POLICY BRIEF

WOMEN'S SAFETY AUDIT REPORT

UN WOMEN

💬 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The safety of women and girls involves not only being safe from sexual violence and harassment, but also from the fear of experiencing such violence and harassment, and the negative consequences of that fear for their wholesome participation in the public life. Safety issues in public spaces – such as streets, markets, parks, workplaces, public transportation, restaurants, schools, health centres, shelters, displacement and refugee camps, grazing areas, and water and fodder collection areas – seriously restrict women and girls' mobility, imposing significant limits on their ability to engage in economic, social, political and leisure activities.

The Women's Safety Audit (WSA) is a participatory research approach aimed at assessing the safety and security concerns of women in public spaces and identifying measures to protect them. The objective of the Women Safety Audit (WSA) is to gain an understanding of the specific safety concerns faced by women and girls, particularly in the context of disaster preparedness and response, including the COVID-19 pandemic. The WSA report identifies the types of violence Nepali women experience in public spaces, analyzes the accessibility, functionality, and gaps in existing safety and security measures, and provides recommendations for the way forward.
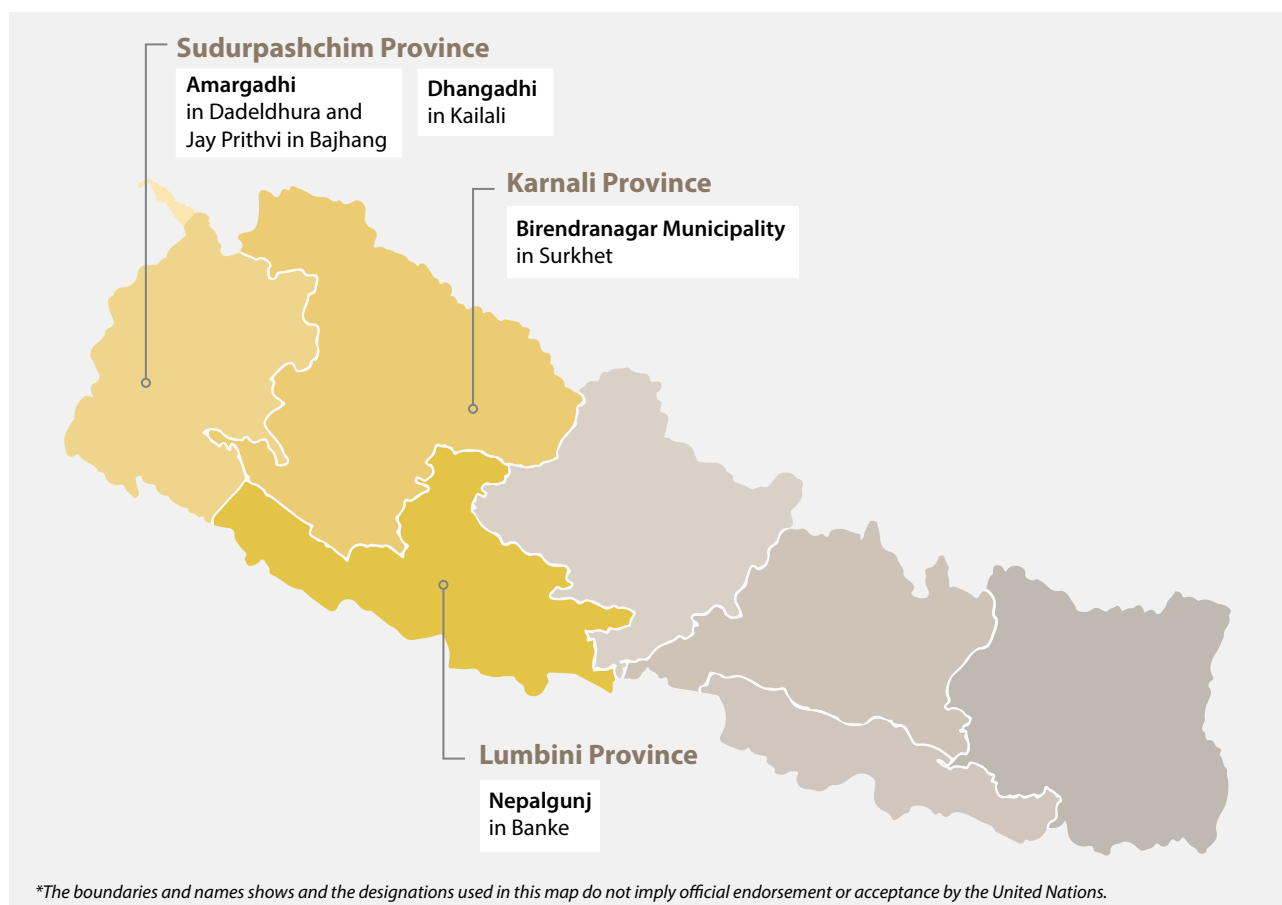
METHODOLOGY

