

2019 SOPA Awards Nomination
for WOMEN'S ISSUES



Sexual Violence is Holding Back the Rise of India's Economy

By Archana Chaudhary, Saritha Rai
and Dhvani Pandya
May 29, 2018

- ▶ Indian women drop out of the workforce due to safety concerns
- ▶ In capital New Delhi, there are more than five rapes daily

There are two things New Delhi marketing executive Khyati Malhotra never leaves home without: Her taser and a pepper spray.

It's just part of the investment she makes to stay safe in a country where crimes reported against women have surged over 80 percent in a decade and deadly cases of sexual violence often roil cities and villages. So a chunk of Malhotra's salary goes into a car and driver to avoid the dangers of public transport, where women are cat-called, groped and assaulted.

In Bangalore, Vidya Laxman, an executive at a multinational in India, pays for a battalion of household help and security cameras to keep her children safe. Sajna Nair of Delhi figures she's lost almost \$200,000 in earnings after quitting a bank job because she couldn't find safe childcare for her daughter.

In recent months, the rape, torture and murder of an eight-year-old girl in the state of Jammu, an 11-year-old in Gujarat and the rape of 16-year-old in Uttar Pradesh have laid bare how India treats its women and children. Lawmakers have said they will push for more stringent punishments to deter such crimes.

Meanwhile, dozens of interviews reveal a less acknowledged economic effect: Increasingly afraid for their own and their children's safety, many women are simply leaving the workforce or taking lower-paying jobs.

In the eight years from 2004, about 20 million women (the size of the combined populations of New York, London and Paris) vanished from India's workforce, the World Bank estimates.

"There's no place where I could leave my child without worrying about safety," said Indu Bhandari, who quit a lucrative corporate career to teach because of those worries. "Having been a target of sexual abuse as a child, I knew first-hand what I could be exposing my child to."

Decisions like hers are a blow to foreign and local companies looking to hire more women in Asia's third largest economy. They also threaten Prime Minister Narendra Modi's agenda as he pushes to attract foreign investment and boost India's economic heft globally. India shows just how much violence and sexual assault against women can hold back communities — and an entire nation.

India could increase its GDP by \$770 billion by 2025 by getting more women to work and increasing equality, according to McKinsey Global Institute. Yet, only 27 percent of Indian women are in employment. That's the lowest among the major emerging nations and G-20 countries, and better only than Saudi Arabia, according to the publication IndiaSpend.

"If we are able to establish a safer environment, definitely more women will step out for jobs, adding to the workforce," said Anjali Verma, an economist at PhillipCapital in Mumbai. "In a decade this may contribute to higher overall consumption, savings, and economic growth." Girija Borker, a Ph.D. candidate in economics at Brown University, in a study of more than 4,000 women at Delhi University found female students willing to pay almost \$300 more than men for a safer travel route because most faced some form of street harassment. "With the rapid urbanization, India needs better policies for women's safety," Borker said.



Nanda Majumdar at her home in Mumbai, India.
PHOTOGRAPHER: KAREN DIAS/BLOOMBERG

In India, preference for male children has skewed the gender balance, leading to a whopping 37 million more men than women. Two-thirds of the country live in villages that follow feudal, caste and gender hierarchies. That means many women never make formal complaints when they are harassed, and perpetrators often go unpunished. It also makes it hard to draw international comparisons.

Crimes against women surged 83 percent from 2007 to 2016, government data show, resulting in 39 crimes every hour.

Public pressure forced lawmakers to recommend the death penalty for child rapists and they are debating a similar punishment for the rape of women. Many businesses are spending more on transport and other benefits to women. Yet filling all the gaps is hard.

“In most advanced economies there are social structures, better travel infrastructure, better creches,” said Nanda Majumdar, who heads intellectual capital and professional development at law firm Nishith Desai Associates.

Nair said she could have invested earnings from her more lucrative financial career in the property or stock markets. She now runs a public relations business.

In New Delhi, Zeba, 25, is heartbroken after male family members refused to let her go to nursing school after a rape nearby. “Things would have been so different if I was a man,” said Zeba. “I would certainly have been richer.”

Below are excerpts from the women Bloomberg interviewed. In their own voices they show the price India's women — and its economy — are paying.

The school teacher



Indu Bhandari near her home.
PHOTOGRAPHER: RUHANI KAUR/BLOOMBERG

Indu Bhandari, 39, lives in Noida, a suburb east of Delhi. Worked for corporations for more than a decade and was in the U.S. before returning to India.

I was first abused as a three-year-old by a man who worked at our home. One of my father's colleagues abused me when I was six years old.

