debate among the rest of the participants in the discussion, one of which reflected that women are eve-teased because of ‘the submissive role of the girl, of the women. Because [men] see it like that’. She went on to address the repercussions of eve-teasing on a woman’s life: ‘It will still affect the girls. Sometimes the parents will say “ok, let’s stop the studies”. That also happens here. “Don’t go to school, or college, just stay in the house”. We must take action on that’.

These findings support the results of other studies that have explored the impact of eve-teasing on women’s mobility within society, as well as the need for ‘transformative education’

and ‘conscientization’ in society. Women lose their bodily integrity, and no longer have the right to decide where they go or with whom (Mathur, 2007). They are negated their right to education, or work, and are forced to stay in the house, thus contributing to the permanence of the patriarchal structure of society. It is understandable that in a society that values men’s prospects and masculinity over women’s safety, a programme such as Mahila Mitra would frame the need to eliminate eve-teasing around how it can affect a man’s life, as it fits into the traditional structures and beliefs of that community, yet this approach may prolongate the positioning of women as subordinates of men, rather than help them be recognised as equals in the public sphere.

Dishonour, Blaming and Bodies

The very act of harassment is associated with the woman having done something wrong (Crouch, 2009, p.139). The woman is seen as having stepped out of her private sphere, brought shame and dishonour to her family, and so deserves to be put in her place (Mathur, 2007, p.2). Several studies have demonstrated that if a woman doesn’t react to being harassed in the way the harasser wants her to, this will often result in further abuse and hostility (Crouch, 2009, p.139; O’Hare and O’Donohue, 1998). If a woman defends herself towards the harasser, she is in fact asserting her equality vis-à-vis her attacker; this will lead to the abuser attempting to regain dominance through violence (Crouch, 2009, p.139). Nevertheless, if the woman is shy and avoidant, she is also likely to be harassed, as she is too timid to disclose the incident (Akhtar, 2013, p.176). Furthermore, while women defend that none of them are spared, many believe that revealing or body-hugging clothes will inevitably lead to eve-teasing, as the woman is considered indecent by Indian standards (Akhtar, 2013, p.174).

The tendency to blame the victim for being harassed is also indirectly promoted by the term eve-teasing itself. Language ‘drives social attitudes, rather than simply expressing them’ (Lister, 2020, p.7), and euphemisms are coined with the purpose of replacing controversial terms, with seemingly more polite ones (Acharya, 2015). In the case of eve-teasing, the euphemism contributes to retracting importance from an issue that has been pervading ‘class, age and geography’ for decades (ibid.). The term ‘Eve’, is, according to Misri (2017) and Baxi (2001), a Biblical reference to Eve, the temptress who ate the forbidden fruit and provoked men. This personification promotes the idea that women who do not remain within the personal

realm of the household, and behave like obedient wives or dutiful daughters, deserve to be harassed as they're immoral and immodest (Mathur, 2007, p.3). The term 'teasing', defined by the OED as 'to worry or irritate by persistent action which vexes or annoys', denotes playfulness, innocence and harmlessness (Baxi, 2001). Ultimately, what 'eve-teasing' does is disguise 'street harassment' as an unimportant incident (Dhillon and Bakaya, 2014, p.6; Sridharan, 2014).

The prevalence of victim-blaming and regard of eve-teasing as insignificant leaves victims of eve-teasing feeling unsafe, humiliated, objectified, angry and unlikely to seek community support (Talboys et al., 2017, p.8). In Akhtar's study, none of the women had informed their family members about eve-teasing incidents because they were embarrassed to discuss them and believed they would only create distress and trouble among their family due to the social stigma associated with being harassed as a woman (2013, p.172). Mahila Mitra women agreed, too, that 'there is a lot more people who don't come out to complain or to seek counselling'. This is likely because when parents become aware that their daughter is being eve-teased, they often tell them to remain home and dedicate themselves to domestic chores, rather than attending any social activities, including school; this can be either due to a concern for their safety, or to maintain 'fake family honour' (Talboys et al., 2017, p. 7). Besides permanently constraining their right to mobility, eve-teasing can reduce a women's chance to a successful arranged marriage and affect the price of her dowry (Talboys et al., 2017, p.7; Akhtar, 2013, p.168). This portrays a permanent assault on women's bodily rights and right to free movement (Akhtar, 2013, p.168).

