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Mirna Guha

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## ‘Safe spaces’ and ‘bad’ girls: ‘child marriage victims’ experiences from a shelter in Eastern India

Mirna Guha<sup>a,b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Sociology, Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge, United Kingdom; <sup>b</sup>Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge, United Kingdom

### ABSTRACT

This article interrogates the politics of safety that underpin rehabilitative practices in a state-funded shelter run by an anti-trafficking NGO in Eastern India. It focuses on the experiences of a group of female adolescents, categorised as ‘child marriage victims’, residing at the shelter. The analysis of in-depth life history interviews collected over a two-week period in October 2014 reveals that the adolescents contest the legislative victimhood imposed on them. For them, their marriages and pre-marital relationships are an expression of romantic and sexual agency, in contravention of familial norms. In this context, the adolescents perceive the shelter as a punitive space and interpret their enforced stay for ‘protection’ and ‘rehabilitation’ as an extension of familial control and regulation of their lives. The protectionism-as-safety discourse rewrites their agency as victimhood and transforms the shelter into a site where everyday forms of gendered power inequalities within social relations in the household are authorised and reproduced by the state and NGO. The adolescents perceive themselves as ‘bad girls’ and adopt various strategies to insist on their rehabilitation into ‘good girls’ to secure release from the shelter often by enacting the ‘victimhood’ expected of them. This allows for unique expressions of agency in an otherwise constrained context but hinders relationships of solidarity with other residents. Overall, the article highlights the need to challenge the ways in which patriarchal norms continue to spatially govern and discipline the expression of female sexuality and agency through ‘safe spaces’ in India.

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## Introduction

Scholars have written about the ‘everyday’ and ‘everywhere’ nature of violence against women in India (Datta. Anindita 2016; Datta. Ayona 2016), which transcends ‘spaces and scales’ and is embedded within the ‘violence

of social power relations' (Datta. Ayona 2016, 173). Women experience violence across spaces, which challenges the prioritisation of the 'public' in political discussions on this subject (Datta. Ayona 2016). However, 'ugly forms and proportions' of violence are also affected and amplified by spatial segregation (Datta. Anindita 2016, 179).

The omnipresence of violence against women and the ways in which the materiality of space can amplify these forms of violence necessitate the need for 'safe spaces' in India. However, the protectionist notion of safety enforced by the Indian state on women has been critiqued by feminist campaigns viz. '...Why Loiter, Blank Noise, Take Back the Night Kolkata, and *Pinjra Tod* (Break the Cage) [which] have begun to challenge mainstream arguments about women's safety by asserting that women's freedom and rights cannot be compromised in the name of protection' (Roy 2016). In a patriarchal context, the imagination and implementation of 'safety' for women and how these lend themselves to restricting women's access to public spaces and controlling their behaviour need to be continually interrogated (Phadke, Ranade, and Khan 2015; Roy 2016).

This article addresses this need to interrogate safe spaces through a specific exploration of the politics of safety within an anti-trafficking women-only shelter in Eastern India. It highlights how the existing legislative framework on child marriage produces the shelter as an institutional manifestation of the 'protectionism-as-safety' discourse: a punitive space where female adolescents in the age range of 14-16 years are sent to by their parents, in collaboration with state actors, as a consequence of consensually marrying partners of their choice. This isn't unique to the particular shelter; Jagori (2017) highlights how shelters across India house female adolescents who are subject to 'protective' practices that deem them victims of sexual exploitation. This occurs despite their consensual engagement with pre-marital sexual relations or early marriages.

The adolescents' experiences were collected through in-depth life history interviews in October 2014. Designated as 'child marriage victims', these adolescents found themselves at the receiving end of protective and rehabilitative practices in the shelter which they perceived as primarily oppressive and restrictive. The article highlights the various ways in which the adolescents attempted to negotiate the victimhood imposed on them. Primarily, these negotiations were intended to secure a release from a 'safe space' that was perceived by them as an extension of familial control over their sexuality and autonomy.