The WSA applied a participatory research approach to capture the perspectives, experiences, and concerns of 225 respondents, including women, girls, men, boys, persons with disabilities, and sexual and gender minorities. The respondents included community members, volunteers, direct beneficiaries of the Gender-Responsive Disaster Risk Management program, as well as stakeholders such as police officers, lawyers, health workers from one-stop crisis management centers, municipality members, government officials, service providers, and social workers.

The WSA used qualitative and quantitative data collection tools and methods, including a Rapid Situation Analysis (RSA), a Rapid Stakeholder Analysis (RSTA), Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), a Safety Walk, a Street Survey, case studies, participant and field observations, and a literature review. Among these methods, the Safety Walk proved to be the most innovative tool for capturing the perspectives of the WSA participants. This approach allowed them to directly explore the available infrastructure and the conditions that affected their lives and livelihoods. The WSA was conducted in two project wards across three municipalities: Birendranagar Municipality in Surkhet, Karnali Province; Amargadhi in Dadeldhura and Jay Prithvi in Bajhang, Sudurpashchim Province. Additionally, the WSA was conducted in two sub-metropolitan cities: Nepalgunj in Banke, Lumbini Province, and Dhangadhi in Kailali, Sudurpashchim Province.

Figure 1 **WSA PROJECT LOCATIONS***

Sudurpashchim Province

Amargadhi
in Dadeldhura and
Jay Prithvi in Bajhang

Dhangadhi
in Kailali

Karnali Province

Birendranagar Municipality
in Surkhet

Lumbini Province

Nepalgunj
in Banke

The boundaries and names shows and the designations used in this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.
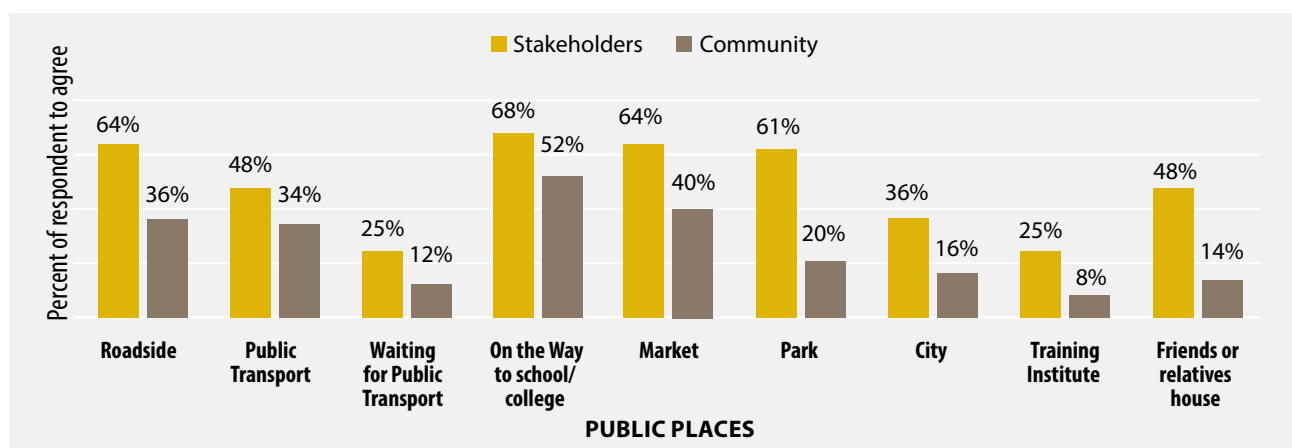
FINDINGS

