MAPPING SILENT STORIES

Adolescent girls' experiences of gender-based violence through body mapping

KADAM BADHATE CHALO

Martha Farrell FOUNDATION

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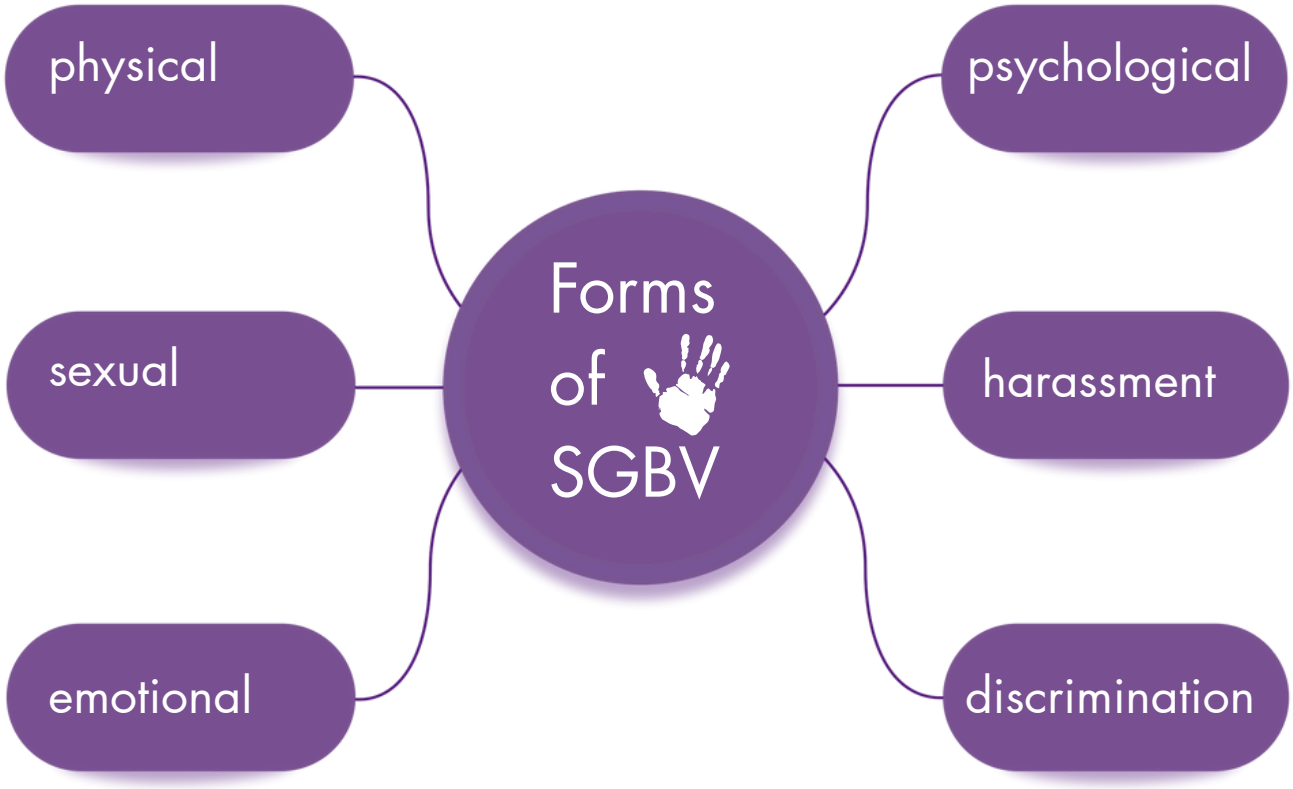
INTRODUCTION

Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) among youth is a prevalent and deeply concerning issue that has penetrated into the very fabric of society in many parts of the world. SGBV manifests in various forms such as physical, sexual, emotional, and psychological abuse, as well as harassment and discrimination, in the contexts of intimate relationships, peer dynamics, familial relationships or institutional settings.