This article addresses the gap in literature on the meanings of 'safety' and 'safe spaces' for women (Lewis et al. 2015), and its findings are contextually relevant. In early August 2018, India's Ministry of Women and Child Development ordered an audit of over 9000 childcare homes in the country

after reports of several incidents of sexual violence at shelters in the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh (*Sputnik News*, 8 August 2018). The audit was sparked by a confidential report produced by the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, on the prevalence of large-scale sexual abuse within the Muzaffarpur shelter in Bihar (*Economic Times*, 31 July 2018). Apart from the prevalence of sexual violence within shelters, these spaces have also been described by residents as 'jails' (Jha 2017). Practices like enforced isolation, deplorable living conditions, and other rehabilitative practices that are deemed oppressive have caused residents to escape from shelters (Gothoskar 2013). Interrogations of state-sponsored 'safe spaces' have also emerged from civil society organisations viz. the *Lam-lynti Chittara Neralu* or 'The National Network of Shelters', which describes itself as a network of 'rights-oriented NGOs, and (feminist) collectives and organisations' (Jagori 2017, 2).

Drawing on Pearson (1999), Walters (2016, 55) highlights how critiques of anti-trafficking shelters stretch back to 1981. The author summarises these as absence of personal privacy (Dhaliwal 1997), lack of adequate space, food and cleanliness (Jayasree 2004) and an overall dismissal of the agency of those who wish to return to sex work (Bandyopadhyay 2008; Jana et al. 2002; Ramachandran 2015). Overall, Walters (2016, 61) argues that anti-trafficking (interventions and) shelters "reinsert women into the very kin and labour relations that make it likely for them to enter sex work in the first place".

### Encountering 'child marriage victims' in an anti-trafficking shelter

I encountered the group of female adolescents in October 2014 when I undertook fieldwork for 15 days at an anti-trafficking shelter on the southern outskirts of the eastern Indian city of Kolkata. This included living within the confines of the shelter for a week. This encounter was not planned in the research design and came about accidentally. The fieldwork at the shelter was meant solely to enable access to women 'rescued' from sex work who were living in the shelter, as part of a larger research on the lives of women in sex work in Eastern India (Guha 2017). However, during my stay there, several groups of female adolescents (14-16 years), who had no association with sex work, were brought in, often late at night, by the police. They belonged to peri-urban and rural backgrounds and came from a mix of Hindu and Muslim households ranging from lower to lower-middle classes in the state of West Bengal. Despite being a shelter that had primarily been founded for victims of human trafficking, these adolescents, categorised as 'child marriage cases', were at the time of the research, one of the three

largest groups of residents at the shelter. I explain why and how later in this section.

The sheer number of residents within this group at the shelter and the constant discussion of 'child marriage cases' among the predominantly female shelter staff prompted me to expand my fieldwork to include them. Initially, I looked through their case files with the staff members' approval, and then proceeded to 'hang out' with the girls at various communal spaces within the premises of the shelter. Most were very eager to speak to me, to share their stories of how and why they'd ended up at the shelter with the hope that I could convince the shelter staff to 'let them go'. Although, this was beyond my capabilities, and as I quickly realised, beyond those of the NGO female staff members as well, the girls still wanted to share their stories. Ethically, interviewing minors fell within the ambit of my research as many 'rescued' (voluntarily and otherwise) women from sex work were also below the age of 18 (although this was disputed by some of them). I conducted eight in-depth life-history interviews which lasted 2-3 hours at a time, over several days. In this article, I present and analyse three such interviews. This is prefaced by a discussion of the legislative context and recent debates surrounding child marriage, and a historical overview of shelters in India.

### **Child marriage: female adolescent sexuality, marriage, agency, and the law in India**

Tracing the 'genealogies of the girl child and child marriage in India', Roy (2017, 6–7) argues that the '...the subaltern subject—the "girl child"—has been constituted as an object of rescue and rehabilitation ... and "child marriage" [...] imagined as a governmental problem to be addressed and solved in post-independence India'. The legislative transformations in the arena of child marriage which marked the shift from the 1929 Child Marriage Restraint Act to the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act of 2006, endowed the "girl child" with rights and liberties. However, safeguarding these rights became a symbol of good governance, which "simultaneously defined [the girl child] as [an] objec[t] of government and [a] subjec[t] with rights and autonomy" (Roy 2017, 7).

