

'Shall We Go Out?'

Women's Safety in Public Spaces in Delhi

A city needs to be imagined as a space occupied by diverse sets of people with diverse needs and aspirations. The quality of a city has to be judged by what it offers to its residents – the right to live, move around and work with dignity and safety. Delhi falls short on delivering this to many of its residents, especially the more vulnerable and marginalised populations. We address this issue from the perspective of women's access and right to public spaces. For many women and men, the anonymity of a city's public spaces offers the space and freedom to escape the hold of the family or the traditional community. But for women, this freedom is severely hampered by the high rates of violence against women that have come to define Delhi. In order to understand the gendered nature of access to public spaces and its effect on women's mobility, Jagori conducted over 30 "safety audits" around the city. These audits, along with the findings from a survey of 500 women across the city and several group discussions, provide the data which this paper uses to explore the ways in which public spaces are viewed and accessed differently by men and women.

KALPANA VISWANATH, SURABHI TANDON MEHROTRA

In this paper we examine the nature of gender usage and gendered violence in public spaces in the city of Delhi. We locate our work within the debates on the nature of violence against women and debates on the nature of contemporary urban spaces. We argue that cities are a particular form of social life that allow for and encourage different understandings and usages of public spaces that are deeply gendered, both in access and right to public space.

Delhi has the dubious distinction of being one of most unsafe cities in the world for women. Statistics show that women in Delhi face more violence than in any other city in this country. Delhi tops the list on all crimes against women including molestation, rape, dowry harassment, domestic violence. According to the 2005 National Crime Records Bureau statistics, one-third of all reported rapes in mega cities took place in Delhi.¹ Similarly, 23 per cent of all reported molestation in mega cities took place in Delhi.

In the lead up to the first Delhi Human Development Report (2006), a public perception survey revealed that people felt the safety of women to be one of the three main problems facing the city, along with employment and housing. Other surveys also suggest that fear of harassment in public places structures women's lives and movement.² The fear and insecurity that women face in accessing public spaces prevents them from availing the benefits of being an urban citizen. They are not seen as legitimate users of the space, except at certain times and for certain activities. Thus women are seen in public when they have a purpose – going to work, market, picking up children and other such activities. But public spaces are not meant for women to be seen if they do not have a purpose.

In an effort to address the issues of lack of safety for women, Jagori launched a campaign to bring into public focus the issue of women's safety. The campaign aims are to highlight public safety for women as a serious issue and to link increasing unsafety to dominant models of urbanisation and the culture of the city. The

Safe Delhi Campaign has a multi-pronged approach which includes research, public outreach, strategic partnerships and communication initiatives among others. As a first step to understand the extent and contours of the issue, safety audits were conducted in different parts of the city. These safety audits are aimed at identifying factors that cause unsafety and those that create a feeling of safety among women and girls. The findings from the audits will be used to design interventions and for advocacy with the state to include women's inputs in urban planning, design and interventions for public safety.

Other strategies used by the campaign include outreach programmes in public places like markets and bus stops, awareness building with youth in colleges and resettlement areas and using mass media to reach out. A booklet with all emergency and helpline numbers in the city has been distributed widely through outreach programmes and through popular coffee shops and theatres. Building up community understanding and ownership of the issue can be seen as a measure of success of the campaign.

Understanding the Violence of Normal Times³

The defining characteristic of violence against women is its ordinary and continuous nature. While there are occurrences of more gruesome and violent crimes, it is the everyday nature of violence and its normalisation that mark it. When we begin to examine the notion of the violence of normal times, we are faced with the ways in which women's everyday lives and experience are structured and controlled. The normalisation of violence against women forces us to examine how violence needs to be looked at within the frame of rights and its violations [Kannabiran 2005]. "Although feeling unsafe is not confined to women, the fear that women feel in urban areas is quite particular. It is to do with physical and psychological honour....Although not all women have been raped or attacked,

all have felt at some point that indescribable feeling of unease which ranges from merely feeling uncomfortable to paralysis” [Smaoun 2000: 29].

The women’s movement has sought to expand the legal definition of violence. The challenge has been to broaden it, particularly in two ways. First, women’s movements have challenged the notion that real violence is violent crime that takes place on the street or public places. The home or the private domain has become recognised as a space of violence and insecurity. Domestic violence is known to cause more death and disability among women and girls aged between 15 and 44 worldwide, than cancer, malaria, traffic accidents and war.

The second challenge to a conventional definition has been to broaden it beyond acts of physical and sexual aggression to include more subtle forms and mental and emotional violence. The violence of normal times includes these various forms of violence which structure daily lives of women in ways that go far beyond acts of violence. This kind of violence serves the purpose of controlling women’s movements and behaviour through a constant and continuous sense of insecurity.