On giving up a well-paid freelance gig: I had to use public transport for part of my travel. There was no separate compartment for women. I remember how one man rubbed himself against me. I punched him. But such an incident shakes you up, disgusts you. I tried to brave it for three months or so. But then decided I'd had enough.

How could I work when I know these things happen to kids in our homes? I had no safe options. So I gave up a lucrative career. I now teach at a school.

There are thousands of mothers who like me are working in schools in spite of being qualified to do so many other things.

The business owner



Sajna Nair on the balcony of her home.
PHOTOGRAPHER: RUHANI KAUR/BLOOMBERG

Sajna Nair, 42, lives and works in Delhi.

Given the reported and unreported but whispered stories of abuse and neglect, I remember doing things like requesting neighbors or friends to drop in unannounced to check on my child. But it became tough to balance this paranoia. I simply quit. This country doesn't care for its daughters and women.

If I had continued, I would have been an associate vice president or vice president at some company. And of course, companies have lost the money they invested in training me.

The multinational executive



Vidya Laxman, center, and her mother, who helps look after the children when she is away on business, talk to the gardener.

PHOTOGRAPHER:SAMYUKTA LAKSHMI/BLOOMBERG

Vidya Laxman, 45, works in Bangalore, now called Bengaluru.

After reading about the recent rapes, the trust in the community is gone. I'm a marathon runner but I don't run early mornings or late evenings. I wait until it's fully light. I used to be scared of encounters with stray dogs and creepy men.

Now I'm no longer afraid of the dogs, I'm terrified of the men who flash women on the streets

When I take an Uber, I always get off a little distance off and walk home. I don't want the driver to find out where I live.

At home, I have a full support system in place as I have two kids, a 16-year-old boy and a 11-year-old girl. I always take precautions while hiring staff, including thorough background checks. I have security cameras installed at home.

What I pay to set all this up is one thing. But it's the hidden price that is troubling.

I've decided to put in sensor-based cameras so that my husband and I can track the stream on our cellphones.

At work, we have upgraded transport systems for employees and enabled it with technology. We have an app that allows users to set off an alarm if needed.

Career-wise I've made big compromises. I only considered offers from product-based companies and deliberately ignored roles in services companies because of the insane travel involved.

Companies need to partner with the government and civic agencies on women's safety. Companies in tech parks all over Bangalore can all get together to work out solutions for their employees' safety. There are many women who drop off the work force because of the late hours and the safety angle. We are letting those women down. We have to find a way.

The marketing executive



Khyati Malhotra uses her phone in the back seat of her car.
PHOTOGRAPHER:RUHANI KAUR/BLOOMBERG

Khyati Malhotra lives in New Delhi.

For as long as I can remember, I've always had a car and driver, even when the driver's salary and petrol expenses meant half of my salary.

Traveling in public transport whenever I tried to save money meant having to watch my back at all times and gave me goosebumps.

I've been stalked even when traveling by car. Once the auto-rickshaw I was traveling in was being followed by a group of guys in a car. When we stopped at a traffic light, we found a police van waiting by our side. I told the policeman what was happening, the police simply drove away.

A friend's car was trailed by a man for more than 20 kilometers while she was trying to drop me to a train station.

The kindergarten worker

Zeba, 25, works in Madanpur Khadar, a low-income settlement on Delhi's outskirts.

I don't want to depend on anyone for my finances -- not on my husband or on my brothers. I want a career in nursing because you can also go abroad. Earlier this year, I had found a course in Dadri, Uttar Pradesh.

I had managed to convince my family. We filled admission forms. Then last month there was a rape in Dadri. Now my brothers have put their foot down. They say it's too unsafe.

People keep saying things are getting worse. And I think they are. Especially after the 2012 rape. People say more women are complaining. But I feel like more men are also challenging us now. It's like: "You think you will be protected if you speak up, we'll make it worse."

With every rape case in the news, restrictions increase. I'm under pressure to get married. To not pursue a career.

The maid



Monika Ghosh walks the lane she travels to work. Monika leaves work by 6 pm and is picked up by her husband to avoid walking the track alone at night.
PHOTOGRAPHER: RUHANI KAUR/BLOOMBERG

Monika Ghosh, 40, works in Noida.

A woman with no support systems has limited choices. If there were systems to protect me, things would have been so much easier. If there were jobs, creches, safe roads.

I now work at a home in a gated community and make about 12,000 rupees a month. But I could earn up to 20,000 rupees if I stay full time or at least till 8 p.m.

The reason why I can't is because the place where I work in Noida has no buses or safe transport. There are villages beyond these gated societies and the roads are unsafe.