Sexual harassment and assault, including verbal harassment, teasing, stalking, touching, flashing, and staring, were identified as chronic forms of violence against women in the audited areas. These forms of violence impose restrictions on women's freedom of movement and hinder the exercise of their basic rights. The threat of harassment or assault is a constant presence in the lives of women, with fifty-six percent of respondents stating that they experience verbal harassment nearly every day, and thirty-six per cent reporting incidents of stalking. Furthermore, sixty-eight percent of stakeholders and forty-two per cent of community respondents indicated an increase in assaults against women and girls during disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic. The WSA revealed that sixty-eight per cent of women and girls feel unsafe in several spaces, including crowded areas, isolated areas, festivals, concerts, temples, schools, colleges, parks, roadsides, narrow streets, "chaupadi" (menstrual huts), forests, and water and fodder collection areas. Even the daily commute to school may not be safe, as stated by fifty-two per cent of women and girls who reported experiencing harassment primarily on their way to schools or colleges. Furthermore, the respondents emphasized that there is no specific time when they

feel safe entering public spaces. The survey indicated that seventy seven percent of respondents believe it is unsafe to be out at night, fifty-one per cent feel unsafe in the evening, and forty three per cent feel unsafe in the morning.

These safety concerns have significant implications for women's lives. The majority, especially adolescent girls, avoid going out at night due to feeling unsafe, and their families also discourage them from doing so. Seventy per cent of women and girls reported consistently taking precautionary measures, such as avoiding isolated locations, and thirty per cent stated that they never leave their homes alone. Most respondents only leave home to go to school, markets, relatives' and friends' homes, or nearby workplaces. One respondent expressed, "We miss out on skills training, further education, working in big offices, going to movies or restaurants, and traveling around."

Gender-based and other forms of discrimination were identified as central factors in harassment and assault. One respondent explained that women and girls experience harassment because they are culturally and socially considered objects. Fifty-eight

Figure 2 **DISAGGREGATED DATA OF RESPONDENTS AGREEING WITH SPECIFIC PUBLIC PLACES WHERE WOMEN & GIRLS FACE SEXUAL HARASSMENT/ASSAULT** *(RECOGNIZED BY STAKEHOLDERS AND EXPERIENCED/WITNESSED BY COMMUNITY)*

Bar chart — Percent of respondent to agree vs Public Places.

Legend: Stakeholders, Community

Public Places	Stakeholders	Community
Roadside	64%	36%
Public Transport	48%	34%
Waiting for Public Transport	25%	12%
On the Way to school/college	68%	52%
Market	64%	40%
Park	61%	20%
City	36%	16%
Training Institute	25%	8%
Friends or relatives house	48%	14%

per cent of women and girls agreed that they were harassed because they were treated as objects. Being poor and vulnerable was identified as a factor increasing vulnerability to harassment and abuse, as well as being a Muslim, Dalit, sexual minority, single woman or widow.

The respondents also identified factors in their physical environments that they believed contributed to the lack of safety in public spaces. A significant seventy-seven per cent highlighted crowding in certain public areas, such as markets, public transportation, streets, parks, and playgrounds. Additionally, sixty two per cent identified the absence of street lamps in certain areas or their surroundings. The lack of clean and safe public toilets was emphasized by forty-eight per cent, with many noting this as a problem even in government offices. Poor infrastructure and inadequate maintenance of public spaces were identified by forty- four per cent as problematic. Furthermore, thirty eight per cent highlighted the lack of effective and vigilant surveillance by security forces and/or CCTV cameras.