Mathur reflects on how the female body is a contested terrain in India (2007). Women fear violence, cannot enjoy living in safe environments, cannot make choices concerning their sexual and reproductive health, and have restricted spatial mobility; essentially, women are forbidden from their autonomous bodily integrity, and so lose their 'personhood' to become property of somebody else (Mathur, 2007, pp.1,2). Men 'parasite' women, meaning they 'must have access to women' in every aspect of a woman's freedom, within both the private sphere, where the man leads the household, and the public realm, if a woman dares to enter it (Frye, 1983, p.103). When women decide to assert themselves, they move away from what men consider the womanly virtues, including compassion, submission, caring, and dutifulness, and men react to losing their dominance over them with rage and hysteria by often beating, harassing, raping, or even killing women. The UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women eloquently described eve-teasing as a 'powerful mechanism of control and

intimidation, through which women's subordinate social status is maintained' (Akhtar, 2013, p.168).

The findings explored in this chapter are non-generalisable to all the nuances of Indian society, but rather a reflection of academic research and participants' individual experiences within Vijayawada City. Furthermore, not every family will suffer from patriarchal power dynamics or be equally organised. Nevertheless, this chapter has identified the subordinate role of women within the private sphere vis-à-vis the dominant role of men in India's public sphere, as one of the leading factors driving the existence of eve-teasing. It has also found change through education, as set forward by Freire's 'conscientization' and Mezirow's 'transformative learning' theories, to be an encouraged solution by Mahila Mitra members, despite its complicated attainment. If education in schools challenged the pre-conceived assumptions that men must have control over a woman's mobility and body and encouraged children to transform their judgement and morals not only in the classroom, but at home too, eve-teasing could be eliminated from future generations. As a Mahila Mitra woman said, 'the next generations will be better than us'.

Chapter 3:

Law and Order

Previous chapters have analysed the definitions of eve-teasing, its societal drivers and education as a tool for positive change. Notwithstanding the importance of these factors, Mahila Mitra is a programme that bases its success upon its relationship with the police, and the police's ability and will to identify eve-teasing in the streets and bring the perpetrators back to the station for counselling. In return, the police depend on a thorough legal system that enables them to tackle eve-teasing and convict perpetrators of harassment accordingly.

This chapter will explore the police's patriarchal attitudes, as well as the shortcomings of the Indian legal system, as potential drivers of eve-teasing in society. It will then evaluate whether a structural reform of the law and order in India would suffice to resolve the issue.

'The police are against us'

(Mahila Mitra Woman, 1)

In an interview for Reuters, Dushyant Dave, a senior lawyer at India's Supreme Court expressed that "the government can make a hundred laws and yet it will fail because there is no enforcement" (Kalra, 2018). While few studies have been carried out regarding the persistence of patriarchal beliefs among male police officers, results unanimously show that officers maintain gender-stigmatised views towards both female police officers and complainants (Tripathi, 2020, p.237). Traditionally a male-centered profession, where 95% of the officers are men, victims often receive an inhuman treatment when approaching the police with harassment cases (Tripathi, 2020, p.233; Himabindu, Arora and Prashanth, 2014, p.2). From refusing to press charges because domestic abuse matters are meant to be discussed within the household, to forcing rape victims to go from hospital to hospital for hours as doctors repeatedly take their history and ask them to re-live their trauma, the reporting process for victims of harassment is an extension of a female-oppressive societal system (Tripathi, 2020, p.233; Himabindu, Arora and Prashanth, 2014, p.2).

While police are often the first source of formal contact to press charges for women victims of sexual abuse and other types of violence, most women choose to remain silent, even if that means suffering alone (Tripathi, 2020, p.232; Mathur, 2007, p.6; Mellgren, Andersson and Ivert, 2018). Mistreatment likely causes the mistrust women in India have toward the police, some even reporting having been stared and whistled at by policemen (Tripathi, 2020, p.233; Himabindu, Arora and Prashanth, 2014, p.2). A study carried out by Mitra-Sarkar and Partheeban in 2011, showed that women seldom seek police assistance, regardless of the officer's sex, with only 11% of respondents having ever contacted police, and even a smaller percentage reporting it as helpful (Dhillon and Bakaya, 2014, p.6). Talboys et al. found that only 3.1% of their participants had ever approached an officer to denounce street harassment, women chose instead to tell a family member or close friend (2017, p.7).

Gardner suggests in her book that eve-teasing has become such an intrinsic part of society because women suffer through it thinking no one will believe something significant has occurred, not even the police (Gardner in Dhillon and Bakaya, 2014, p.2). The tendency to under report eve-teasing, as proven too by a lack of police records, stems from victims' fear of having stigma attached to them (Akhtar, 2013, p.172), and the conversation held with Mahila Mitra women seconded this idea:

- (Mahila Mitra Woman, 1): 'In India there is a stigma. There is a stigma to go to the police station to report issues. Only since Mahila Mitra can women go to report freely without fear. But hundreds of people around us, their cases are unreported'. 'Recently, in public places, two cases where girl victims happened, no one responded. No one responded in the city. Only through a video in social media I came to know that in one of our police station areas a fellow was harassing the lady by taking videos and putting them in public. He reported to the police station, and the police filed a case against the woman! Moreover, he was a lawyer. The police department is supporting that fellow'. 'One other case, there was a woman in the roads. She cried a lot, and she was really helpless. The police filed a case against that girl'.
- (Mahila Mitra Woman, 2): 'We are weaker'.
- (Mahila Mitra Woman, 1): 'No, we should not accept we are weaker. We are strong, we have to report. We have to stand beside the victim'.