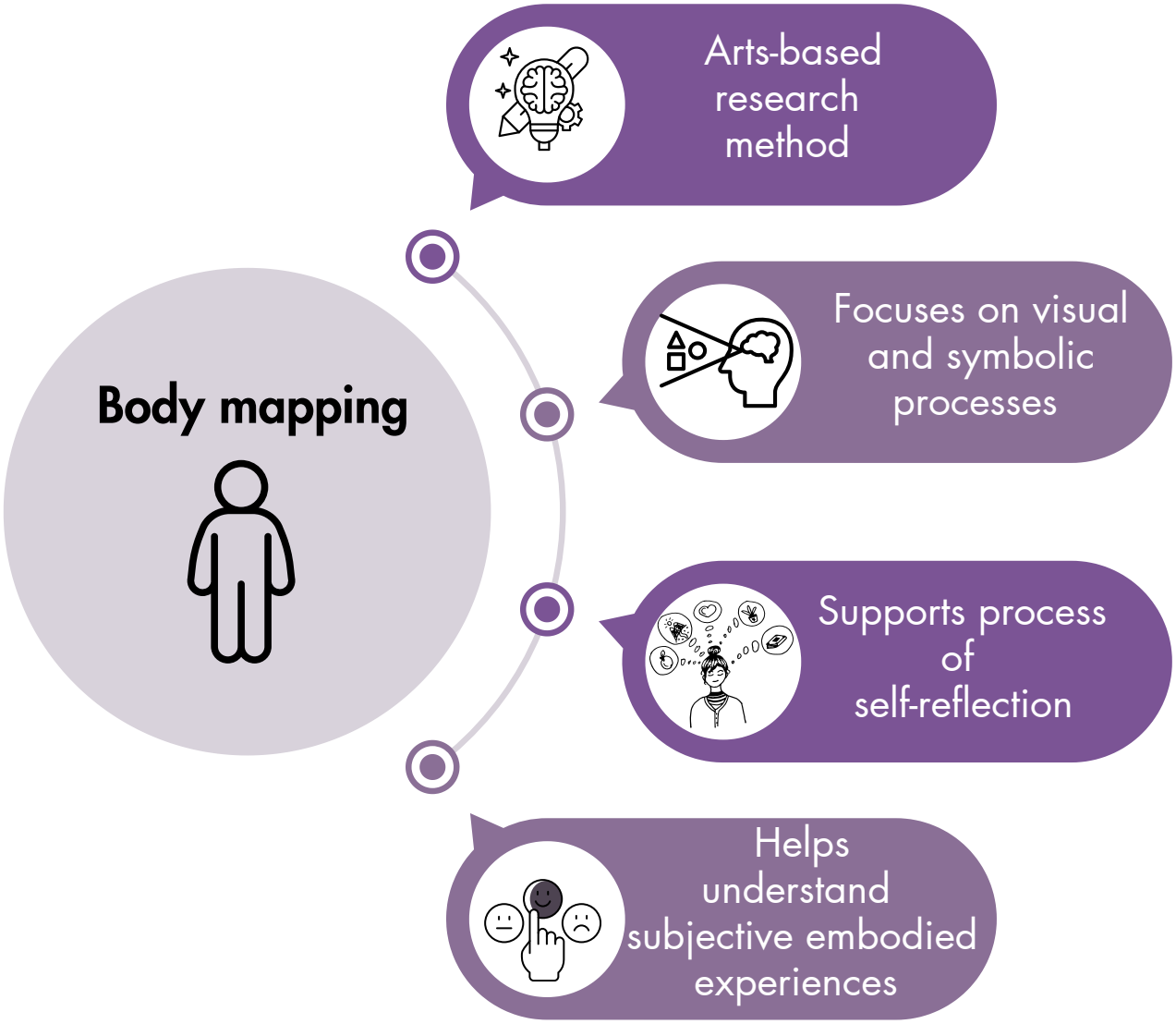
According to data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), there has been a concerning rate of escalating crimes against women and girls, with reported cases surging significantly. There has been a 4% increase in registered crimes against women in India, according to the 2022 NCRB report, as compared to 2021.

Kadam Badhate Chalo (KBC) is the Martha Farrell Foundation's (MFF) flagship programme, which is a unique collaboration between adolescents, community, civil society, and administrative systems to enable collective action against SGBV. KBC supports adolescents through a journey of discovering their inner potential, learning skills, and developing their voice and agency to take collective action to counter SGBV in their lives. The programme provides the necessary space, critical tools, and skills to identify and address the issues of violence, prioritising the development of a gender-sensitive perspective, and making it a cornerstone of their journey.



Body mapping, an arts-based research method, focuses on visual and symbolic processes to understand subjective, embodied experiences related to mental health. First developed in the Global South as a means of community mobilisation and advocacy regarding women's health and HIV-related care needs, body mapping is now used by researchers, health practitioners, and community agencies globally to explore social determinants of health among diverse groups. Used extensively by health researchers, body mapping supports a process of personal reflection and making meaning that relates to one's lived experience of illness. It can also be used to augment medical histories by contributing to the understanding of the patient as a whole person, which may, in turn, yield supplementary information that is relevant to treatment and patient education.

Since MFF's inception, we have been using body mapping as a tool to document experiences of gender and SGBV. We have used this methodology as a group exercise to understand the realities of SGBV, which also included the derogatory slurs and insults directed at the body, allowing an exploration of how shame attached to the body shapes our lives and influences our choices, such as clothing and behaviours.



BODY MAPPING TO EMPOWER ADOLESCENTS

On 9 January, 2025, as part of the KBC programme, a body mapping session was facilitated with eight KBC leaders. The leaders were adolescent girls between the ages of 17 and 21 years, and hailed from five communities of Delhi-NCR — Tigri, Sonia Camp, Tahirpur, Nandlal Basti (Mukherjee Nagar), and, Harijan Basti (Gurgaon).