Crime and criminal analysis are concerned with conceptualisation of policies that aim to prevent acts of violence committed by individuals. Crime statistics only reflect those crimes that are reported to the police and come within the public discourse. We know that much of the violence experienced by women never enters the crime statistics.

Inequality between the sexes and the systemic discrimination that women and girls face in a patriarchal system limits their movements and ability to negotiate public spaces. This limitation affects women’s lives in numerous ways – right and access to education, to paid work and the freedom to move around. These must be seen as violations of basic rights of women to live and work in cities. The UN Conference on Human Settlements in June 1996 highlighted this and strongly advocated the inclusion of women’s voices in the planning and implementation processes.

Safety of Women and Urban Spaces

The increase in urban population is a worldwide trend and India is moving in the same direction. The urban population in India has grown 31 per cent in the decade 1991-2001. It is estimated that India will have more than half its population living in urban areas by 2030. It is also estimated that 61 per cent of the world’s population will be urban by the same time [United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2003].

The area of women’s safety which is concerned with creating safer urban environments for women has come into the discourse since the early 1980s “focusing on women’s insecurity and risk of violence in public spaces” [Shaw 2002:1]. This has expanded to include “urban planning, housing design and transport design” (ibid). The strategy, termed as the safety audits was pioneered by METRAC,⁴ and aims to create partnerships with local government as well as with grassroots organisations and community-based organisations. This methodology of doing safety audits has been used in several countries after it was used extensively in Canada. While the focus has been on ensuring women’s right to safety, it can be located within broader debates around urban governance.

There have been different models of gender conscious planning adopted by cities to respond to violence against women and women’s fear of violence. The “broken windows” approach focuses on zero-tolerance to crime, closed circuit televisions (CCTV) and an exclusionary approach to creating safer spaces

[Mitchell 2003]. This approach criminalises certain kinds of people and behaviour such as gay men.

The safer communities model on the other hand, puts forth a vision of making public spaces safer through activities, land use, social mix and involving users in designing strategies and initiatives for safer public spaces. These are seen to be more conducive to building ownership rather than the top-down approach of the “broken windows”. The safer communities initiatives emphasise “activity, land use and social mix” [Whitzman 2006:16].

Safety audits can be “tools for resistance” and collective action can lead to the creation of safer spaces and overall community development [Andrew 2000 and 2006]. Collective action can make other urban spaces such as residential buildings and blocks, underground parking areas, lanes and alleyways, university campuses, transport systems, and parks safer for women and other vulnerable groups [Whitzman 2002a, 2002b]. Further, Mtani (2002) shows how safety audits can be adapted to not only improving infrastructure but also reducing unemployment and street violence, as done in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. However, audits can be very limited in scope when they are organised by particular groups with a specific agenda and can create unreal expectations of immediate and effective change [Whitzman 2002b].

While the safer communities approach is more democratic and amenable to the needs of vulnerable populations, there have been several critiques of it. It has been used primarily in the richer and developed countries and leaves out large parts of the city with its focus on the city centre and public housing. Secondly, it does sometimes leave out the viewpoints of those already excluded from public spaces such as women, young people, older people, people with disabilities; and thirdly, the focus on physical design is limited [Pain 2001; Whitzman 2006].

Women’s ability and right to access and use public spaces is dependent on the kinds of boundaries imposed upon them due to nature of the space and its usage. Thus having a mixed usage of space is more conducive to free and easy access. Very strict zoning leads to separation of spaces for living, commerce and leisure. This increases the likelihood of some spaces being closed to women and other vulnerable groups such as children. For example in Delhi, we found that vendors selling everyday items make a space safer, whether in the subway, residential areas or bus stops. The local bread and egg seller gave a sense of comfort to women who returned home at night. Similarly vendors provided light and a crowd around bus stops which tend to become increasingly empty and dark as it gets later.

We have adapted the safety audits methodology in particular ways to the local level. The focus of our audits in Delhi has been on both physical infrastructure and the usage of spaces. In addition we have also supplemented the data from our audits with information collected through focus group discussions and a survey of women’s experiences of violence in public spaces.

With respect to a strategy for local action, Andrew (2006) cites Whitzman’s image of the necessity of four legs for a good table – elected officials as champions of gender equality, strategic femocrats, organised community groups, and good research. The safety audits represent the fourth leg of the table and the broader campaign is working on partnerships for gaining support for the others. We have used safety audits as a participatory research methodology to gain an understanding of the safety of women in urban public spaces and how it varies with time and how it is compounded with other vulnerabilities such as class or age. Further safety audits have helped us identify the infrastructure

issues which make a built environment unsafe for women and gain an insight into the perceptions of women.