The available literature on child marriage in India overwhelmingly highlights exploitative experiences and negative outcomes on the health and well-being of girls coerced into such marriages. While this data is much needed and necessary, expressions of agency within such experiences are often mentioned as an aside, or barely at all, thereby collapsing all experiences into that of victimhood. For example, in its introductory chapter on the meanings of early marriages, a World Health Organisation report titled *Married Adolescents: No Place of Safety* (Mc Intyre 2006, 8) acknowledges that

"... older adolescents freely choose to enter into cohabitation or marriage, and... see it as a positive experience which releases them from the lack of autonomy, choices and access to services such as contraception". However, similar to other policy-related and academic material available on the subject, it then goes on to emphasise that the report focuses on non-consensual marriages only, and its detrimental effects on the health and well-being of the girls involved.

In October 2017, new legislation passed by the Supreme Court of India stated that sexual intercourse with a 'minor wife' is rape and called for a nullification of child marriages in the country. This led to criticism regarding the dangers of conflating female adolescent sexual and marital choices with sexual violence, especially when older female adolescents make sexual and romantic choices that challenge familial and community-based matrimonial norms. Mehra (2017) critiques it as a 'top-down approach with serious consequences, and removed from the social realities of the country'. At the heart of this critique is the concern that the law will criminalise all adolescent sexual and marital decisions as non-consensual. In a cultural context where the control of female sexuality is 'at the core of both patriarchal and caste relations' (Abraham 2001, 135), marriage, approved by family and community members and in keeping with caste, religious and community-based norms, is posited as the only socially sanctioned institution and space where women can explore their sexuality, primarily for procreational purposes. The juxtaposition of pre-marital stigma, which in a gender-unequal context affects young women more than men, with marriage as the primary means of achieving social and economic security, for women from peri-urban and rural backgrounds, marks out early consensual marriages for older female adolescents as socially and economically desirable (Mehra 2017). The conflation of consensual early marriages and exploitative child marriages within the law has been critiqued as ignoring the 'the sociological trend that the age of marriage for females increases only when the standard of living is raised, and when public spaces are safe for them to pursue their education' (Agnes 2013, 10). The consequences of this lack of distinction in law is often dire for female adolescents who marry consensually but in contravention of their parents' or communities' wishes for the daughters to marry suitors deemed suitable by them. An example of the misuse of the law against young women (aged 16 years and above) is provided by Agnes (2013, 7) who highlights that most rape cases in 'lower courts' concerning young women are filed by their parents to punish their daughters and their male partners, for eloping against familial wishes.

In the current Indian political context, the rise of the Hindu right-wing has witnessed claims of 'love jihad' or alleged forcible conversions of Hindu women to Islam in the name of 'love', engineered by Muslim men (Gupta

2009; Rao 2011). Between 2016 and 2018, this manifested in a prolonged legal campaign waged by one Hadiya Jahan, a woman in her 20s who strongly contested her family and community's claims that her consensual marriage to a Muslim man was a form of 'love jihad' (*BBC News*, 8 March 2018). Hadiya's age highlights its irrelevancy within the cultural and social trend of familial supervision of unmarried women in India, where single women are often infantilised and denied agency and consent in sexual and romantic relationships. The need to remain vigilant about how patriarchal and cultural notions of women's agency (or lack of) underpin politics of safety in India is therefore immediate and urgent.

### The shelter: an overview of its conception

Established in the 1950s, shelters in India were embedded in "social welfarist (sic) origins" (Jagori 2017, 7) and were aimed at improving "social and moral hygiene" (ibid). As part of this initiative, the state started "protective" and "rescue" shelters for women and girls in different parts of the country, which positioned it as a 'saviour' for women in distress (ibid). Since the 1980s, a shift from the welfare-based approach to a 'developmental' one, and the adoption of rights-based language and feminist approaches in the governmental and non-governmental sector have led to cross-sectoral collaborations in the creation and functioning of women-only shelters. Despite this, these spaces have continued to be afflicted and shaped by patriarchal norms.