The police are generally not perceived as a viable

source of protection against public harassment and assault. Eighty per cent of community respondents stated that they did not report their personal cases to the police. Among the reasons cited by sixty per cent were family and peer pressure, as well as the perception that the reporting process would be cumbersome, time-consuming, and costly. Concerns were also expressed that their reports would be taken lightly and not investigated seriously.

The practice of seeking assistance from helplines and women's organizations is increasing, however. At the district level, government hospitals have established One-stop Crisis Management Centres (OCMC). These OCMC systems coordinate various entities such as the health system, police, local government, courts, safe houses, and service centers to prevent potential violence and provide comprehensive support to survivors. Additionally, numerous organizations at the local level are actively raising awareness about women's safety and security, conducting various campaigns. Sixty-four percent of stakeholders are aware of the awareness programs conducted by these organizations. Furthermore, fifty-seven percent of stakeholders reported the establishment of 'security committees' during natural disasters

Figure 4 **RESPONSE FROM COMMUNITY ON TYPES OF INCIDENTS THAT THEY HAVE EXPERIENCED OR WITNESSED DURING/POST DISASTER AND PANDEMIC**
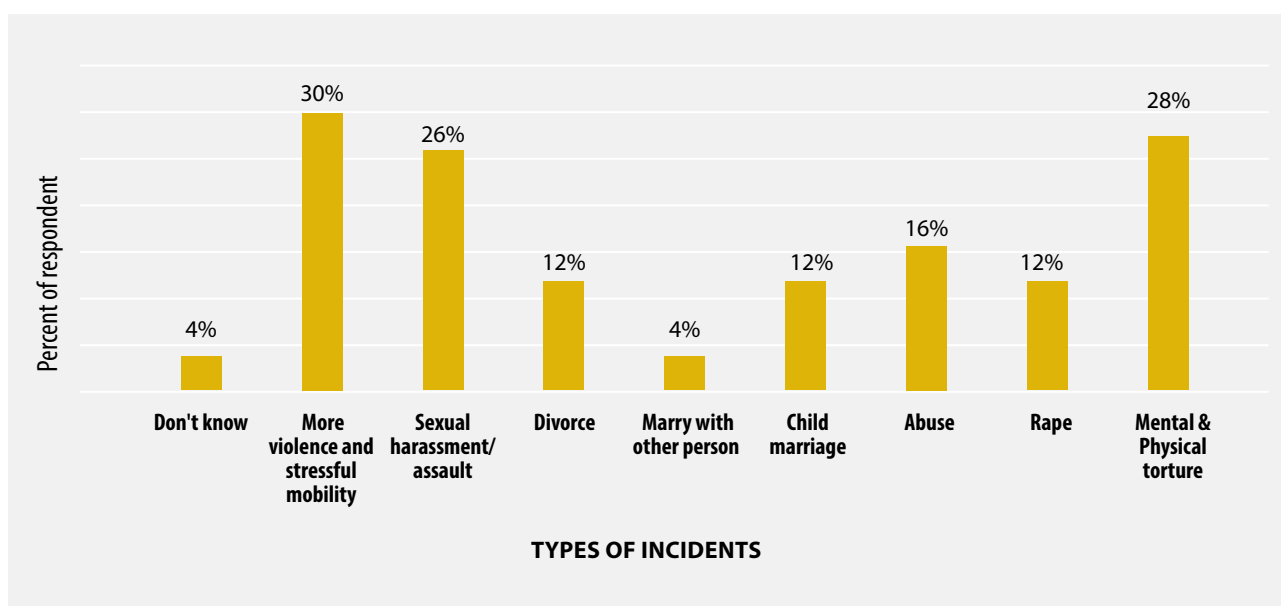
and the pandemic period. However, the Area Development Committees within local governments need to be strengthened.

Natural disasters and other crises dramatically change the lives of people and make women and girls in particular more vulnerable. They often lack the protection of family members and friends in these contexts, and economic struggles make them vulnerable to sexual exploitation and prostitution, including by authority figures with protection mandates. Vulnerability is increased in quarantine centres, temporary shelters and displacement camps. Women and girls often have to stay in the same facilities as men, and inadequate lighting and unsafe public toilets seriously restrict their mobility. Forty-six per cent of respondents strongly agreed that the personal safety of women and girls had been even more imperiled during recent disasters and the

COVID-19 pandemic. Thirty percent of community members and fifty-nine percent of stakeholders reported an increase in violence, sexual assault, and challenging mobility.