The session aimed to give them the space to explore their own experiences of SGBV through art-based methodologies, enabling expression through verbal, writing, and art. Through participants' engagement with their narratives in a comfortable environment and safe space, the session allowed for a meaningful and personal exploration of their experiences with SGBV.

Body mapping was used to understand the personal narratives of SGBV in the lives of the KBC leaders. Since KBC leaders play a pivotal role in fostering safe spaces for other adolescents in their communities. As advocates of gender equality, it is essential for them to understand the emotional and psychological impact of SGBV.

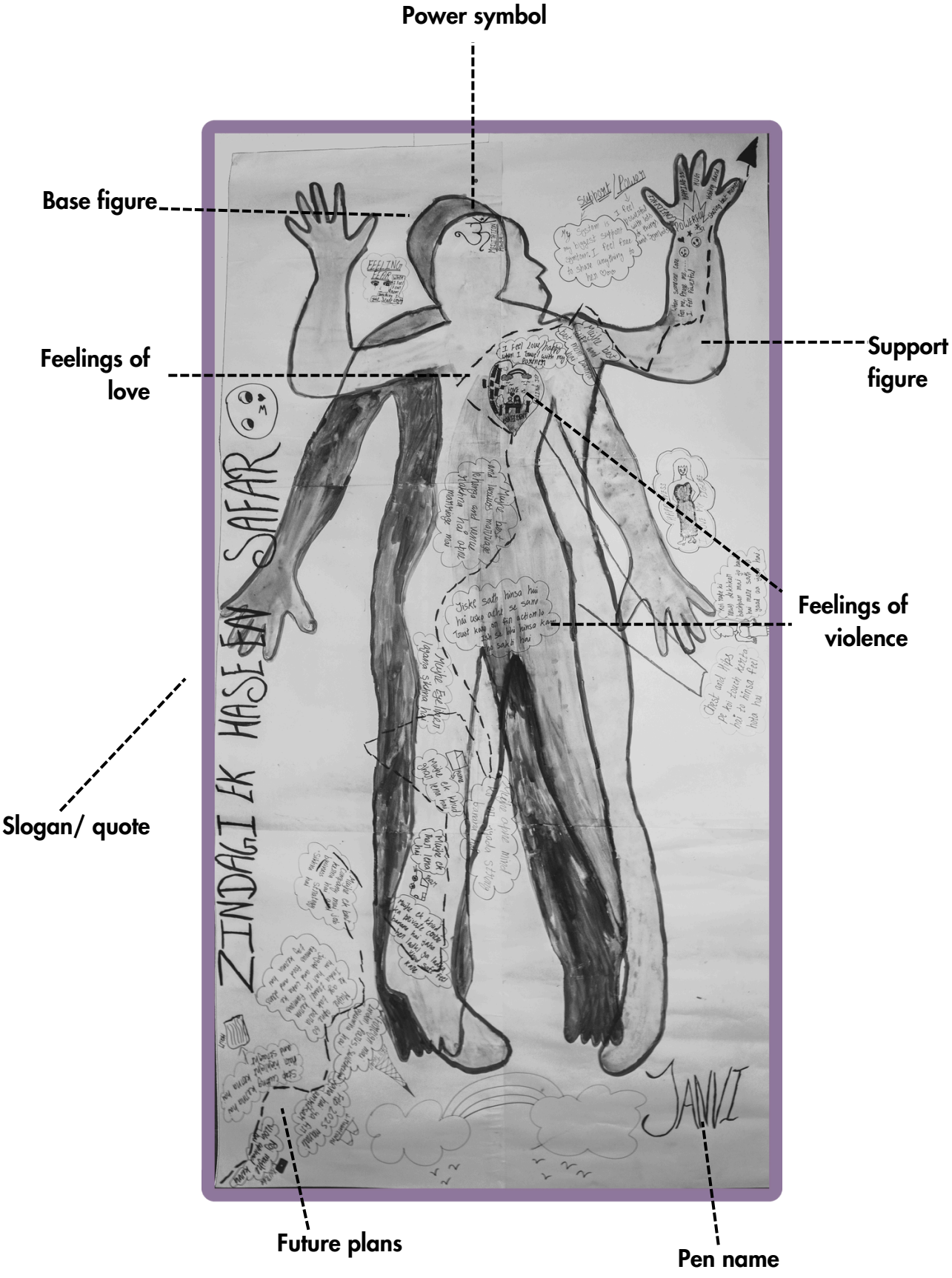


Figure 1: Depiction of a body map-signs, symbols, and their meanings

The session began with adolescents establishing a set of values to guide their interactions. They collectively decided on principles such as love, empathy, care, confidentiality, and the importance of creating a safe space for all participants. Emphasis was placed on creating a safe space where everyone felt comfortable sharing their thoughts and experiences, without any fear of judgement.

