

MAKING DELHI SAFE FOR WOMEN

Why are we concerned about women's safety?

Over the last few years, the issue of women's safety has become a major focus of public attention and concern in Delhi. A significant proportion of the respondents in a Public Perception Survey conducted during the preparation of the Human Development Report for Delhi feel that the streets of Delhi are becoming more and more unsafe for women.

One does not need to look at the statistics collected by the National Crime Records Bureau to agree that women in Delhi face high levels of violence – even a random scan of the daily newspapers is enough to support this statement. Women are certainly unsafe on Delhi streets, running the daily risk of harassment, attack, assault, rape and murder. On the other hand, they do not seem to be very safe at home either – official statistics show that, in Delhi as elsewhere, most crimes against women are committed by close relatives within the four walls of the home.

On a more hopeful note, the findings of the Public Perception Survey also show that citizens have become more sensitive and responsive to the issue of women's safety than they were in the past. There are several reasons for this. Women's organisations have been able to break the silence around the issue of violence. Media coverage of incidents of violence has increased enormously. Women have also become more confident about their rights and are approaching the police in greater numbers to register formal complaints.

Who is responsible for women's safety?

Violence against women is not just a women's concern. Women's safety and security cannot be ensured through the efforts of women's organisations alone, no matter how committed or active they are. We believe that making Delhi safer for women will have beneficial consequences for all citizens, and can happen only through partnerships between women and women's organisations, citizen's groups and community organisations, the police and law enforcement agencies, the administration and elected representatives.

The traditional approach to women's safety is based on restrictions and fear. Women are told to stay away from places and situations that are potentially violent – to avoid public spaces and stay at home as much as possible, not to go out at night, not to travel alone, not to protest if someone misbehaves with them and so on. This approach has several unfortunate consequences. First of all, it makes women alone responsible for their own safety – if something happens to them, it is assumed to have happened because they have not followed the rules. Moreover, it restricts women's freedom and autonomy, and curtails their mobility and their ability to work and participate in social activities. It

reduces women's self-confidence and makes them physically and psychologically dependent on the protection of others. It prevents them from fulfilling their potentials and enjoying their rights as citizens.

Ironically, this restrictive approach does not really make women any safer – if anything, it increases their vulnerability by forcing them to live in fear and creating the feeling in their minds of being helpless victim.

Discussions on women's safety must therefore begin from the recognition of women's **right to a life free of violence**. From this perspective, the responsibility for preventing violence and making the city safer for women lies with society as a whole, not with women alone.

What makes cities unsafe?

Many of the factors that make Delhi unsafe for women are common to other cities as well.

- A poor urban environment - dark or badly lighted streets, derelict parks and empty lots, badly maintained public spaces, inadequate signage, lack of public toilets.
- Empty streets at night because of early closing of shops and businesses or lack of a tradition of street life.
- Poor public transport and rude/unhelpful/abusive behaviour of bus drivers and conductors.
- Insufficient presence and unresponsive/aggressive attitudes of police and civic authorities.
- Isolation from neighbours and lack of community life.
- Traditional notions of privacy and refusal of neighbours/police to intervene in situations of domestic violence.
- Ideas and beliefs about appropriate behaviour, leading to reluctance to protest in cases of public violence.
- A 'macho' culture and a lack of respect for women and women's rights, leading to cases of violence being ignored or trivialised by the general public as well as those in positions of authority.

What can be done to make Delhi safe?

JAGORI, a Delhi-based women's resource centre that has been working for the last two decades on issues of women's rights with a particular focus on violence against women, was requested by the Delhi HDR team to organise a meeting to discuss the issue of women's safety. The meeting was attended by a cross-section of actors in urban governance including representatives of civil society organisations, women's groups and government officials, and came up with several recommendations.

Police

- Training for police to equip them to deal sensitively and appropriately in cases of violence and violations of women's right to safety
- Recruitment and placement of women police officers in each police station
- Collaboration with women's NGOs for helpdesk in police stations
- Increase the number of PCR vans and police personnel
- Collaboration between senior officials and women's organisations to monitor and address violence against women - women's organisations could be invited to regular monthly review meetings taken by Police Commissioner
- Review of the functioning of the Crimes Against Women Cell to ensure that it responds appropriately to women's needs

Services for women facing violence

- Increase the number and improve the quality of available services including helplines, medical facilities, legal aid units, shelter homes and counselling centres.
- Enforce existing government guidelines on prevention and redressal of sexual harassment at the workplace
- Disseminate information on government commitment to women's safety and available services
- Training for women in self-defence

Infrastructure

- Improve urban infrastructure – lighting, signage, pavements, parks
- Signage in all public places giving details of helpline numbers and persons to be contacted in case of harassment
- Provision of clean and well-lighted toilets in all public areas
- Ensure adequate infrastructure in resettlement colonies, particularly affordable and clean toilets and drinking water points
- Provide night-shelters for homeless women
- Ensure services for mentally ill women and women with disabilities
- Sensitisation of bus drivers and conductors and signage on buses

Community action

- Strengthen community-level women's organisations.
- Gender sensitisation for resident Welfare Associations to enable them to respond to cases of domestic violence in their areas
- Collaboration between Resident Welfare Associations and women's organisations

Media

- Sensitisation of media persons to issues of women's rights

- Formulation of a code of ethics in reporting cases of violence
- Public campaigns on women's safety
- Dissemination of information on available infrastructure and services

JAGORI is conducting participatory 'safety audits' of various areas in Delhi, including residential areas, shopping centres, government buildings, educational institutions and cinema complexes. The audits are a means to identify 'unsafety' factors in the area, as well as to sensitise participants (who include members of the local community and clients/users of services) to the issue of women's safety.

Some factors that constitute a risk and/or create a feeling of vulnerability for women participating in the audit are common across these locations.

- **Poor lighting.** Back lanes of markets and service lanes in residential colonies are badly lit and often obstructed with rubbish or debris. Underpasses and subways on main roads have non-functional lights. Parks within residential colonies seldom have any provision for lighting.
- **Poor signage.** Road signs and house numbers are either missing or unreadable. Helpline numbers are not clearly displayed in public buildings. Signboards bearing the names and contacts of elected representatives do not have addresses and emergency contact numbers.
- **Poor infrastructure.** Women's toilets few in number, dirty and ill-lit if free. Public phone booths are few, especially in affluent colonies. Private phone lines do not permit calls to toll-free helpline numbers. Bus stands are dilapidated, and the area behind them is a de facto urinal for men.
- **Deserted and derelict spaces.** Few women are visible in public spaces after dark, unless accompanied by a man. Most public parks are deserted after dark. Vacant plots obscured with debris and building materials are scattered across residential areas. In affluent colonies, houses are hidden behind high walls and no people are visible in the lanes.
- **Macho behaviour.** Verbal and physical aggression from police, car and bus drivers, bus conductors, parking attendants and people on the streets is a visible feature of public spaces. Sexually coloured and abusive language, provocative remarks and physical harassment are a constant element.

JAGORI is continuing this series of safety audits in partnership with concerned citizens, as part of its 'Safe City' campaign. Through this campaign, JAGORI aims to mobilise a wide spectrum of public opinion towards action on the above issues. For more information on safety audits, contact jagori@jagori.org or helpline@jagori.org