The shelter where I carried out research for this paper is run by a prominent anti-trafficking NGO in Kolkata, and the operation of the shelter is supported by state funds. To protect confidentiality of participants, I will refer to the NGO as *Sakhi* in this article. This article isn't intended to be a sole critique of this specific organisation. Instead it is an interrogation of the politics of safety that inform protective and rehabilitative practices undertaken in the shelter and similar 'safe spaces' that are supported by state funds and run by state and non-state actors in India.

An interview with *Sakhi's* founder in early October 2014 revealed that the organisation had pioneered 'rescue' interventions for women below 18 years of age who had been coerced into sex work in Eastern India in the early 1990s. In 1993, with the help of the police, the organisation rescued a 14-year old girl from *Sonagachi*, one of the largest red-light areas in Asia, located in the north of the city of Kolkata. *Sakhi's* metamorphosis from a 'collective of feminists' into an anti-trafficking NGO mirrored the introduction and growth of the anti-trafficking discourse in the country. Both centred on acts of 'rescue'- in 1995, the organisation was involved in a large 'rescue' operation in Mumbai where over 400 girls were picked up from red-light

areas. These girls had migrated to Mumbai from different states, among them some were illegal migrants from Bangladesh and Nepal.

Prior to the large-scale police raid, the organisation had already created a 'safe space' in the form of a shelter for young girls (daughters of female sex workers) in its attempt to curb 'second-generation prostitution'. After the rescue of the four hundred women, twenty were sent to the organisation's shelter and; six were diagnosed as HIV positive. Attempts to house them in other women-centric shelters in the state had been unsuccessful; word of their engagement with sex work had caused disquiet among residents. The newer cohort had been physically and verbally abused by residents, who questioned their victimhood and socially ostracised them for voluntarily engaging in sex work. To avoid the same situation, *Sakhi* in conjunction with the Social Welfare department of the government of West Bengal, started a separate shelter (the site of my research) to house these women as 'victims of trafficking'. In 2009, the organisation decided to expand its services to female minors (below the age of 18 years) rescued from other exploitative situations, including child marriages. This was done primarily so that the organisation could access greater funds and house more in its shelter. "We began to notice that foreign funding [for the shelter] had started to fluctuate, and we realised we needed government funding to continue," explained the founder, Ms. Sharma.<sup>1</sup>

However, this funding expansion, intended to support services, led to power struggles between the organisation and the state regarding the shelter. Due to a loss of negotiating power with the state, *Sakhi* was unable to stop the steady stream of 'child marriage victims' into the shelter despite its female staff and founder recognising that the girls were being punished by their families for marrying out of choice. This resulted in overcrowding, and a sense of helplessness on the part of the shelter's female staff who found themselves playing an unwilling role in the reinforcement of patriarchal control in the lives of the female adolescents at the shelter. The accommodation of child marriage and anti-trafficking 'victims' in the same space reflect the ways in which these two discourses intertwine with each other within legal and developmental imaginations of these phenomena. Linkages between violence within forced marriages and pathways into coercive sex work through human trafficking in Eastern India certainly exist (Guha 2018). However, the imposed homogeneity of victimhood within anti-trafficking discourses and interventions (Sanghera 2005) and the enforcement of custodial care as a form of protection often against the wishes of the 'rescued' sex workers (Guha 2018) mirror similar impositions of passive victimhood on child marriage 'victims' even when experiences are consensual. I explore this below.