The adolescents then chose pen names for their body maps, each name reflecting personal connections and reasons for choosing. '**Mahreen**' and '**Bantu**' named their body maps after their best friends, symbolising trust and comfort, while '**Lisa**' drew inspiration from a South Korean K-pop star known for her boldness, independence, and ability to express anger. '**Beauty**' chose her name because it made her feel beautiful, while '**Hijabi Girl**' saw her hijab as a source of empowerment. '**Arzu**', '**Jennie**', and '**Janvi**' shared a personal fondness for their pen names.

After choosing their pen names, the participants became a part of a reflective exercise, where they had to identify the body part from which they derive the most power from, and what made them feel confident. Janvi and Arzu associated power with their ability to think, highlighting their brain as their greatest asset. Mahreen identified her voice as her source of power, recognising the confidence it gave her to speak up for herself and articulate her thoughts clearly.

KEY FINDINGS

Bantu found strength in seeing herself in the mirror, while Lisa and Beauty viewed their hands as symbols of agency and action, emphasising their role in shaping one's destiny. The responses highlighted the significance of self-perception and personal empowerment in their lives.

The participants then reflected on various emotions like happiness, love, and fear, and the body parts they associate each emotion with. While talking about happiness, Arzu shared that she felt happy when she smiled, while Janvi found happiness in her feeling beautiful in her skin, and appreciating herself the way she is.

When the conversation explored emotions tied to love and affection, the participants were initially hesitant to share their thoughts with the broader group, stating that love is something that is not usually expressed so openly in their culture. Expressing love for friends felt more acceptable, but romantic affection often carried a sense of fear. Bantu associated love with her hobbies like painting and dancing, while Arzu and Jenny felt loved through physical gestures like kissing and hugging and sharing their feelings with close ones.

