

---

# Taking a Feminist Approach to Feminist Futures

**Naveena Karusala**

Georgia Institute of Technology  
Atlanta, Georgia, USA  
nkarusala3@gatech.edu

**Michael Muller**

IBM Research  
Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA  
michael\_muller@us.ibm.com

**Neha Kumar**

Georgia Institute of Technology  
Atlanta, Georgia, USA  
neha.kumar@gatech.edu

---

Paste the appropriate copyright statement here. ACM now supports three different copyright statements:

- ACM copyright: ACM holds the copyright on the work. This is the historical approach.
- License: The author(s) retain copyright, but ACM receives an exclusive publication license.
- Open Access: The author(s) wish to pay for the work to be open access. The additional fee must be paid to ACM.

This text field is large enough to hold the appropriate release statement assuming it is single spaced in a sans-serif 7 point font.

Every submission will be assigned their own unique DOI string to be included here.

**Abstract**

We present considerations for incorporating intersectionality into designing for women's safety. Our previous work on women's safety in New Delhi (India) provides an understanding of safety for women of relatively high socioeconomic status, which works as a starting point for further research into the intersection of gender with social class, race, religion, and more. We provide examples of work on women's safety in diverse contexts, highlighting that design considerations vary with different intersections. With the end goal being women's empowerment, we propose that designers ask what safety and feminism look like in the communities they are working with, taking care to note how these views might differ from mainstream feminism, why, and how they might be factored into approaches to design.

**Author Keywords**

Women; Safety; Cross-Cultural; India; HCI4D

**Introduction**

In recent years, women's safety in India has received a great deal of attention. The 2012 gangrape of a 23 year old woman in New Delhi [12], India's capital, prompted an exceptional amount of outrage and protests throughout India and the world [11]. In an effort to address women's safety in public spaces, the Indian government issued a mandate that every new phone must feature a panic button

by 2017 [20]. Our investigation into women's reactions to the panic button led to a better understanding of their conceptualization of safety, showing that it is affected not only by women's own actions, but also safety in public spaces, technology use, social presence and influence, perception of law enforcement, and media coverage of women's safety.

These findings on women's safety in the public spaces of New Delhi are a starting point for understanding safety in other contexts as well. We studied mostly women from middle to high socioeconomic backgrounds in an urban area, but what does safety look like for women of low socioeconomic status in New Delhi? What does it look like for women in rural areas? Pulling our lens back even further, what does safety look like in cases of police brutality, war-torn areas, or across borders? Most importantly, what are women's own goals for safety in each of these scenarios?

In this position paper, we describe prior work on women's safety in diverse (though not exhaustive) contexts to highlight the effects of different types of privileges. We then discuss how researchers can approach future work in designing for women's safety and the complexities of using an intersectional framework.

### **Related Work**

Within India, the gap in women's safety is most obvious between urban and rural areas, which are often associated with "modern" and "backwards", respectively. In fact, prior work has proposed that the unprecedented reaction to the Nirbhaya rape case<sup>1</sup> stemmed from the fact that Nirbhaya was a middle-class and "modern" woman [15].

Her relatability galvanized largely urban middle class youth

---

<sup>1</sup>The victim was labeled Nirbhaya or fearless by the media and the masses in honor of the brave fight she put up, before losing her life on account of the wounds inflicted on her by the rapists.

[15] who saw themselves in her, and those women had the privilege of being heard by the government. However, the rape of rural or Adivasi (tribal) women has not received the same attention [15]. The underlying assumption behind these reactions in India is that when one does not have resources, issues with safety in public spaces will naturally arise—lack of safety is something that privileged women may be able to reduce [13]. And so even the panic button, a national mandate that covers both smartphones and feature phones, does not consider women who do not have phones or must rely on someone else for access to a phone. Further, the panic button assumes a full cell network, and thus may leave women in rural areas unprotected (or women who are walking through underground tunnels, or women who work in buildings that block cell service).

Women from families with very traditional values, often from rural areas of India, are subject to additional forms of violence. Families looking to have their daughter married must pay a dowry to the groom's family. Families of low socioeconomic status may be unable to afford high dowries, and their daughter is often punished for it by the in-laws through violence and mistreatment [17]. Such devaluation of girls and women is so extreme that families in both rural and urban India have been using prenatal selection to avoid having girls at all [17, 14]. Here, women's sense of safety is destroyed by virtue of their family's socioeconomic standing.