## Analysing the experiences of 'child marriage victims' at the shelter

My interactions with the group of female adolescents living in the shelter as 'child marriage victims' spanned two weeks across October 2014. I interviewed eight adolescents over this period, who ranged from a mix of Hindu and Muslim backgrounds, aged between 14 and 16 years, from peri-urban and rural areas in the southern region of the state of West Bengal; the shelter's location in that area meant it received most residents from neighbouring regions. Among them was Shibani, a 16-year old adolescent from a Hindu household from a peri-urban southern suburb of Kolkata. Shibani had met her boyfriend, Ajay, aged 17 years, at a tuition centre where she went after school to get additional help on her schoolwork and prepare for her upcoming school exams. They had started a romantic relationship without her parents' knowledge, which changed within a month:

I don't know how my parents found out – they must have heard it from the parents of the other students at the tuition centre. They were furious! My mother beat me and said I had cut off the family's nose [lowered its social status] in the neighbourhood. My father was also angry... he said I should focus on my studies instead. But both Ajay and I were serious about our studies... he was so encouraging... I had shared with him my dream of becoming a doctor, and he'd promised to always support me. But my parents didn't like him. He was about my age, and his family wasn't very rich... but he was so hardworking. My parents started to look for another man for me to marry, someone older, wealthier. But I didn't want to marry a stranger: I loved Ajay. (Shibani, October 2014)

Shibani went on to share the circumstances that had led her to run away from home:

When I told my parents, I didn't want to get married to whomever they would choose for me, they locked me inside the house. You must believe me... Ajay and I didn't want to get married so early but we didn't have a choice... [my parents] didn't let us talk to or see each other. My mother beat me daily. Finally, when Ajay got a job in the railways through some contacts, our friends helped us run away. I ran away from home in the middle of the night. Ajay and I went to a temple early next morning and got married. Despite our marriage, he wanted me to study and pursue my dreams, but someone told them where we were, and the police caught us. Now Ajay is probably in jail and I am here. I'm so sorry; I know I made a mistake. Now my life is ruined, I don't even want to look at another boy anymore. I'm not a bad girl - all I want to do now is study and make something of myself. (Shibani, October 2014)

Shibani's feelings of remorse and insistence that she wasn't a 'bad girl' were common in the group. However, among others, anger at their 'punishment' was more explicit. One example was 16-year old Maitree, from a Hindu household in a neighbouring suburb to Shibani's, who eloped with her boyfriend from school to escape a marital decision she did not agree with:

They had already thought of a match for me: he was much older than me – in his 30s! He was an acquaintance of my uncle's and was wealthy ... owned a lot of land. I knew my parents were waiting for me to finish school, so they could marry me off. But I loved Sunny, a boy from my school. And he loved me. He was a few years older than me and from a different religious community. He supported my dreams for my future ... that I wanted to study more, he understood me – that was important to me. That's why I ran away with him. But now, with the police ... Sunny is probably in jail ... I am here ... this is not fair ... what did I do wrong? (Maitree, October 2014)

Shibani and Maitree's predicaments highlight the 'ideological construct that perceives women as both dangerous and at the same time in danger' (Abraham 2001, 141), which underpins the patriarchal 'protection-as-safety' discourse in India. However, this also underlines how irrespective of the reason for their stay, young people within secure accommodation perceive themselves as 'bad kids' (Ellis 2016, 1553). The distinction between 'at-risk' as vulnerable and needing help, and 'risky' as 'troublesome' (Worrall 1999) becomes blurry within experiences of young people at the receiving end of custodial care by the state (Ellis 2016). For Shibani and Maitree, they clearly perceived their stay at the shelter as 'punishment' even though it was apparently meant for their protection, which resonates with the experiences of vulnerable children within state-run shelters elsewhere (Goldson 2002). However, their self-perceptions as 'bad girls' were also a result of their parents' anger at their actions, and reinforced through their involuntary stay at the state-funded shelter. Their experiences highlight the regulation and control of female sexuality in India within intimate spaces i.e. by familial and community actors, a process that commences at adolescence (Abraham 2001; Jeejeebhoy 1998). Drawing on Das (1995) and Mody (2008), Datta.Ayona (2016, 175) argues that the 'state has empowered social institutions such as the "community" or "family" as spaces where intimacies are legitimized, valorized or criminalized'. The state-funded shelter, therefore, becomes a space where this legitimisation is reciprocated – as the state reinforces families and communities' perception of what makes 'bad girls'.