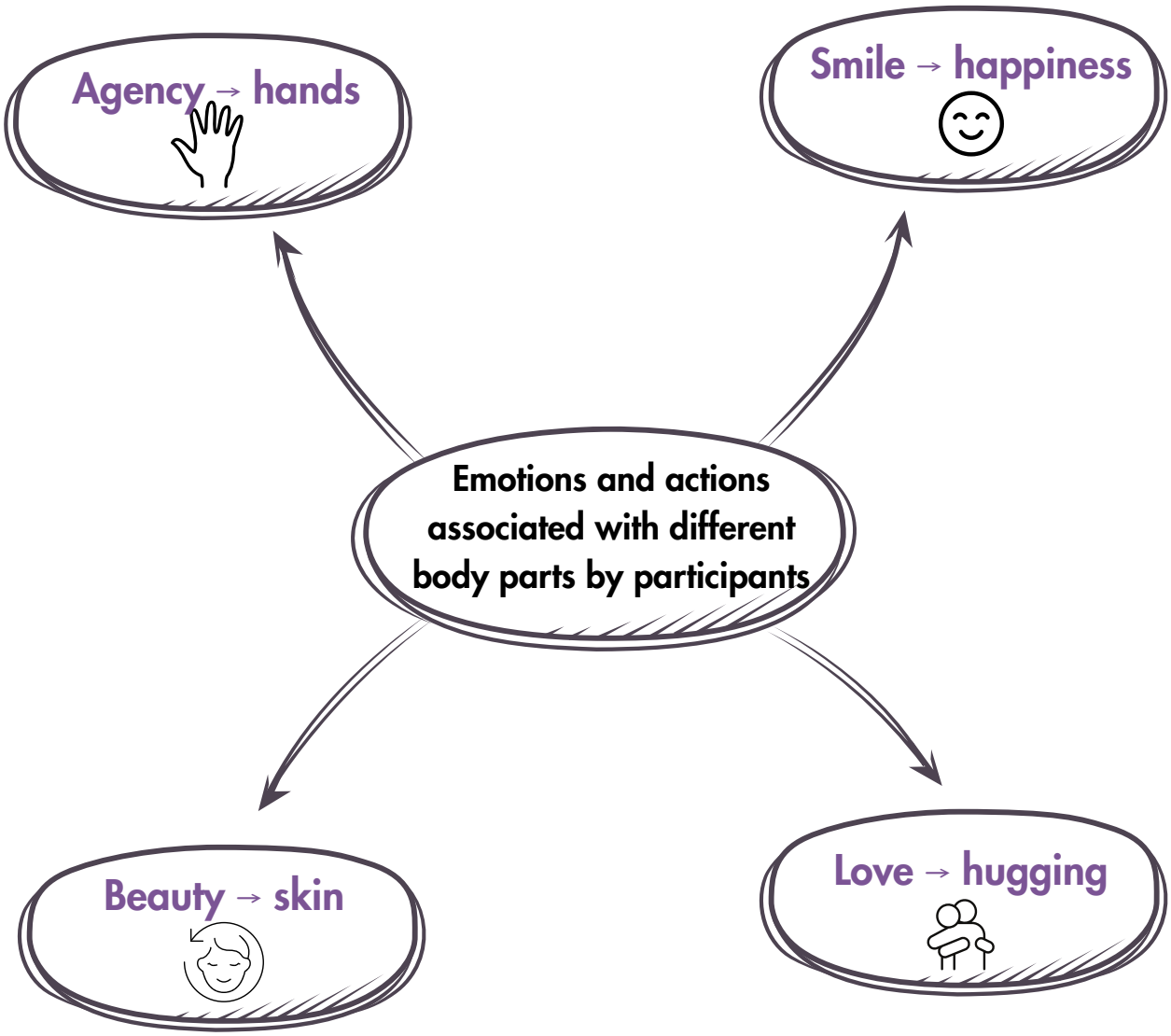

Agency → hands
Smile → happiness
Emotions and actions associated with different body parts by participants
Beauty → skin
Love → hugging

Figure 2: Body map of Bantu

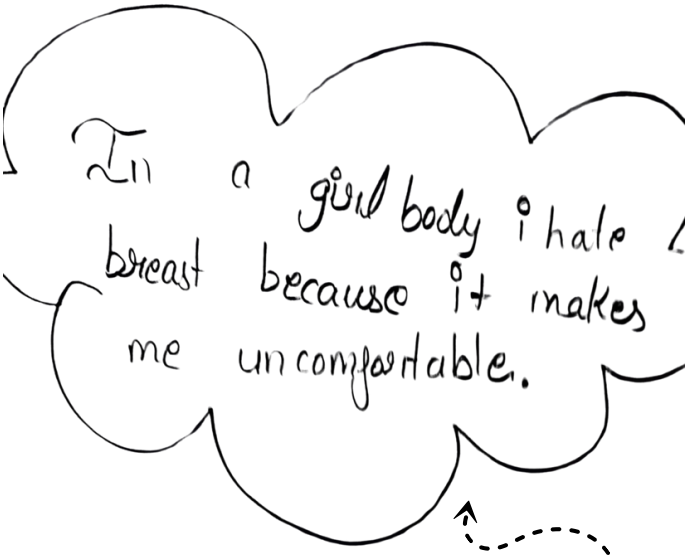
Hijabi Girl shared that she feels love in the deep conversations she holds with her sister. Beauty shared, "**I feel loved when I fight with my sister,**" highlighting how even conflicts can be an expression of closeness. Some participants associated love with digital communication, sharing they feel loved when they are able to chat with their friends online. Janvi expressed that travelling with her partner makes her feel deeply connected and loved. The responses highlighted how love manifests differently for each individual.

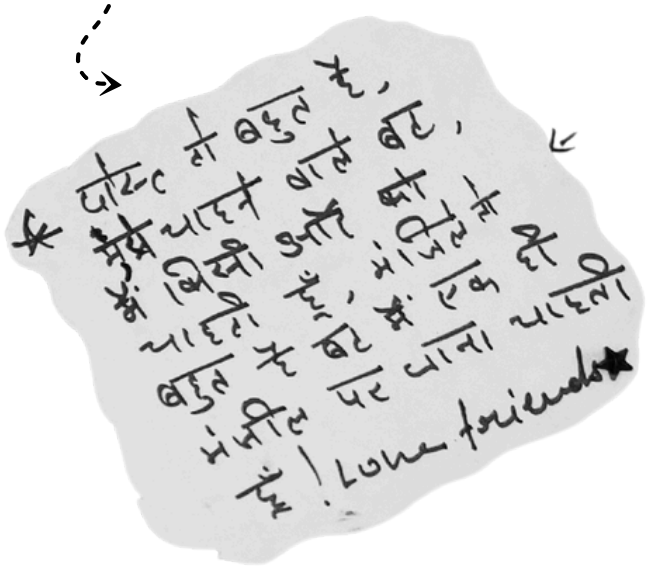
While discussing fear, participants reflected on both emotional and physical responses in their bodies. Hijabi Girl described experiencing severe stomach pain, a racing heart, and a sense of mental shutdown, making her feel extremely uncomfortable. Janvi shared that fear makes her feel nervous and hesitant, causing her hands to tremble and a weird sensation in her stomach. She also expressed that she only feels truly safe when she is not being watched or judged, reflecting on how the fear of judgment contributes to her discomfort.

For Bantu, fear is deeply connected to her hands. She shared her experiences of distress — when something happens to her or someone else, her hands begin to shake and turn cold. She also noted that feelings of being ignored, disrespected, or depressed manifest physically, causing the same reaction in her hands.

The discussions were then steered towards violence, and participants were asked which body part came to their mind when they thought about violence. While some participants described how their bodies were violated in public spaces like buses, markets, or crowded fairs, others spoke about violence in private spaces, including their own homes. Participants also opened up about the physical manifestations of their fear of violence.