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#MeToo's

Twitter Gatekeepers Power

a People's Campaign in India

By Bhuma Shrivastava, Ari Altstedter
and Archana Chaudhary
Oct 23, 2018

- ▶ Unlike in U.S., Indian movement erupted initially on Twitter
- ▶ Google visualization shows India ablaze with #MeToo searches

It was a seemingly harmless tweet that enraged Mahima Kukreja and put the 28-year-old on the frontline of India's #MeToo firestorm.

The advertising professional was on her way to work Oct. 4 when she saw a message from popular comedian Utsav Chakraborty, who has a television show and nearly 50,000 Twitter followers, about a recent incident of Indian men behaving badly on a cruise ship in Australia, which he said was an "embarrassment" to fellow citizens. Wasn't this the same person who'd sent her an unsolicited photograph of a penis two years ago?

"I was like, 'this is a man standing on some moral high ground after harassing me,' Kukreja recalled during an interview at a Mumbai cafe. "At that moment, I wasn't thinking of consequences. I thought: 'This is it. I'm just going to come out with my story.'"

She replied to his tweet with her allegations. Chakraborty issued a public apology within hours, in which he admitted to sending such photographs to several women and blamed it on a haze of painkillers to control a chronic illness. He couldn't immediately comment when reached directly.

Mahima Kukreja is on the frontline of India's #Me Too firestorm.
PHOTOGRAPHER: DHIRAJ SINGH/BLOOMBERG

Bloomberg

Soon a wave of messages hit Kukreja's inbox. Many were expressing sympathy and solidarity, but others were from women requesting her to voice their own experiences of harassment and assault with various men they'd met at and outside the workplace.



Kukreja speaks to an attendee at a #MeToo event in Mumbai.
PHOTOGRAPHER: DHIRAJ SINGH/BLOOMBERG

Sifting through these notes and publishing some of them on Twitter has since become a full-time job for Kukreja and a few other women. They are pouring in from across a country where casual harassment of women in homes, on streets and public transport, and in the office, are as common as the expectation that victims will stay silent.

Life on the frontlines of India's #MeToo is different from the movement that swept the U.S. While America was more focused on workplace harassment, India's campaign has taken on a more diffuse character. Here, a small group of women are effectively gatekeepers for allegations -- shared over social media, sometimes anonymously -- that range from inappropriate touching in public spaces and misconduct in personal relationships, to predatory behavior by men in power.

In the year since the #MeToo movement took hold in the U.S., allegations of sexual harassment brought low more than 400 men, the majority of them Americans. While sister protests popped up in Sweden, Japan and elsewhere, nothing seemed to stick until now in India. However, over the past three weeks, dozens of Indian men have been named for allegedly violating consent.

Several top journalists have stepped down in its wake, as have executives at local units of Dentsu Aegis and Fox Star Studios, while the Indian owner of Jaguar Land Rover put an employee on leave pending investigation. Chakraborty's TV show was canceled. A production house that partnered with Netflix Inc. has been dissolved and last week a minister, M.J. Akbar, resigned after more than a dozen women, including a Bloomberg journalist based in London, issued public statements against him.

The women allege that Akbar sexually harassed them or engaged in other inappropriate behavior decades ago during his time as an editor of several Indian publications. He has denied the allegations and filed a defamation suit against one accuser.

Different From U.S.

For Indian women, Twitter and Facebook offer a safe space to narrate their stories, and the naming and shaming has been loudest on social media. This contrasts with the U.S., where the initial bombshell accusations were first published in well-respected, national publications.

“The freedom of the press, protected by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, makes it possible for investigative journalists to publish stories on #MeToo,” said Alka Kurian, a professor at the University of Washington, who studies feminist politics in South Asia. In developing countries, “state censorship laws, threats to job or even life, cultural taboos, or a broken justice system, hamper investigative journalism. In such a situation, social media has played a powerful role.”

A [GoogleTrends visualization](#) of hotspots for #MeToo searches around the world shows India's landmass alight with sparkling gold dots that represent unusually high reader interest. After initially being dominated by global metropolises, the top five most active urban centers where people searched for the term over the past week have been a rotating constellation of smaller Indian cities.