The perception of the 'child marriage victims' as 'bad girls' and their stay at the shelter as 'punishment' was reinforced by several practices within the shelter: withholding of mobile phones from all residents, inability to leave the shelter premises, lack of information about when they would be 'released', and occasional phone calls and visits from their family members facilitated by the shelter staff. The adolescents shared that these conversations and visits involved pleading with their families to let them return home, with parents either directly telling them they needed to stay longer at the shelter to 'learn their lesson' or deferring responsibility to the state in this regard. In all of this, the female shelter staff were sympathetic of the girls' predicaments, expressing the view that the NGO had been reduced to

a powerless intermediary in a process that was, to them, a clear violation of the adolescents' rights. However, the perception of the staff and the NGO among the adolescents was ambiguous: some asked me to 'put in a good word for them' in the case files maintained by the social workers at the NGO (which were not available for the girls to read/contribute to), while others asked if I could try and get the shelter staff to vouch for them in front of state actors. Ellis (2016) highlights the tyranny of the case files which can be a "source of anxiety and worry for young people" (p. 229) by not allowing them a chance to intervene in what is written about them. The adolescents I met shared their anxiety about these case files; one wondered if it would impede their chances of employment in the future. However, some found ways around it by enacting a particular script of 'victimhood' expected of them by the state, their families and communities. An example of this was Rabia, a 15-year-old Muslim girl from the same suburb as Shibani's, who had eloped with a man 16 years her senior. She had chosen him as her partner due to his wealth and high social status, criteria her lower-middle class family had expressed a desire for while considering a marital partner for her older sister. Rabia had chosen a partner in keeping with the socio-economic aspirations that her parents had expressed in discussions preceding the marriage of her sister. However, his earlier marriage and widowhood, made them reject her choice.

To enable their release from the shelter, all the adolescents had meetings with members of the Child Welfare Committee (CWC), a statutory body which was a visible representation of the state's deployment of the 'protection-as-safety' rhetoric. These closed-door meetings, which the girls described as 'being on trial' involved explaining to the members, the circumstances leading up to the marriage in question. While most, like Shibani and Maitree, chose this opportunity to convince the members that they had learnt the error of their ways and would not pursue romantic relationships anymore (or at least without their parents' approval), Rabia chose a different strategy. During her interview, she shared that she'd lied to the members and explained why:

I haven't told them that I left with him by choice. If I do, they won't let me go. They'll think I'm a bad girl and should stay here longer. I told them I was on my way to a friend's house when I was drugged by a stranger and blacked out. And that when I came to, I realised I was being held captive and had been married. If they believe me they'll feel sorry for me and let me go. This is what I have told the social worker too. If they find out what really happened... they'll keep me here forever. I want to go back to my family. (Rabia, October 2014)

Rabia's explanation of her decision to lie to the CWC representatives (and the shelter staff) highlights how she believed that admitting that she had eloped out of choice would be more punitive than if she performed the