Discussing the sexual harassment and violence they face in public spaces, Arzu shared that when she thinks of violence, her shoulders and waist come to her mind, while other participants mentioned areas like their chest and hips as parts that are frequently subjected to unwanted touch. Mahreen associated violence to her breasts, sharing how public spaces, especially crowded buses, became distressing sites where people deliberately brushed against her. She also linked violence to the vagina, sharing that whenever she hears any distressing news about rape and men attempting to violate women, it impacts her very deeply as they resurface a painful, embodied memory.





As the discussion progressed, participants shared their personal experiences of violence. Janvi shared about her experience of being sexually harassed in public spaces, but also within her own house. She expressed that even though it was a very long time ago, the experience remains deeply ingrained in her memory. While she found support in her sister and a trusted uncle outside her immediate family, she shared that she has struggled to trust her parents, because they did not take a stand for her.

For Bantu, violence was tied to the act of being stared at. She recounted multiple instances where she was stalked or subjected to prolonged, uncomfortable gazes from strangers. Whether walking or simply existing in public or another space, she often felt uneasy and afraid.

Lisa took a broader perspective, stating, **"When I hear the term violence, I resonate my whole body with it. I don't just think of physical violence, but also mental violence."** Hijabi *Girl* also associated violence with her entire body. She recalled a distressing incident when she was on her way to coaching class in the evening, wearing a *burkha*. A group of boys stalked her and made inappropriate remarks. Overwhelmed and fearful, she ran away.

Figure 3: Body map of Lisa

Figure 4: Body map of Hijabi Girl

Confessing that she had not shared this experience with anyone else before, she shared that the incident impacted her sense of self, and there was a constant fear that if she shared this with her family, they would stop her from going to school. She said, "**I struggle to share my thoughts with people now. I used to speak openly, but over time, I developed trust issues. I have realised that no matter what, people judge.**"

Participants also shared their struggles with blaming themselves for the violence they had been subjected to, wondering if they had done something to invite the violence. They expressed frustration at how society has conditioned girls to believe that their clothing, behaviours, mannerisms, etcetera, are the reason for harassment and violence.

The discussions highlighted that silence and victim blaming are ingrained in women's lives. The fear of repercussions of sharing their stories about violence, the absence of safe spaces, and the impact of violence have reinforced a cycle where survivors are left to deal with and navigate with their trauma alone.

One participant powerfully stated, "Our entire body is private, but why do we have to constantly face gender-based violence? If our bodies are meant to be private and respected, why does society allow this violence to persist? Why are survivors often blamed or silenced, while perpetrators walk free?"

Through the body mapping, participants reflected on how violence is not just a physical experience, but it has deep emotional and psychological impacts on a person, which often stay long after the incident as well.

Through these discussions, it was evident that safe spaces are absent for girls to speak about their experiences with violence. Janvi highlighted the lack of support, sharing that when she disclosed her experiences of violence within her home, her family did not take action against the perpetrator. Instead, they simply moved to a different house. Hijabi Girl shared that, since childhood, she has been holding onto her feelings, never finding a space to express them.

To help the participants process their heavy feelings, a cathartic grounding exercise was facilitated. The participants were encouraged to reflect on their support systems, their happiest memories, and their goals for their future. This reflection led to participants representing their happy experiences and future aspirations through dotted lines on their body maps, stretching from one end to the other, marking their journeys with ups and downs, represented in the curvy lines.