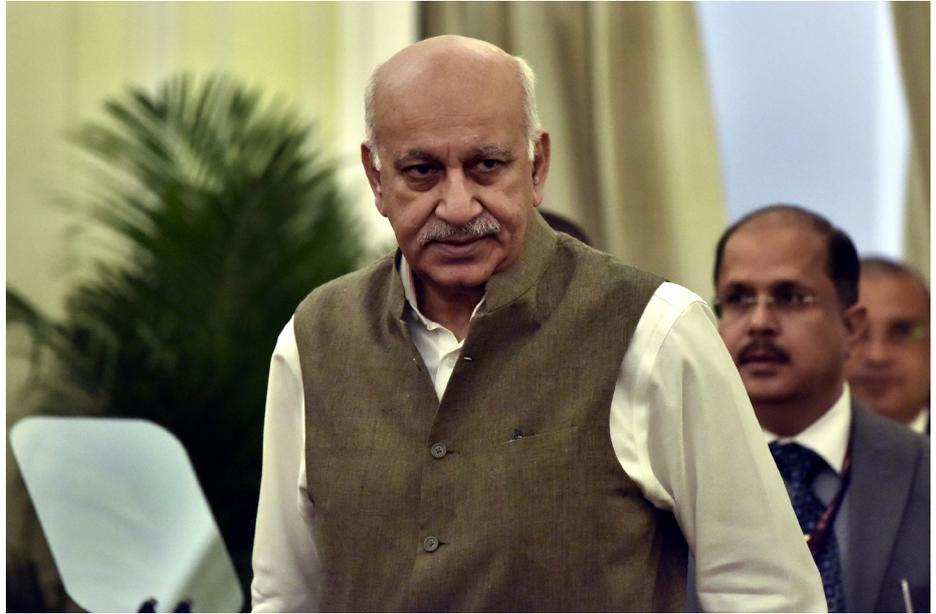
About 1,000 kilometers away from Mumbai, in the southern city of Bengaluru, freelance journalist Sandhya Menon was following the Twitter exchange between Kukreja and the comedian. The Brett Kavanaugh hearing -- about allegations of a sexual assault against the then U.S. Supreme Court nominee -- was fresh in her mind and the 39-year-old had been thinking about how she had ignored instances of harassment in her career.



Sandhya Menon.
PHOTOGRAPHER: DHIRAJ SINGH/BLOOMBERG

“That’s when I put out those tweets,” Menon said, referring to a series of messages about three prominent male journalists, which contained accusations including inappropriate touching, some of which while they worked together. “Something snapped.”

Menon, Kukreja and a handful of like-minded women are now the gatekeepers of the movement, listening to the allegations, drawing out stories, determining if the victims want to go public, and debating on the best way to do it.



M.J. Akar.
PHOTOGRAPHER: SONU MEHTA/HINDUSTAN TIMES VIA GETTY IMAGES

The backlash has already begun. Former minister Akbar, the most high-profile man to be accused in the campaign, in a statement earlier this month called the allegations “false and fabricated, spiced up by innuendo and malice.” The criminal defamation case he filed can carry a penalty of as much as two years in jail, another key difference from the U.S. where such laws are more defendant-friendly.

“The danger is the case will prevent individuals from speaking out,” said Indira Jaising, an advocate in India’s Supreme Court who has been publicly supportive of #MeToo. “It’s going to be a major test for the Indian legal system.”

Akbar’s case was admitted into court on Thursday and a hearing is scheduled for Oct. 31. Conscious of repercussions, Menon and Kukreja are stepping up due diligence, ensuring they know the identity of accusers contacting them, and pressing for details that would back up accusations. Menon says she’s wary of fueling a trial-by-Twitter, as emotions run high.

Both say the situation is taking a toll on their lives. Menon, a freelancer, hasn’t been able to concentrate on projects and isn’t sure of her next paycheck. Kukreja, a writer with an advertising firm, said she’d suffered panic attacks due to the stress but her employer has been supportive, by allowing her breaks and easing out deadlines.

The campaign is creating ripples offline too. Kukreja recalls speaking with a small-town girl, who said the #MeToo movement has emboldened her to talk to her father about being abused by his friend. Lawyer Devika Singh is seeing increasing instances of companies reviewing past practices and tightening compliance with India's sexual harassment laws. The National Commission For Women on Friday set up a dedicated email to receive such complaints.



A discussion with Sandhya and Mahima at a #MeToo event in Mumbai.
PHOTOGRAPHER: DHIRAJ SINGH/BLOOMBERG

India's #MeToo champions are now urging women to combine the high visibility of the campaign with potentially "agonizing" but legally empowered routes for recourse such as the NCW and filing police reports. That's one way to fix formal processes, which are broken and often in favor of powerful men, they say.

"We should continue to amplify these voices on social media and at the same time continue to file written complaints," Menon said. "If more women go through due process, this movement will get more traction."