victimhood that had been imposed on her and others in the group. Similarly, Shibani and Maitree believed that enacting the reformed and rehabilitated 'good girl' (in opposition to the 'bad girl') trope would enable them to leave the shelter sooner. These young women's negotiations with the victimhood imposed on them by their family, the community and the state evoke Butler's (1997) argument that although power may be imposed externally (through the law, the state, the community), it is never static. Instead the process of becoming a subject involves an engagement with power which is enacted on an individual level, allowing for unique expressions of agency in an otherwise oppressive environment. Rabia's performance of victimhood and Shibani and Maitree's enactment of the 'rehabilitated good girl' trope show how these girls tried to intervene and unsettle the power imposed on them by their families and the state through a performance of victimhood, the imposition of which had removed their agency in the first place. In the institutional context of the shelter and the legislative framework of child marriage, these young women are placed in discursive relations of power which constitute them sexually (Butler 1997) as victims, and 'as good girls turned bad' (through participation in socially unsanctioned relationships) who require rehabilitation. In his work on the sexual subjectivation of diasporic Chinese youth, Li (2014, 85) draws on Butler (1997) and argues that 'sexual subjects have the potential to appropriate or subvert what they have been recognised as, using the very terms that constitute them in realising their sexual subjecthood'. To navigate their self-perception as 'bad girls', Rabia, Shibani and Maitree performed the tropes of 'good' Indian female sexuality (obedient, victimised, and vulnerable) to negotiate their release from the shelter. Their actions can also be read as an enactment of what Mai (2016), in his work on framing migrants' agency, conceptualises as 'mobile orientations': "the heterogeneous arrangements of objects, bodies and narratives that are oriented towards becoming specific socio-cultural subjects through agencing decisions." By embodying and narrativizing a 'good girl' trope these girls oriented their subjectivity to that of 'victims', which enabled for an expression of agency in an otherwise constrained context.

### **Relationships, safety, and agency in the shelter: a discussion**

Shuker (2015, 37) argues that 'secure estates' for children must balance physical safety with a relational element: this involves off-setting restrictive physical safety measures with shows of compassion and acceptance by social workers. She emphasises the need for 'good relationships' within these spaces which can create a positive experience for young people who are otherwise subject to restrictive safety measures. In the context of this research, the adolescents found themselves subject to the confines and rules

of the shelter without being able to partake in positive relationship-building processes with other residents and the staff. Reasons for this were manifold: unlike 'rescued' women from sex work who stayed for periods of 6 months and more, these girls believed that their stay was brief and were convinced that repeated apologies to their families and pleading with state representatives would secure their release. Their stay at the shelter seemed to be spent in a blur of desperation and anxiety, and none I met were keen to participate in the recreational and educational activities offered at the shelter. Secondly, as I have outlined before, the female shelter staff were largely confused about how to build positive relations with these adolescents – they disapproved of the use of the shelter as a form of 'punishment' for what they recognised as consensual elopements, but felt obligated to act out the role of the 'rehabilitator' expected of them by the state that funded the running of the shelter. Thirdly, these girls found themselves unable to relate to those 'rescued' from sex work – on one hand, they challenged their victimhood which set them apart from young women who had been coerced into sex work. On the other hand, they retreated to deploying the rhetoric of victimhood and exploitation when comparing themselves to female residents who had voluntarily entered sex work. This was done to further assert their identities as 'good girls' and distance themselves from whom they perceived as 'bad'. 16-year old Piyali from a neighbourhood close to the shelter explained:

We ran away from our homes because our parents were putting pressure on us in some way or the other, there was a compulsion which forced us to do what we did. But these girls they choose sex work – how can they voluntarily choose this life? We are not like them, we are different! (Piyali, October 2014)

Piyali's explanation highlights that the adolescents were acutely aware of how their families, communities, and the state perceived them as 'deviants', and were keen to distance themselves from those they perceived as the 'most deviant' i.e. young women who had entered sex work due to various socio-economic constraints in their own lives. Ironically, these two groups of residents had a lot in common, specifically, in their contestations of the victimhood imposed on them. However, the adolescents' own prejudices about what constituted 'bad behaviour' and a keenness to distance themselves from it within the shelter to secure their release, hindered opportunities for meaningful peer-solidarity and friendship. These hindrances and obstacles can be read as the "own politics" of the 'resistors' (Ortner 1995, 177) which become sites of "friction and tension" (ibid) even when the cause is similar: resisting the denial of their agency by families, communities and the state.

For these adolescents, the shelter failed to fulfil what Lewis (2015) outlines as the two key characteristics of women-only 'safe spaces' – the ability to keep its residents *safe from* violence and harm, and *safe to* be fully human.