Delhi, the City

With a population of 15.3 million people,⁵ Delhi is the seventh most populous city in the world and the second in India (after Mumbai). Much of the Delhi metropolitan area lies within the National Capital Region of Delhi (NCR), which has the status of a union territory. New Delhi, the national capital and also the seat of the government of the NCR, is jointly administered by the union government and the government of Delhi. Civic services are provided by the New Delhi Municipal Council (NDMC).

According to the Economic Survey 2001-02, Delhi had a per capita annual income of Rs 38,860 and recorded an annual economic growth rate of 9.9 per cent. Most of this growth comes from the tertiary sector which contributed 78.4 per cent to the GDP in 2001-02. The city, once a centre of manufacturing, has seen rapid de-industrialisation in the last decade with consequent rise in the unemployment rate. Construction, real estate, information technology, banking, hotels and tourism are presently the largest contributors to the economy. Other key sectors include government administration and defence.

Delhi's relatively high per capita income, better living standards and high economic growth rate has attracted a lot of people from rural areas in neighbouring states. Due to this high migration rate, Delhi is one of the fastest growing cities in the world. According to a United Nations report, Delhi will be the third largest urban agglomeration in the world (after Tokyo and Mumbai) by 2025.⁶

The Delhi Development Authority (DDA), created in 1957, is the body responsible for planning for the development of the city. Five years after its formation, the DDA unveiled a master plan for the city which proposed to develop 44,770 hectares of urban area by 1981 for a projected urban population of 4.6 million. This turned out to be a serious underestimation, and an additional 4,000 hectares of urban area (comprising Patparganj, Sarita Vihar and Vasant Kunj) were added to the target. In 1981, with massive gaps remaining in fulfilment of targets, the master plan was reviewed, amended and extended to 2001.

Given its consistent underestimation of requirements of housing, commercial space, social infrastructure, green areas and institutional areas along with massive shortfalls in targets, the master plan has been a subject of controversy since its inception. The lack of transparency and technical rigour in the planning process have been critiqued by civil society groups as well the Supreme Court.

Shortfalls in planning are most visible in the area of housing. According to official figures, less than one-fifth of the population lives in planned settlements that conform to minimal standards of amenities and services. More than five million people live in 'jhuygi-jhopdi' colonies – slum clusters with no assured access to clean drinking water, sanitation, health services, transport facilities or security.

Delhi has over the past few years been recreating itself and repositioning itself as a global city. The master plan and the coming Commonwealth Games in 2010 seek to redefine Delhi as a modern city with state-of-the-art infrastructure. The vision that underlies the Delhi Master Plan 2020 is of a class-stratified garden city where residential, recreational and commercial areas are clearly demarcated. Such enclaves already exist on the outskirts of the city in the form of highly priced and heavily guarded clusters of farmhouses, often with independent power and water supply systems.

Middle class colonies in Delhi are also increasingly adopting this model, with residents contributing to augment or back up inadequate public services. Gates and private guards control entry and exit into these colonies, with domestic servants, hawkers, rag-pickers and salespeople being allowed in only after screening and sometimes even police checks. The deteriorating law and order situation is cited by residents as justification for such actions. This model has led to further fear and mistrust among people in the city and loss of the sense of community.

The master plan and its vision for the city have been critiqued for its anti-poor and middle class bias. Architects and urban planners have argued that the middle class is concerned with the idea of a world-class city and aims to cleanse the city of its poor and remove them from the vision of others [Ravindran 2000]. The master plan is not a document which emerges from dialogue with the more vulnerable groups populating this city and this is reflected in its middle and upper class bias.

Safety Audits in Delhi

Jagori conducted a series of safety audits across the city of Delhi during the period August 2005-July 2006. The aim was to get a representative sample from diverse areas of the city. These audits were conducted in residential colonies, resettlement areas, marketplaces, commercial areas, educational campus, railway station and industrial area.

They were conducted by members of Jagori and in some areas along with local residents and members of local organisations.