‘I sent a letter to VCP (Vijayawada City Police) regarding these two cases that happened in front of our eyes. What is the police doing? They have to protect women.’

‘Those who have to protect women, they are against women. Mahila Mitra have to fight against the police also. Even an educated, small girl cannot report her plea to the police station. They forcibly took her to the police station, at nine o’clock at night. It is against the rules. All the videos were released, there is a lot of evidence. But no one bothered, including Mahila Mitra.’

‘Police are suppressing Mahila Mitra.’

- (Mahila Mitra Woman, 3): ‘Intentionally, Madam. Intentionally those people are suppressing, instead of supporting’.
- (Mahila Mitra Woman, 1): ‘Especially in India, women never report to the police station. I’ve been here for 40 years. No woman has gone to the police station to report any private or public case (of harassment) ... Recently, for independence celebrations, the government invited Mahila Mitra just as a showcase, but police are against Mahila Mitra’.

Given the fact that the Mahila Mitra programme was established alongside the police to eliminate sexual harassment, this conversation struck as a surprise. ‘The relationship with the police is definitely better now’, ‘we never knew they could be friendly too’. These statements from two Mahila Mitra women were quickly eclipsed when a woman that had been silent for the entire hour put her hand up and said ‘Sorry to say this, but...’, then proceeded to open the debate with ‘In India there is a stigma’, as written in the transcript above. After speaking about the two cases of the women who ended up having cases filed against them, instead of their harassers, all the women nodded, and went on to contradict their old arguments, agreeing with the fact the police is against Mahila Mitra. The conversation above indicates two different aspects. Firstly, it supports the idea that the police’s problematic views towards the role and societal position of women, and apathy towards filing cases against harassment, is a major obstacle for the elimination of eve-teasing in the streets of Vijayawada, but also an obstacle towards the promulgation of women’s equality, as a woman justified the police’s

actions with 'we are weaker'. Secondly, an initiative like Mahila Mitra can hardly provide victims of eve-teasing with support, if the police fails to even acknowledge the case.

Therefore, yes, within the limitations and scope of this study, the police's attitudes towards eve-teasing is one of the reasons why eve-teasing continues to flourish in the streets of Vijayawada. Nonetheless, it would be wrong to assume that changing the police's behaviour alone can resolve an issue that is also promulgated by a justice system that neglects victims of harassment.

The Indian Penal System

The police alone cannot efficiently implement a justice system that fails to provide a clear framework for the resolution of cases of harassment against women, and secure convictions for the perpetrators. The weakness of India's legal system regarding the efficient tackling of violence against women, including street harassment, has a trickle-down effect on all the bodies governed by such law, including the police. While this doesn't excuse the problematic patriarchal views of many police officers (Dhillon and Bakaya, 2014, p. 6; Tripathi, 2020, p.233; Himabindu, Arora and Prashanth, 2014, p.2), educating a police force that has no reliable justice system to fall back on, will not help women find the support they need regarding public sexual violence.

Several events have shaken India's population to the core and served as a wake-up call regarding women's safety. For instance, the suicide of Sangeeta Sharma, an advocate in the Andhra Pradesh High Court, in June 2000, reflected that not even lawyers have the legal resources to fight against sexual harassment if they are women (Mathur, 2007, p.6). But if one case must stand out, it is the Nirbhaya story of the 16th of December 2012: Pandey and his female friend Singh, a 23-year-old student, got into an off-duty bus in Delhi, where Singh was gang raped repeatedly by a group of six men while the bus kept moving, and Pandey was beaten-up (Times of India, 2019). After Singh tried to fight back, a man inserted a metal rod into her, ripping her intestines apart (ibid.). The two friends were then left by the roadside to die and were found by a passer-by, with only 5% of Singh's intestines still in her body (ibid.). Singh died of her injuries the 29th of December (ibid.).