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#MeToo's

Comes to Bollywood After

Actor Alleges Sexual Harassment

By Archana Chaudhary
and Ari Altstedter
Oct 10, 2018

- ▶ Decade-old misconduct allegation sparks flood of accusations
- ▶ Actors, comedians, journalists identified in Twitter posts

Almost a year to the day after the #MeToo movement upended Hollywood it has arrived in the world's biggest film industry, Bollywood, and is spreading through India.

In recent weeks a decade-old sexual misconduct allegation against a popular male movie star in the Hindi film industry has been reported to police and a production house that partnered with Netflix Inc. on its first local hit has been dissolved amid allegations against a founder. Also, the chief executive of a pioneering comedy troupe has resigned after it admitted that he failed to take action when an employee was accused of sending lewd photographs to women.

Now Twitter is being flooded with allegations of inappropriate behavior by prominent men in India. The outpouring comes as the country grapples with a mass exodus of women from the workforce for a variety of reasons: Nearly 20 million women dropped out of the labor market between 2004-2005 and 2011-2012, according to a World Bank report.

“The whole culture of silence and shame has been existing not just in Bollywood, but in Indian society as a whole,” said actor Tanushree Dutta, who alleged last month that she was sexually harassed on a movie set in 2008. “I was just speaking the same truths I have been speaking for the last 10 years. Ten years ago there weren’t any takers.”

Twitter Storm

Dutta has alleged that she was sexually harassed by actor Nana Patekar on a movie set, where her complaints were ignored. The actor has spoken publicly about the incident before. Yet in the wake of the #MeToo movement her interview set off a Twitter storm of support and criticism as well as accusations against other actors, directors, comedians and journalists.

Patekar has denied the allegation, according to newspaper reports, and said he made the same denial 10 years ago. He canceled a press conference on the issue and said in a televised statement that he’d been advised against speaking to the media. His lawyer has sent a legal notice to Dutta asking her to apologize or face further action, Reuters reported.



Nana Patekar.
PHOTOGRAPHER: AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Meanwhile, a partner at Phantom Films Pvt., which recently produced the Sacred Games series for Netflix, announced that the company was being dissolved after the Huffington Post sought a response to allegations against Vikas Bahl, another partner. Bahl is alleged to have sexually assaulted a crew member in her hotel room in 2015.

When asked what the dissolution would mean for the second season of Sacred Games, a Netflix spokeswoman said by email: “We are evaluating options on the path forward.”

Bahl denied the allegation when it was previously reported in 2017 by the Mumbai Mirror. The newspaper reported on Wednesday that Bahl had sent legal notices to two Phantom Films partners accusing them of orchestrating a campaign against him. He didn’t respond to a text message seeking comment.



Vikas Bahl.
PHOTOGRAPHER: PARVEEN KUMAR/HINDUSTAN TIMES VIA GETTY IMAGES

Spreading Quickly

The first politician to be named as the #MeToo movement gained momentum was M J Akbar, India's junior foreign minister and a former editor. The Indian Express reported Wednesday on several women's allegations of inappropriate behavior by Akbar during his time in the news business, while a first-person account in The Wire alleged that he had sexually harassed a young journalist over many months during his time as editor in the 1990s.

Foreign ministry spokesman Raveesh Kumar declined to comment, while Akbar did not immediately respond to emails sent to his work and personal accounts.

Maneka Gandhi, the minister for women and child development, has said that allegations of sexual harassment against anybody should be taken seriously and that there is no time limit on coming forward with such complaints, according to interviews in the local media.

The allegations against Akbar open up a new risk for India's political parties, which count among their state and federal representatives, politicians facing 48 cases related to crimes against women, based on data from the Association for Democratic Reforms, which works toward better governance in politics. Akbar has no such cases against him.

India has long grappled with the issue of women's safety and a 2012 gang rape and murder of a 23-year-old in New Delhi sparked a public outcry. Crimes reported against women have surged over 80 percent in a decade, pushing some out of the workforce due to safety concerns, Bloomberg reported earlier this year.



A protest in Dec. 2012 against the Indian government's reaction to recent rape incidents.
PHOTOGRAPHER: DANIEL BEREHULAK/GETTY IMAGES

Economic Costs

This comes at a cost to Asia's third-largest economy, which could boost its gross domestic product by 27 percent if female labor force participation levels were equal to those of men, International Monetary Fund Managing Director Christine Lagarde has said.

Far from making strides in that direction, the share of women who work in India shrank to about 24 percent in 2015-2016 from 36 percent a decade earlier, according to a government report.

"There will definitely be more," women coming forward as part of this wave, said Karuna Nundy, a senior lawyer in India's Supreme Court. "These women are asking that the mechanisms of justice must be fixed. They are demanding safe spaces and that they be heard."