Instead, the shelter authorised existing patriarchal control and regulation of the adolescents' agency and sexuality by familial and state actors. It also provided the spatial means to enable the extension of 'punishments' to the adolescents for contravening familial norms, which caused them severe emotional distress. Overall, their agency was rewritten as victimhood, which limited their personhood. For them, the shelter became what Datta.Anindita (2016, 179) describes as 'genderescapes of hate' which are the "...lived spaces over which women are constantly devalued, degraded, humiliated and subject to different forms of violence hinging from such discrimination and devaluation within what can termed a culturally sanctioned misogyny".

The participation of the anti-trafficking NGO in extending this form of control and everyday violence in the lives of these adolescents is a reminder of the increasing danger of the co-option of anti-trafficking rhetoric in state control of female sexuality *and* right-wing moral hysteria about interreligious marriages and legal reluctance to accept female consent and agency in such instances (Gupta 2009, 15). It also highlights the ways in which community-based organisations, NGOs, and development interventions can perpetuate and maintain power and gender inequalities which emanate in social relations within households (Kabeer 1994, 283). Finally, it signals the need to rethink the ways in which 'developmentalism', (Escobar 1995, 11) which Madhok (2014, 2) drawing on Kapoor (2008) refers to as 'a mode of being as well as to a set of discourses [and] practices... and institutions that accompany 'development' as a technical, political, ethical and intellectual project', affect conceptualisations of agency. This reflects Madhok (2014, 3)'s argument that 'in producing new subjects and subjectivities in the service of 'development', developmentalism...authorises certain forms of agential activity... [and victimhood, thereby] ... produc[ing] new forms of coercion and oppression'. The infusion of feminist rhetoric and rights-based language within 'developmentalism' also requires continual interrogation: particularly the ways in which feminist forms of governance reiterate and reproduce statist discourses on coercion and consent, especially in the arena of child marriage (Roy 2017) and in instances where adolescents and young women express sexual agency which contravene social norms.

It is important to mention that unlike the Muzaffarpur shelter and others, I found no evidence of new forms of sexual and physical violence at *Sakhi's* shelter. Although, all the child marriage 'victims' perceived the shelter as oppressive, I met other adolescents who had experienced sexual violence within their families and communities and welcomed the safety offered by the shelter. However, like young women rescued from coercive sex work (Guha 2018), these adolescents found the isolation from the outside world oppressive. This highlights how shelters in India, separate from familial and community-based spaces are a necessity for those vulnerable to gender-

based violence in India. However, these spaces need to be open, grounded in consensual engagement, and with egalitarian social relations between residents and staff. Moreover, they should not reinforce existing kinship structures (Walters 2016) which are often sources of gender-based violence in the lives of women and girls in India.

### Concluding thoughts

Overall, the experiences of the 'child marriage victims' analysed in this article indicate that the 'politics of safety' which underpin rehabilitative practices in 'safe spaces' for women in India require interrogation, contestation, and change. The ways in which the 'protectionism-as safety' discourse in India is deeply embedded in patriarchal norms on female sexuality and agency need to be continually challenged. The adolescents' experiences also speak to a broader need to recognise and value female consent displayed within wider contexts of gendered coercion and power inequalities, and demand further nuance on legislation and intervention on 'child marriage' in India. Denying the agency of female adolescents who show resilience and resistance in the face of everyday gendered constraints in the name of 'child protection' is to do them a deep disservice. This also detracts support from those who are in strong and actual need of such interventions. Finally, although this article focuses on female adolescents, the findings signal a need for immediate research on the experiences of young men who are penalised and potentially imprisoned as 'perpetrators' under current child marriage legislation.

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### Note

1. All names in this paper have been changed to protect confidentiality of participants.

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## Notes on contributor

*Dr. Mirna Guha* is Acting Senior Lecturer in Sociology at Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge. Her research specialisms include gender-based violence, sex work, social justice, and social relations within marginalised communities. She has a PhD in International Development from the University of East Anglia. In her doctoral research, she explored female sex workers' experiences and negotiations with everyday violence in Eastern India. She has prior experience as a practitioner on gender-based violence and gender inequality with youth in South Asia, and has conducted research on the experiences of male refugees, and on Muslim communities' perceptions of counter-terrorism interventions in the UK.

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