The atrocious incident, which started as a case of 'eve-teasing', by which a group of boys cornered a girl in a bus and started groping her and making comments, instigated protests

all over the country, with people demanding justice for the victim, now named Nirbhaya, meaning 'freedom' (Times of India, 2019). Consequently, a new judicial committee was set up to study the best ways to ameliorate the system for the prosecution of sex offenders, investigation which concluded that apathy on the part of the government and police were mainly at fault for the cases of violence against women (Shakti, 2017, p.11). The maximum sentence for having raped a victim resulting in their death was also changed to the death penalty, from what previously was life imprisonment (Himabindu, Arora and Prashanth, 2014, p.1). Additionally, in 2013, through the Criminal Law (Amendment) Ordinance, several laws were passed regarding sexual assault in India (Library of Congress, 2013). The case concluded in 2020, when four out of the six men that gang raped and injured Singh to death were hung (BBC, 2020). The fifth, served three years in a reform facility and was released, and the sixth took his own life in 2013 (BBC, 2020).

Multiple sources have questioned the efficiency of the new laws introduced, as Nirbhaya was the only case that obtained conviction among 706 rape cases denounced in New Delhi the same year (Hundal, 2013). Amendments made to the criminal law were not made comprehensive either, with marital rape remaining a non-criminal offence, and gender-based crimes continuing in large numbers regardless (Himabindu, Arora and Prashanth, 2014, p.2; Aboh, 2018).

Besides the Nirbhaya case, the previous few decades had already seen significant changes in policies and laws regarding women's lives, thanks to the presence of women's organisations, lobbying and collective mobilisation (Mathur, 2007, p.3). One of the most significant changes took place in 1992, when sexual harassment at the workplace was first considered a violation of fundamental rights by the Supreme Court, following the gang rape of a worker at the Women's Development Programme. The second was in 1997, with the Vishakha judgment, which recognised the significance of International Conventions and norms when interpreting gender equality according to the Indian Constitution, following the alleged gang rape of a social worker in the village of Rajasthan (Mathur, 2007, p.6; Vishakha & Others v. State of Rajasthan & Others, 1997). These two cases vindicated the experiences of many women, and helped recognise, for the first time, eve-teasing as a significant offense that may lead to further harassment (Mathur, 2007, p.6).

While in India, the term 'eve-teasing' cannot be found in the criminal code (Talboys et al., 2017, p.2), four statutes in particular target the tackling of street harassment:

- Section 294 condemns obscene acts and songs that annoy others with imprisonment for up to three months, a fine, or both
- Section 354 mentions that assault or use of criminal force with the intention of violating a woman's modesty, stalking, and/or voyeurism, can lead to two years of imprisonment, a fine, or both
- Section 376 refers to rape and notes that the imprisonment is for life, or otherwise ten years plus a fine
- Section 509 condemns saying words or making gestures intended to harm the modesty of a woman with imprisonment for up to a year, or a fine, or both, yet this offence is potentially bailable (Crouch, 2009, p.140; Indian Penal Code)

When reading through these laws, the first factor to stand out is their focus on the woman's modesty and the protection of innocence, rather than tackling gender-based discrimination (Crouch, 2009, p.140). In her extensive study on street harassment, Bowman ponders on the idea that the law failing to take issues affecting women seriously is a recurring theme in jurisprudence at an international level (1993, p.518). Legislation that aims to help women prosecute their harassers is often rooted in protecting the weaker and more vulnerable sex, rather than in seeking justice. This leads to very few criminal and civil cases properly fitting into the description of harassment the legal system recognises as a valid argument, and hence very few cases ending in conviction (Bowman, 1993; Crouch, 2009, p.140).

Since the introduction of stricter legislation regarding violence against women, country-wide statistics haven't seen a decrease, but rather a dramatic increase on the amount of sexual harassment cases reported (Kalra, 2018). The two cases Mahila Mitra women previously mentioned, where the women had the police file against them, and that didn't fit into what the police and justice system deemed as 'valid harassment', are unlikely to be the only eve-teasing cases that go undiscussed. Police's apathy, alongside a nation-wide failure to implement vague laws on harassment and convict perpetrators, is one of the main obstacles preventing women from safely accessing public spaces. The question now is, would a stricter, fairer, and better implemented justice system regarding street harassment, provide a durable solution to eve-teasing? The following section will begin by analysing certain questionnaire results and will combine these with the opinions voiced by Mahila Mitra members during group discussions to assess whether they consider the law an effective solution to eve-teasing in Vijayawada City.

The law as the solution

The question that attracted the most diversion during the questionnaire had to do with whether fining and/or jailing eve-teasers was a good method for eliminating eve-teasing. My expectation, given the emphasis the Mahila Mitra programme places in counselling the eve-teasers rather than resorting to legal action, was that the majority of women would be against the fining or jailing of eve-teasing perpetrators. To my surprise, 64% of women actually agreed with the statement ‘Fining eve-teasers is an effective way of reducing eve-teasing’ (figure 5), and 57% of women affirmed that ‘Sending eve-teasers to prison is an effective way of reducing

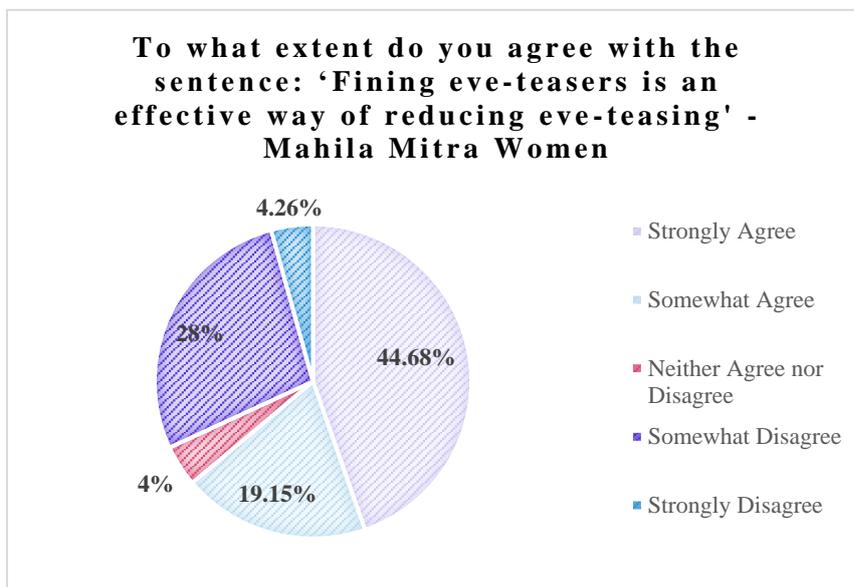


Figure 5

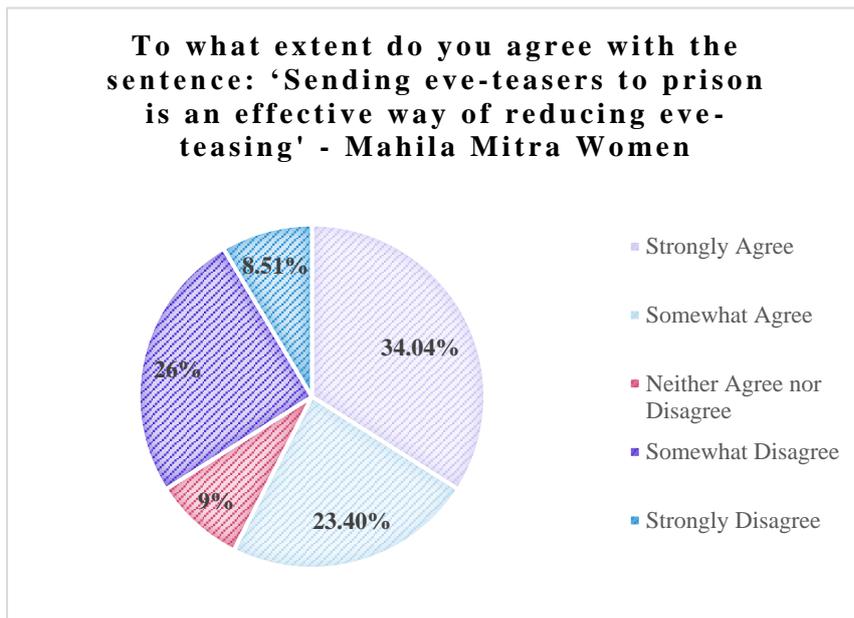


Figure 6

eve-teasing’ (figure 6). As per reformed eve-teasers’ answers, a majority also agreed that fining and sending eve-teasers to prison is a good measure to reduce eve-teasing, even if they have previously eve-teased themselves (figures 7, 8). It must be noted that the variables determining the amount fined, or the time eve-teasers would hypothetically spend in prison, as well as the nature of this prison, is not specified anywhere in the questionnaire. Therefore, different participants could have contrasting views on what this ‘fining’ and

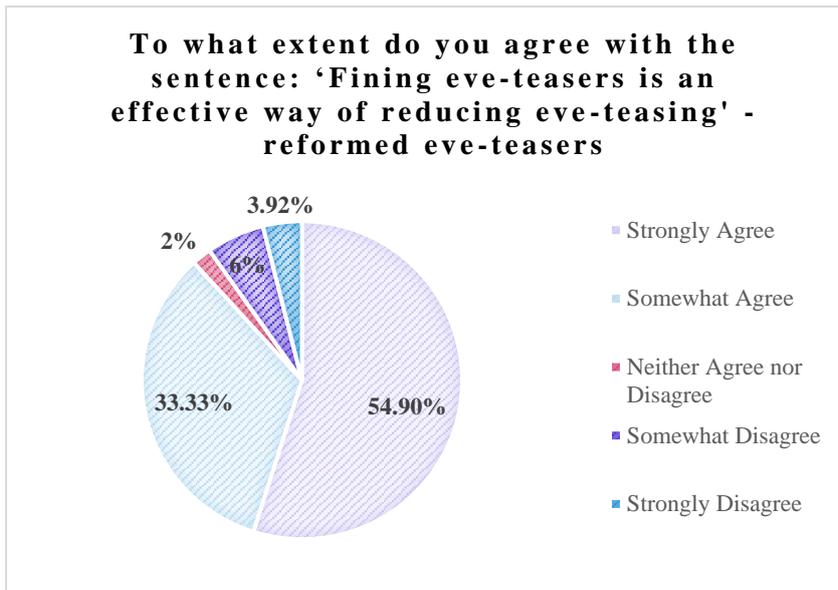


Figure 7

believe in some cases, counselling and educating is not enough to stop eve-teasing. While during the discussions, women voiced their distrust with the police, who ‘are suppressing Mahila Mitra’, this does not necessarily mean that members do not believe that better policing and stronger laws are the solution; VMM actually bases its goals on ameliorating the law and government’s actions. ‘Mahila Mitra must fight against the police’, ‘Mahila Mitra should be given some powers, some recognition in the city’, ‘All women must get support and strength. We have Mahila Mitra. We must report’; these three statements show the women’s support for structural changes and regulations. Notably, many Mahila Mitra women agreed when one exclaimed: ‘It must be the government that first answers to this gender discrimination!’.

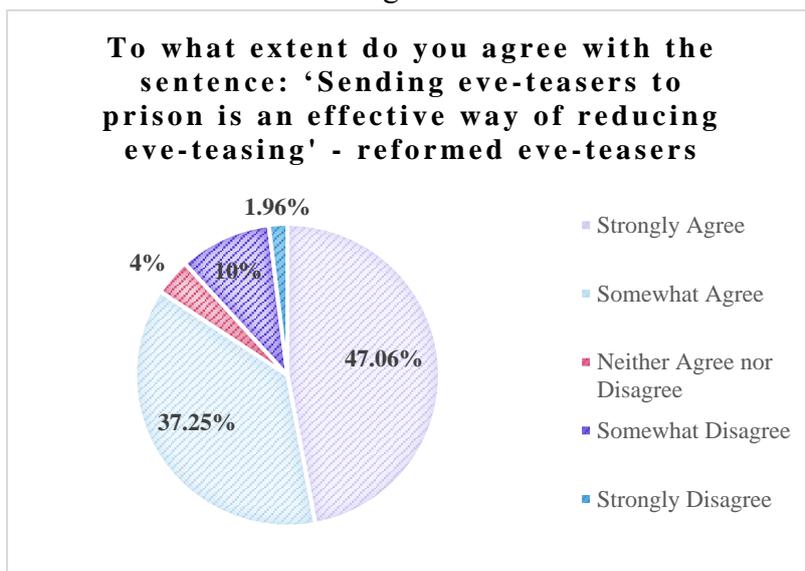


Figure 8

‘jailing’ of eve-teasers would involve, and what acts and degree of eve-teasing would lead to these punishments.

The results, however, indicate two overarching trends:

1. Firstly, they show that a majority of Mahila Mitra members, and reformed eve-teasers,

Reporting incidents, giving the organisation powers to act upon cases (which was given as a response to police’s apathy), being able to denounce a police system that is failing, having laws that truly protect women, are all signs that resolving structural problems regarding the legal system and police

could facilitate Mahila Mitra's work and help the initiative reach a lot more women.

Mahila Mitra members expressed concern that their programme is not known by enough women, and that a lot of cases remained in the dark. They expressed how 'publicising, announcing that there is Mahila Mitra', would make more women reach them. 'We are a bridge between the police, the victim and the eve-teaser', acknowledged an elderly woman, '[women] cannot approach the police stations, so they come directly to us, they open up completely'; yet they went on to voice concern regarding the police hiding cases from them. Through legal reforms that changed the language of 'modesty' and 'honour' that is often used when referring to public harassment, and instead prioritised women's safety regardless of their 'feminine' characteristics and position in society, alongside government reforms of the police force, eve-teasing could potentially be eradicated. Academics such as Dhillon and Bakaya have found that eve-teasing victims often wish the police had been more proactive; an increase in police booths and public phones women can call up would significantly curbe the prevalence of eve-teasing (2014, p.6). Furthermore, their studies also showed widespread support for stricter punishments for the harassers, like this study's results (ibid.).

2. This leads into the second aspect. Eve-teasing may be becoming increasingly recognised as a serious offense, and no longer 'fun' or 'normal'. As expressed in the introduction, the past twenty years have seen a significant shift in the way media and society frame sexual harassment (Kearl, 2015, p.2). When speaking to the Mahila Mitra women, most agreed on the fact more awareness has led to 'a generation gap'. The women explained that sometimes counselling eve-teasers is not enough, because their parents and families still uphold the view that eve-teasing is a woman's fault, and a boy should not be blamed for it. While these views cannot be generalised to all 'old' people, questionnaire results showed a significant gap between 18-45, and 45+ year-old women's opinions on whether fining and prison for eve-teasers is a good idea (*figures 9, 10*). Specifically, 70.4% of women aged 18-45 versus 55% of women aged 45+ agreed that fining eve-teasers is an effective solution to reduce eve-teasing, a 15.4% gap. In terms of sending them to prison, the age difference was even wider, with 70.3% of women aged 18-45 agreeing, compared to 40% of 45+ women, a gap of 30.3%. Furthermore, all the reformed eve-teasers who participated, and who expressed a strong positioning in favour of fining and sending eve-teasers to prison, were also young, aged 16-24.

The significant age gap in the questionnaire results shows that younger generations are more likely to want legal and police action taken against eve-teasers, possibly due to eve-teasing being viewed as increasingly problematic in society. This generational difference,

nonetheless, also indicated that legal and police reform may not be enough to change societal attitudes, especially those of older generations, towards eve-teasing. As seen with the apathic behaviour from the police, having to enforce the law does not guarantee the breaking down of patriarchal barriers that depict public harassment as a right men should enjoy. In order to permanently curve these damaging views that continue to hinder the fight for gender equality in Vijayawada City, there must be a broader societal transformative educational change, that reaches beyond schools, alongside a structural reform of the law and order.