The audit found that the capacity of the rescue team within the Disaster Risk Reduction and Management (DRRM) system, as well as the contingency plan, mock drill and coordination were weak .These aspects were found to lack sensitivity towards the Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) dimensions of Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR). Additionally, the audit identified low levels of women's participation and engagement across the DRR sectors. Currently, women and stakeholders have limited knowledge regarding the various safety and security concerns that impact women in the DRR context, as well as the DRRM cycle, early warning systems, and access to resources and rights.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The WSA report made a set of recommendations to enhance the safety and security in public spaces for women and girls. These recommendations encompass law and policy reform, the generation and sharing of new knowledge, capacity-building for duty-bearers, improved protection measures, engagement of men in social norm change, and the development of Gender Equality and Social Inclusion responsive infrastructure.

The general recommendations include:

- Enact gender-responsive laws, policies and budgets, and developing a legal framework for the implementation and monitoring of public physical infrastructure (e.g. roads, pathways, buildings, toilets, bridges and rehabilitation centres). This framework should incorporate design standards and guidelines into building codes and by-laws to enhance safety, accessibility, and inclusivity.

- Ensure inclusive and meaningful participation of women and other community members in the public infrastructure development process, from the design phase to completion.

- Conduct a country-wide Women's Safety Audit for Nepal, to establish a strong baseline for effective project design, planning and budgeting for safer and more secure public spaces.

- Adopt 'women's safety walks' in public places as a local government strategy for improving the safety and security of women.

- Ensure that all levels of government inform construction companies about the requirements for women's safety and security, as well as the needs of individuals with disabilities, in infrastructure development. Hold these companies accountable for designing and constructing such infrastructure accordingly.

- Strengthen surveillance systems in public spaces, including CCTV cameras, police patrols, community surveillance, and the installation of street lights.

- Improve reporting and complaint-handing mechanisms for sexual harassment and assault, including by ensuring a respectful communication culture and greater support for survivors.

- Foster an enabling environment to 'break the silence' around the sexual harassment and assault of women, including persons with disabilities and members of the LGBTIQ+ communities, through effective implementation of the Sexual Harassment at Workplace (Prevention) Act 2014.

The recommendations relating to DRRM include:

- Ensure that all relevant stakeholder, including those in government, review the Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Act, 2074 and the Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Rules 2076 through a GESI lens, and implement action and provisions at the federal, provincial and local levels.

- Maintain quality data collection, documentation and a sharing system – using Sex and Age Diversity Disaggregated Data (SADD) and a Gender Analysis Tool – across the DRRM cycle.

- Enhance the capacity of elected representatives, duty bearers in different government departments, civil society organizations, DRRM teams, and community members on GESI-responsive DRRM and the safety and security of women and girls..

- Focus on GESI-responsive capacity building for DRRM teams and other relevant stakeholders in areas such as preparedness, early warning systems, rescue operations, vulnerability mapping, stockpiling, establishing communication channels, response, recovery, reconstruction and rehabilitation, resilient livelihoods, and analysis of GESI disaggregated data.

- Ensure governmental and non-governmental actors working in the field of disaster safety and security identify and analyse possible protection threats for women and girls, and develop relevant strategies and preparedness plans, including allocation of human and financial resources.

- Increase the leadership roles of women, girls, children, people with disabilities and members of marginalized communities at all stages of the DRRM cycle.

- Ensure a minimum of fifty percent participation of these groups in the key stages of DRRM, including: participatory capacity and vulnerability analysis , gender analysis, design and planning, implementation, and monitoring, evaluation and learning.

- Provide education and training on disaster preparedness, planning processes, and social and financial literacy for women's groups, elected and potential women political leaders, and other committee members. Empower them to mobilize groups effectively, including promoting savings, accessing contingency resources, and seeking support.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT