India is the most dangerous country in the world for women, a survey suggested. This elicited two broad categories of reactions from Indians. The first category contains Indians who care so much about India that they cannot countenance any criticism, seeing it only as an attempt to tarnish the image of their land. The second category contains Indians who care so much about India that they cannot countenance any survey that stops by simply ranking India as the most dangerous place for women. I can do so because I am able to look around in India for myself. What do I see when I look around in India?

On the street
On my last trip to my home town, I saw a woman wearing a hijab sitting on a scooter outside a bank. I thought she was waiting for a brother or husband to come out and drive her away. But no, another woman, also wearing a hijab, came out of the bank, kick-started the scooter and drove off with her companion. This might be a particularly colourful example, but it shows one thing: women are out on the streets in India. I remember, many years ago, having a discussion with a Danish journalist who had covered much of Asia. He had said to me, “Finally, India is a country that makes me hope because it is the first country, after one crosses Turkey, where one sees women walking unescorted and freely on the streets.” The journalist was exaggerating, but he had a point. And the point is this: Yes, India might be the most dangerous country in the world for women, but that is also because – unlike in Saudi Arabia or Afghanistan – women move about more freely in India. There are women in all walks of Indian life: Ministers, CEOs, MPs, doctors, engineers, teachers, police officers, taxi drivers, shopkeepers, pavement-sellers, industrial workers, etc. This has been a change for the better – slow but steady – from pre-independence days.

In short, women in India are more vulnerable partly because they have the option of more space and movement – greater options for women evoke chauvinist reactions but they are probably the most enabling thing that we have achieved since independence. True, not all Indian women can avail this option. Many are circumscribed by religion, custom, patriarchy, and other forms of orthodoxy. But the legal and sociopolitical option is there. India did not need to “allow” women to drive only in 2018, as Saudi Arabia did. India does not force female athletes to cover their heads during sports events, as Iran does.

Contribution to the economy
Of course, there are problems. As The Economist has noted, women are less likely to work in India “than they are in any country in the G20, except for Saudi Arabia. They contribute one-sixth of economic output, among the lowest shares in the world and half the global average. The unrealised contribution of women is one reason India remains so poor.” This is worrying, but it has to be read in perspective: it is women from the economically rising sections of society – lower middle class to the upper classes – who often do not work. Women from the poorest sections – Dalits, sub-jamas, etc. This has been a change for the better – slow but steady – from pre-independence days.

We need to look at the safety of women in the larger context. We should not make excuses for any lack of safety, in whatever form it occurs. But we should also recall that what matters, finally, is the space available to women. This should not be allowed to shrink, survey or no survey. Women have been falling away at an alarming pace. The female employment rate in India, counting both the formal and informal economy, has tumbled from an already low 35% in 2005 to just 26% now [in 2018]. In that time, the economy has more than doubled in size and the number of working-age women has grown by a quarter, to 470m. Yet nearly 10m fewer women are in jobs.” Even if one takes into account rising unemployment in recent years – rising unemployment in almost any country translates into fewer jobs for women, who are laid off before men – this remains a disturbing feature. More so because there is a clear trend in some volatile Hinduvta circles to try and send women back to the kitchen, sometimes in the name of “protecting” them, a gambit that has long been tried by many Islamist too.

We need to look at the safety of women in the larger context. We should not make excuses for any lack of safety, in whatever form it occurs. But we should also recall that what matters, finally, is the space available to women. This should not be allowed to shrink, survey or no survey. And it should be expanded further.