Women of religious minorities in India are also particularly vulnerable to sexual assault, especially in areas harboring armed-conflict. The states of Gujarat, Odisha, Punjab, and Kashmir have been subject to militarization at the hands of majority religious groups or armed forces that are not restricted by rules of conduct [1]. As a result, police and military personnel are often the perpetrators of sexual assault [1]. They further abuse their power by actively preventing

women from filing reports on sexual assault, refusing to collect evidence, and revictimizing women during interviews [1]. Women in these situations face these types of violence because of their gender, but are specifically targeted for their religious beliefs. The state-sanctioned nature of these instances of violence also embolden law enforcement and military personnel to do as they please.

Police affect women's safety in other contexts as well. Indian media investigations of senior level police officers have revealed a culture of victim-blaming, blaming sexual assault on women because they had a boyfriend or were at a bar [9]. The women in our own study have stated that police who respond to cases of sexual assault can be insensitive, further questioning and blaming the woman to the point that women do not prefer contacting police for help.

These issues extend to the United States as well, where fear of law enforcement greatly affects some women's relationship with the police. For example, immigrant Latina women contact the police far less than their experiences with domestic violence might indicate because of worry over their immigration status [2]. Additionally, there have been cases of police not responding to domestic violence reports, inappropriate medical examinations, and unpunished assault of women while in state custody [16]. Because black women are more likely to depend on public services, violence inflicted by state agencies affect them disproportionately [16]. Violence against women in state custody has also been well-documented, and greatly affects black women who are subject to stereotypes of sexual promiscuity [16].

Some vulnerabilities of groups of women are written into law. In the United States, a non-indigenous person cannot be tried in an indigenous court (e.g., a court on Native land, with court officers chosen by a Native American or Alaska

Native government) [19, 5]. The practical outcome of this law is that non-Native men prey upon Native women on reservations or in tribal reserves, and can generally rape with impunity [19, 5]—a persistent legalized framework that reflects a long history of sexual violence to enforce the colonialized position of women of color in the Americas [5]. In a 2006 survey, 48 percent of Native American/Alaska Native women reported being raped [7]. An earlier survey reported that this demographic of women face violence at the highest rate of any group of women in the United States [18]. In these cases, sexual violence intersects with racism through legal structures.

Women experiencing natural disaster face economic loss, to which women of lower socioeconomic status may be less resilient due to already existing food insecurity, lack of access to healthcare, insecure employment, and vulnerable homes [6]. In light of economic trouble, women receiving targeted aid can spark family conflict and abuse [6]. Women who need to migrate to find new jobs face a higher risk of rape and abuse, and women facing homelessness after a disaster sometimes have no choice but to return to their abusers [6].

Clearly, the definition of safety and the circumstances that break down one's sense of safety vary widely, not only across gender, but also across race and social class. Living in certain contexts also presents specific challenges that amplify women's safety issues. Based on this perspective, breaking down and exploring women's safety in various spaces (e.g., private or public), cultures, legal standings, and contexts (e.g., public safety, disasters, armed conflict, police violence) is of utmost importance.

## What Does Empowerment Look Like?

We assume that the value of studying women's safety is to understand how women can be safer and therefore less affected by the negative physical, psychological, or social effects of lack of safety. This begs the question of what safety means to different women. For example, is it the end of domestic violence or the ability to contact law enforcement without harassment or even both? What needs to change from the status quo to make women safer and what are the impacts of lack of safety? Questioning who women trust to ensure safety is also essential. Is the responsibility on women themselves, or community leaders, or the government, or one's family? Most importantly, we must understand the overarching goals of women within a community. Khoja-Moolji calls this effective feminism and calls for asking women for their own definition of empowerment [10].

This perspective, however, becomes complicated by the fact that patriarchy is insidious and can be present even in girls' and women's aspirations. Numerous proposed methodologies for feminist design take this into account and call for a recognition or uprooting of the patriarchal values within an individual's worldview. Fox and Rosner's research on feminist design distinguishes designs that better match the user's needs within a current system from designs that reimagine technology [8]. Buskens proposes that designers think about what the purpose of their work is—to conform to, reform, or transform existing ideas about patriarchy [4]. Finally, Bardzell's feminist HCI framework calls for the principle of advocacy, pointing out that status quo values can be harmful and that designers must be honest about their view of empowerment and how it differs from that of others [3].

Considering these contrasting views, we bring to attention that intersectional design and feminist design are not

always automatically compatible. In our own work, the women in our study relied heavily upon precaution and restriction of movement to ensure their safety and did not find the panic button particularly useful as a result. This conception is rooted in their privilege as women who can afford smartphones, private transportation, and coming home from work before sunset, but does not imagine the possibilities of unlimited mobility and confidence in public spaces (which we, who conducted the study, saw as ideal). Utilizing the methods described above by Fox and Rosner, Buskens, and Bardzell are essential for reflecting on one's own views on feminism as a designer in tandem with a community's conceptions of feminism.

## Conclusion

An intersectional approach results in more specific definitions of feminism. We wish to point out that these definitions are essential for designing appropriate technologies but also may not entirely reimagine what emancipation can look like. Transformative ideas related to women's safety can be particularly difficult to generate because of the seriousness and pervasiveness of the issue. It is difficult to imagine a world in which safety is not an issue for women. The consequences of lack of safety can also be irreversible and incredibly traumatic, making avoidance of dangerous situations the primary instinct. However, within the design process, we propose that feminism in intersectionality is something that deserves careful attention.

## References

- [1] Roxanna Altholz, Angana Chatterji, Laurel E Fletcher, and Mallika Kaur. 2015. Access to Justice for Women: India's Response to Sexual Violence in Conflict and Social Upheaval. *Available at SSRN 2758851* (2015).
- [2] Nawal H Ammar, Leslye E Orloff, Mary Ann Dutton, and Giselle Aguilar-Hass. 2005. Calls to police and

- police response: A case study of Latina immigrant women in the USA. *International Journal of Police Science & Management* 7, 4 (2005), 230–244.
- [3] Shaowen Bardzell. 2010. Feminist HCI: taking stock and outlining an agenda for design. In *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. ACM, 1301–1310.
- [4] NJ Bidwell and H Winschiers-Theophilus. 2015. Infusing a Gender Perspective in Indigenous Knowledge Technology Design: Some Reflections and Suggestions. *At the Intersection of Indigenous and Traditional Knowledge and Technology Design* (2015), 297.
- [5] Sarah Deer. 2004. Toward an indigenous jurisprudence of rape. *Kan. JL & Pub. Pol'y* 14 (2004), 121.
- [6] Elaine Enarson, Alice Fothergill, and Lori Peek. 2007. Gender and disaster: Foundations and directions. In *Handbook of disaster research*. Springer, 130–146.
- [7] Teresa Evans-Campbell, Taryn Lindhorst, Bu Huang, and Karina L Walters. 2006. Interpersonal violence in the lives of urban American Indian and Alaska Native women: Implications for health, mental health, and help-seeking. *American Journal of Public Health* 96, 8 (2006), 1416–1422.
- [8] Sarah Fox and Daniel K Rosner. 2016. Inversions of Design: Examining the limits of human-centered perspectives in a feminist design workshop image. (2016).
- [9] Al Jazeera. 2012. Are Women Safe in India? (2012).
- [10] Shenila Khoja-Moolji. 2016. For many women and girls the white, Western liberal ideal of girlhood is neither possible nor desired. (2016).
- [11] Sharmila Lodhia. 2015. From “living corpse” to India’s daughter: Exploring the social, political and legal landscape of the 2012 Delhi gang rape. In *Women’s Studies International Forum*, Vol. 50. Elsevier, 89–101.
- [12] Niharika Mandhana and Anjani Trivedi. 2012. Indians Outraged Over Rape on Moving Bus in New Delhi. (2012).
- [13] Aparna Mitra and Pooja Singh. 2007. Human capital attainment and gender empowerment: the Kerala paradox. *Social Science Quarterly* 88, 5 (2007), 1227–1242.
- [14] Sucharita Sinha Mukherjee. 2013. Women’s empowerment and gender bias in the birth and survival of girls in urban India. *Feminist Economics* 19, 1 (2013), 1–28.
- [15] Rishita Nandagiri. 2015. Outraging Whom? *Postcolonial Studies Association newsletter* (2015), 8.
- [16] Beth Richie. 2012. *Arrested justice: Black women, violence, and America’s prison nation*. NYU Press.
- [17] TV Sekher and Neelambar Hatti. 2010. Disappearing daughters and intensification of gender bias: Evidence from two village studies in South India. *Sociological Bulletin* (2010), 111–133.
- [18] Patricia Tjaden and Nancy Thoennes. 1998. Prevalence, Incidence, and Consequences of Violence against Women: Findings from the National Violence against Women Survey. Research in Brief. (1998).
- [19] Hilary N Weaver. 2009. The Colonial Context of Violence Reflections on Violence in the Lives of Native American Women. *Journal of interpersonal violence* 24, 9 (2009), 1552–1563.
- [20] Huizhong Wu. 2016. India says every phone must have a panic button by 2017. (2016).