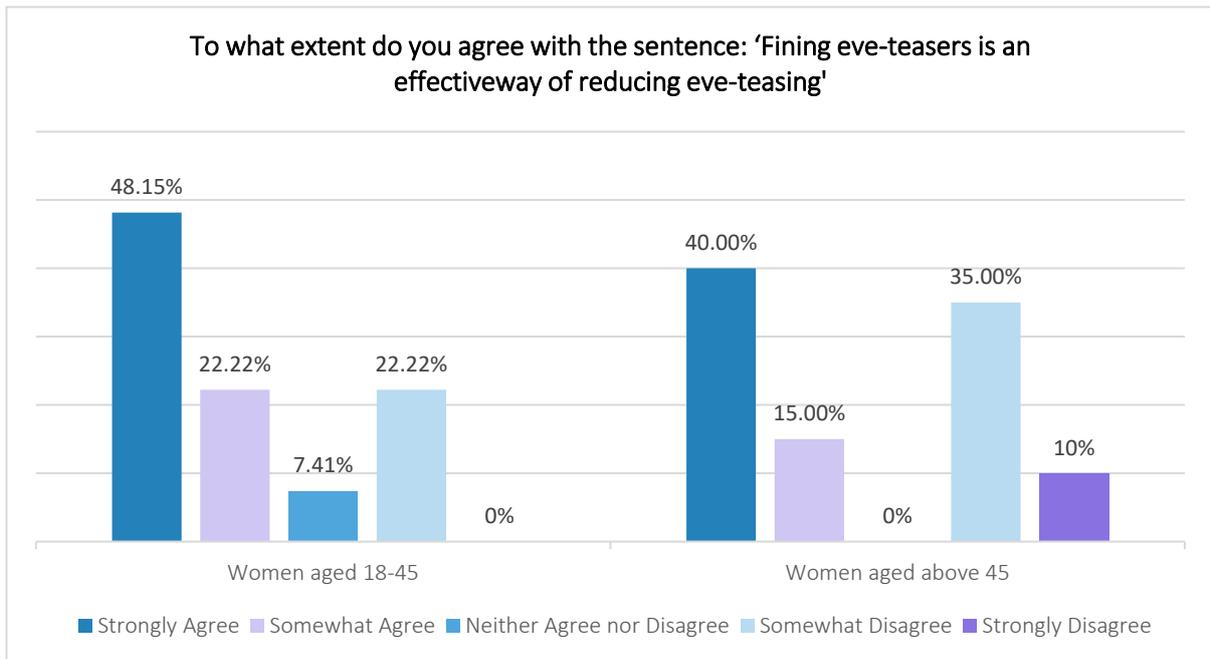


Figure 9

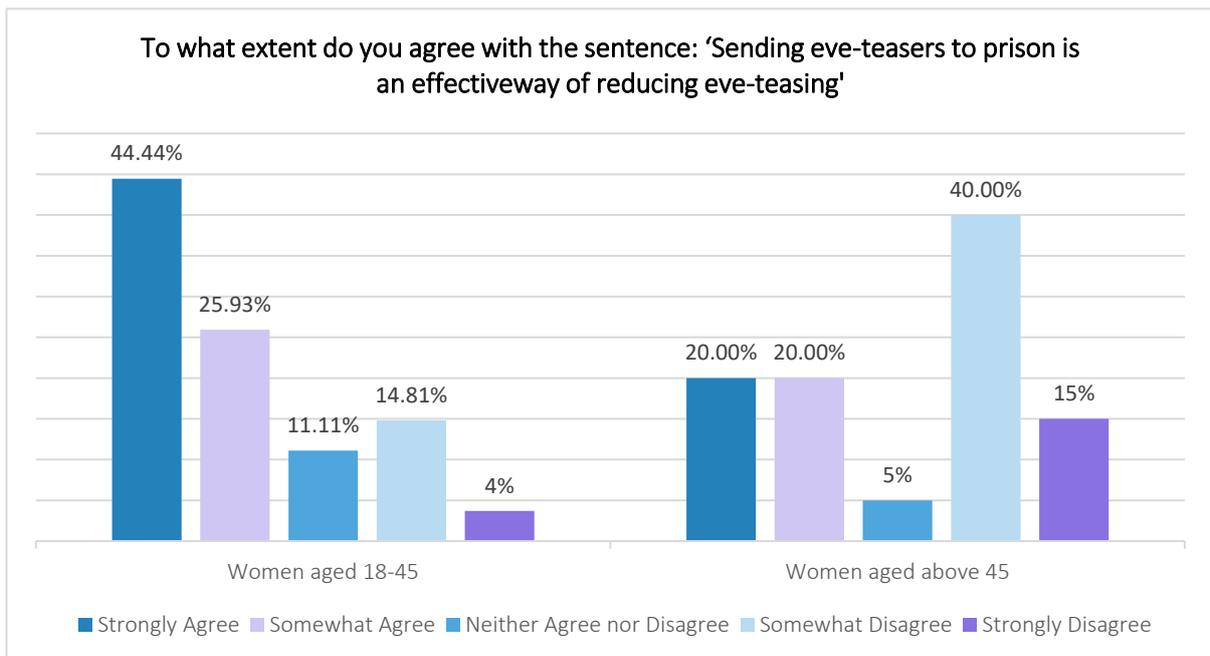


Figure 10

Conclusion

Eve-teasing remains a euphemism that lends itself to ambiguity. Its understandings are not shaped by the term alone, but also by the stigma women face when entering the public space in India. In a society where women are expected to remain at home, controlled by the men in their families, those who dare enter the ‘masculine’ public sphere irrevocably face the anger of men who feel entitled to harass women. The intrinsic patriarchal hierarchies of Indian society that place women as subordinates of men, eclipse the seriousness of eve-teasing, which is normalised into society as an action men have the right to, and women must endure.

Societal practices, however, do not drive eve-teasing alone. While Mahila Mitra focusses on bridging the gap between the people and the police in Vijayawada City, members’ opinions indicated the police may instead be widening it. The sole fact that most participants believed that fining and imprisoning eve-teasers is an effective way of ending eve-teasing, when the organisation advocates for the opposite, proves not enough is being done on the part of the police to curb eve-teasers’ behaviour. This may be due to the failure of the Indian penal system to implement vague laws tackling eve-teasing, and/or because some police share societal views on the inferiority of women. Through counselling eve-teasers, transformative education in schools, and even conducting sessions for parents and elders, Mahila Mitra will slowly challenge societal expectations in Vijayawada, yet the inadequate legal system and reluctant police will get in the way. During the discussions, some members even called out the need for more publicity and agency on behalf of the organisation, to turn against the police, and address eve-teasing cases themselves.

If one conclusion must be drawn, it is that transformative education and the restructuring of the law and order, must work hand in hand to ensure the eradication of eve-teasing. Individually, neither solution will succeed. Eve-teasing is a much more complicated issue to uproot than it initially appears to be, with its drivers stemming both from societal and structural factors, but we must keep fighting to make the public space safe for all women.

This study has aimed to explore the understandings, drivers and solutions of eve-teasing, within the limitations of Mahila Mitra members’ views and Vijayawada City. Future research should gain a deeper insight into the distinct eve-teasing experiences of women from different castes and religions, as well as people with different gender identities and sexual

orientations, an area that remains unexplored in academia, and illustrate what specific educational and legal solutions might lead to its eradication.

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