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GENDER ISSUES

What about safety in public spaces?

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The responsibility for preventing violence against women lies with society as a whole, not with women alone. A safety audit was conducted in Delhi to check its safety parameters.



Increased vulnerability: Rarely do women get public support when harassed in places like markets. Photo: Shiv Kumar Pushpakar

THE recent case of rape and murder of a young woman working in a BPO in Bangalore has only highlighted the vulnerability of women in our cities. Not a day goes without reports of some incident of violence against women and girls. Statistics show us that Delhi ranks the highest in crimes against women among all the megacities in India.

According to National Crime Research Bureau data (2003), Delhi has the highest percentage of reported crimes against women among India's 35 megacities (14.8 per cent). If you break up the data according to the crime, Delhi tops in most, with 30 per cent of reported rape cases, 18 per cent of dowry deaths and 15 per cent of molestation cases.

Unfortunate consequences

As much as violence itself, it is also the fear of violence that controls women's lives. The response to this fear has usually been based on a notion of "protection". Women are told to be careful about when and where they move around, and how they dress. Men are exhorted to protect the honour and dignity of women.

This approach has several unfortunate consequences. First of all, it makes women responsible for their own safety. If something happens to a woman, the assumption is that she did not follow the rules. Equally important is the fact that it restricts women's freedom and autonomy, and curtails their mobility and their ability to work and participate in social activities.

Ironically, this restrictive approach does not even make women any safer — if anything, it increases their vulnerability by making them live with fear. 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.

One strategy that has been used in some cities is the safety audit. A safety audit is a process of walking through an area and "auditing" it in terms of the factors that make it safe or unsafe. Jagori, a New Delhi-based women's group, has been conducting safety audits in some areas around the city.

There are broadly three sets of factors that affect the safety of a public space. One is the infrastructure, which includes lighting, the state of pavements, how well trees are trimmed, whether there are dark corners. Another set of factors is the location of police booths, public telephones, or the presence of shops and other vendors. The third aspect is the reaction of people to sexual harassment or the general attitude of the public towards violence against women or any vulnerable group.

Public reaction

For example, a bustling marketplace can be seen as a safer space than a deserted area. Yet, a crowded marketplace also allows for the anonymity that often leads to sexual harassment. In such a situation, people's attitudes and their response to acts of violence against women and girls play a big role in making a space safe. In that respect, Delhi would surely fare very badly. Very rarely do women get any public sympathy, let alone support, when they are harassed in a public space.

The concept of the safety audit was first developed by METRAC (Metropolitan Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children) in Toronto, Canada. It aims to get people to begin to look at the space they live, work and move around in from a

perspective of defining the factors that make it unsafe and what kind of changes can make it safer.

Since it is not only infrastructure that determines safety, the audit also looks at how women feel in a space. It includes questions about when and why women feel uncomfortable or unsafe in a space. It also helps to understand what would make the place safer.

It was observed, for example, that areas where the resident welfare associations are active tend to have better access to infrastructure such as lighting, pavements and well-maintained parks. In slum colonies, often even basic infrastructure is not provided.

The audits in Delhi were carried out in residential areas, market places, universities, railway and metro stations etc. The findings from the audit reinforced what many of us know by just living in this city. For example, men and women use parks located in and near residential areas, but women and children tend to use it either in the morning or in the evening before it gets dark. Also, women use parks if there are other women there. Parks located in more public areas are more likely to be male-dominated spaces — like the area above Palika Bazaar or its roundabouts.

Pavements are almost non-existent on Delhi roads. This makes people who walk on roads more vulnerable. Since the nature of traffic in Delhi has changed over the years and there has been a great increase in the number of flyovers, we have a situation where it has become almost impossible to cross major roads.

The underground subways are the only way to cross a road and these become safety hazards if they are not well lit or well used. The study found that subways that have shops and vendors were, in fact, safer for women to use for there would always be light and people in the subway.

Lighting is a major issue. There are many stretches of road that have little or no light. There are spaces within residential colonies or marketplaces that are pitch dark at nights. Parking lots are another area where lighting is very poor. Cities are spaces where people create homes, work and move around.

Public spaces are open to and used by all. While the police have a clear role to play in ensuring safety for women by effectively addressing crimes against women, their actions alone are not enough to make Delhi a safer city. Neither is it just the responsibility of women's organisations to ensure women's right to safety.

Stakeholders

There is today the recognition that violence against women is not just a "women's issue". There are many different sets of actors who have a role to play and who have a stake in creating a safer city, including NGOs, citizen's groups, community organisations and educational institutions, in addition to the police and law enforcement agencies.

It is heartening to note that after the recent BPO murder case, public discourse has been focusing on the responsibility of the employer and the State in ensuring that women are safe. We don't need discussions on whether women should work at night. There are many other professions also where women have to work at night — such as nurses, women in the entertainment industry, media and others — and we need to address women's right to safety in those areas too.

What we need today is a more responsible citizenry. All people living in a city should have the right to live, work and move around safely in a city.

If every resident of this city feels a sense of ownership and responsibility in making this a safer and more caring city, we would already be many steps ahead of where we are today — one of the most unsafe cities for women.

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(Courtesy: Women's Feature Service)

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