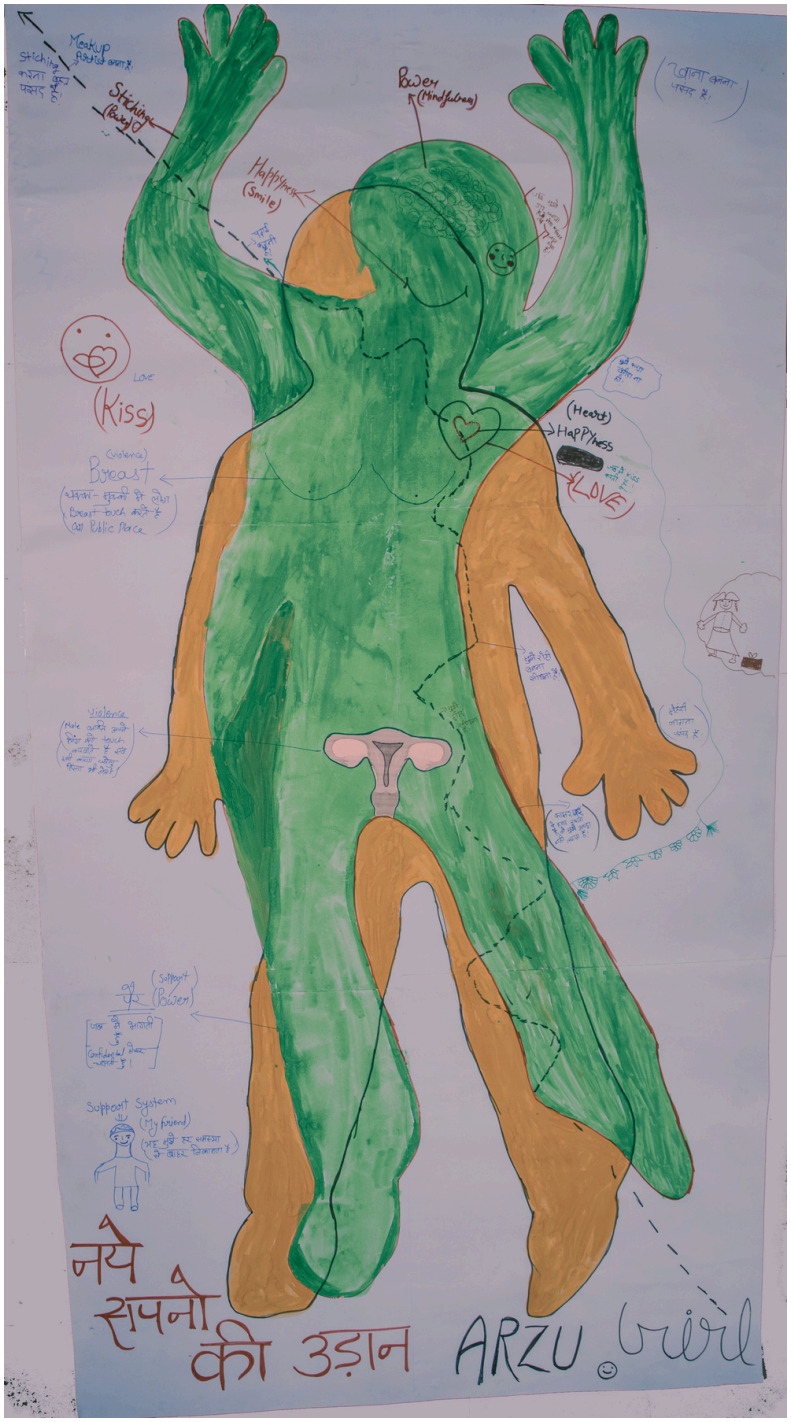


Figure 5: Body map of Arzu

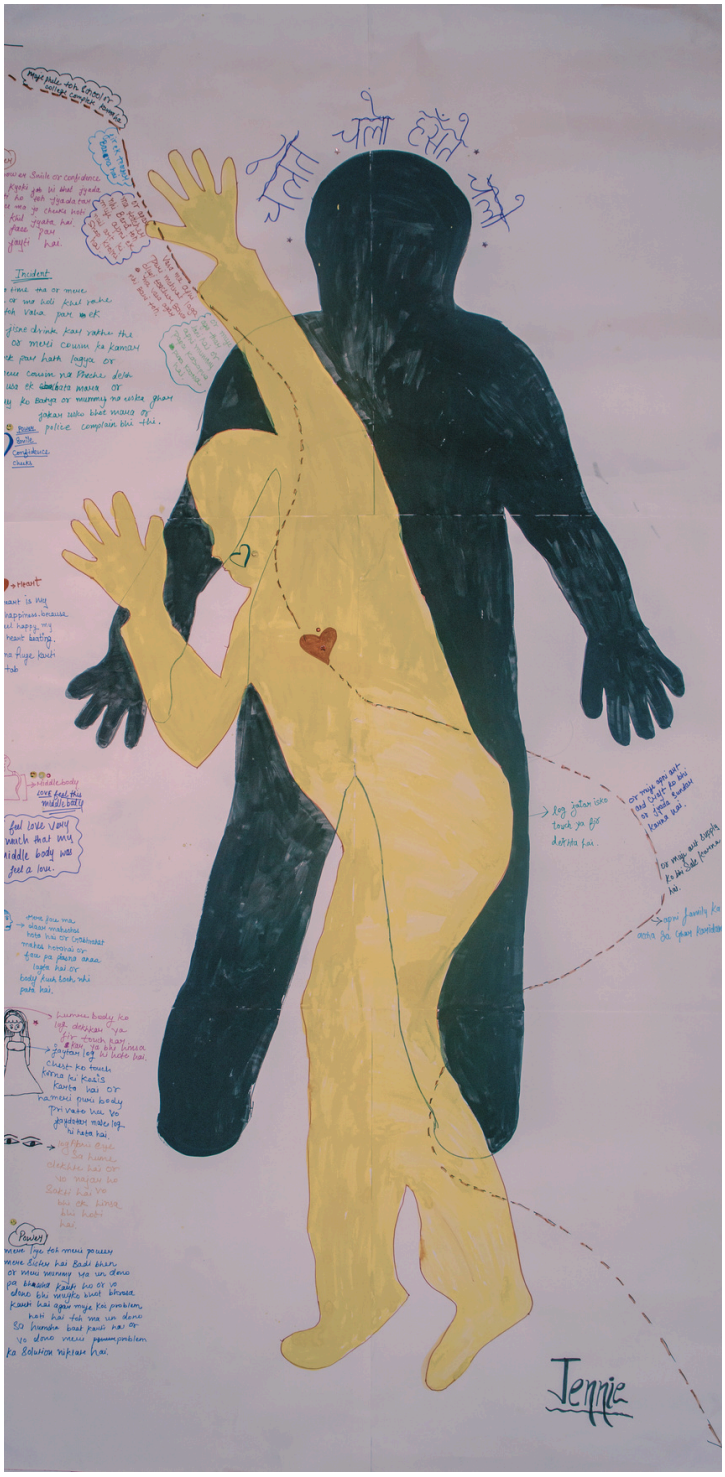


Figure 6: Body map of Jennie

The participants shared that it is also a symbol of how their bodies carry them through the journey of life, marked by not only experiences of violence, but also moments of joy and strength. They further coloured their body maps, as an outlet for emotional release.

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During the session, Mahreen shared, "My diary is my support system. Whenever I am overwhelmed with emotions, I just pen down my day's feelings in it." The group also voiced their personal dreams: Janvi said, "Mujhe apna khud ka business khol ke khud ka kuch kaam karna hai" (I want to start my own business and do something of my own), while Sonia expressed, "Mujhe apni class ke boards mein top karna hai." (I want to top my class in the board exams).

The session ended with each participant creating a personal slogan, a phrase that resonated with their life's journey and their body maps.

These slogans were more than just words- they were reflections of the essence of their stories and aspirations.

Janvi shared, '*Zindagi ek haseen safar*' (Life is a beautiful journey). Bantu wrote, '*Meri berang zindagi ko rang deti hai meri kalakriti*' (My art gives colour to my colourless life). Lisa wrote, '*Tutegi nahi, jhukegi nahi*' (I won't break, I won't bow). Jenny wrote, '*Chalte chalo, haste chalo*' (Keep moving forward, keep smiling). Hijabi Girl wrote, '*Girenge, tutenge, fir bhi aage badhenge*' (We may fall, we may break, but we will still move forward).

Figure 7: Body map of Mahreen

Mahreen wrote, '*Jasbaaton ki duniya*' (A world full of emotions) and Beauty shared, '*Zindagi ek safar hai suhana*'. (Life is a beautiful journey). Each slogan became a powerful statement of resilience, hope, and self-empowerment.

Figure 8: Body map of Beauty

CONCLUSION

The body mapping session proved to be a powerful, reflective journey for the participants, creating a safe space allowing the participants to reflect about their lived experiences of SGBV. The process allowed the participants to express deeply personal stories, and highlighted the complex interplay of physical, emotional, and social realities that shape their identities and self-perceptions.

Beyond individual reflections, the discussions also encouraged critical thinking by challenging harmful gender norms and examining social structures, power dynamics, and internalised beliefs that shape realities. This process not only helped participants recognise the impact of violence on their well-being and leadership capacities but also reinforced their resilience and agency.

One of the key findings was the absence of safe spaces for girls to openly discuss their experiences of violence, and patriarchal societal norms normalising victim-blaming.

In between these heavy conversations emerged a profound sense of strength, hope, and solidarity. The participants felt supported by each other, and also felt a sense of power through their body maps, identifying not just the pain, but also the sources of their confidence, joy, and aspirations.

For many participants, the session became a turning point. "**I expressed those feelings which I couldn't share at home",** Jenny shared. "**I feel proud of being able to capture all my experiences and thoughts that I held back for the past many years"**, Hijabi Girl shared. "**I expressed my low feelings and emotions. Looking at all the others, who also feel the same way, I realised and learnt that I can continue to regain my strength and have a positive outlook**," Bantu reflected on the sense of collective strength.

This sense of togetherness helped the girls realise they were not alone in their struggles. Many of them felt isolated, believing they were the only ones facing SGBV. However, by sharing their stories, they saw that others had similar experiences, and they reflected on how this deep-seated issue, emerging from patriarchal structures, needs to be challenged.

At the end of the session, the participants wrote a poem together, reflecting on their fight against SGBV.

Zulmon, sitam aur bandhisho ko voh todhegi,
Apni khud ki azaadi ke liye woh toh ladhegi.
Aage badhne ke liye sangharsho se ladhegi,
Himmat bandhkar aage badhti chali jayegi,
Hauslon ko buland karke, woh aage badhti jayegi.

[She will break through oppression, cruelty, and chains,
She will fight for her own freedom.
To move forward, she will battle struggles,
With courage, she will keep moving ahead,
Raising her spirits high, she will continue to rise.]

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