Table: Safety Audits Conducted by Jagori

Distinguishing Features	Locality	Region/district
Upper middle class residential area with an exclusive market, a middle class colony and a working class market in the near vicinity	South Extension I	South
Private bungalows as well as DDA colonies, mixed usage	Saket	South
Middle class residential colonies incorporating urban villages	Sarita Vihar, Vasant Kunj, Mayur Vihar, Paschim Vihar, Patparganj	East
Lower middle class and working class, mixed residential and commercial use	Paschimpuri	West
Heritage area with mixed use (housing, religious site, historical monuments, railway station)	Nizamuddin	South
Educational institutions incorporating housing for staff and students, commercial areas	Delhi University campus	North
Office complexes surrounded by informal commercial activity	Connaught Place, Nehru Place	Central South
Resettlement colonies	Sundar Nagari, Kalyanpuri, Madanpur Khader, Bawana	
Mixed usage (commuters, street children, authorised and unauthorised vendors, railway employees)	New Delhi Railway Station	Central
Industrial area	Mayapuri Phase I	West
Recreational and entertainment areas, mixed usage (general public, vendors, pavement dwellers, employees of commercial firms)	India Gate, PVR complexes	Central South

In certain areas, our team members were either residents of the audited area or knew the area well. Certain audited areas such as the railway station, the university, and Connaught Place were familiar to most team members. The audits were conducted by teams of two to eight people, and in one case, accompanied by a local man.

We started the audits⁷ just before dark. The audit route was identified by the team and in certain places the team divided itself into small groups so as to cover a larger area. The issues we focused upon were:

- The state of infrastructure or the built environment – streetlights, the state of pavements, bus stops, how tall the trees are, whether they cover the streetlights, the maintenance of parks, dark/abandoned buildings or areas, the state of car parking areas.
- The location of police booths, public telephones, shops and other vendors. In the case of shops, we also noted the kind of shops as certain shops such as auto parts or liquor have primarily male customers.
- The usage of space according to gender.
- Women users perceptions of safety.

Addressing infrastructure issues is one part of conducting a safety audit. These are the concrete and visible ways in which safety or “unsafety” is determined and which can be changed. In addition the culture of the city plays a central role in determining the usage of spaces. Public spaces in Delhi are primarily male dominated spaces. Men can be seen out in most areas and during most times. Women are legitimately allowed to use these spaces when they have a purpose to be there. Thus, if they are on their way to work or study, dropping or picking up children, walking in a park (at certain times), shopping (at certain times), then they are seen as legitimate users of the space. What women do not have is the licence to just be or “hang around” in public spaces.

Time is another major factor in determining who can and should be in public spaces. There are some times of the day when it is more acceptable for women to be seen and be users of public spaces. It is more unacceptable for women to be out after dark but we found that even during the daytime there are spaces where women found difficult to access or uncomfortable to navigate.

We recognise that gender⁸ is not the only or even primary axis of discrimination in urban spaces. Age, social class, occupation, marital status are other identities which impact of the experience of urban spaces. Class and privilege are central to people’s definition of their experience in cities. Our research and data show that an overwhelming majority of women in this city face violence or fear the possibility of violence and therefore structure their movements. In a survey carried out by Jagori of 500 women in the city, over 95 per cent reported carrying an object for self-protection such as pepper sprays and sharp objects; or restricting their movements both in terms of space and time; or dressing in a certain way in order to feel more comfortable while in public spaces [Jagori 2006].

But the experience of this fear is different depending on where one lives, travels and works. Women who commute by buses obviously are vulnerable in a manner very different from those who own a car. Similarly, living in a slum or resettlement area poses very different challenges to safe movement than living in a middle class residential area. In the same middle class area, the concerns of safety of the women who live in the colony and those who provide services can be very different and even opposing. It is important to state that one’s location in the social

structure offers privileges and disadvantages which affect the way a woman is able to access the space.

Infrastructure Issues

‘We Can Barely See Where We Are Walking’

We observed that safety, or the lack of it, has concrete consequences on the lives of people. For instance, we found that harassment of girls in their neighbourhoods, on way to the school, and in buses leads to their dropping out of school. The ramification of safety here is not just a feeling of fear but can be viewed as an irrevocable material consequence on the lives of these girls.⁹ The infrastructure issues, as have been noted in other studies on women’s safety, curtail the movement of women in the city, their work and their education – their complete participation in city life [Andrew 2000; Moser 2004; Whitzman 2002b].

The audits conducted by us in different areas of Delhi revealed many infrastructure inconsistencies. First, lighting in public spaces emerged as a problem in many parts of the city. We found that poorly lit areas such as main roads, inner streets, sections of markets, areas between residential blocks, bus stops, public toilets, subways, parks and car parks pose a threat to the safety of women.

Women we spoke with shared that they avoided such places after dark as they had either been harassed in these spaces or that they were apprehensive of violence. Either way, this curtailed their movement. To begin with, we observed that the lights on the roads are often placed at the centre of the road or only to one side of the road with the light reaching the road and not on the pavements on either side. Further, the bus stops are primarily lit by streetlights and have no lights of their own. Thus, only those bus stops which are close to streetlights are well lit. During the course of the Mayapuri Industrial Area audit, we found that the roads outside the factories were unlit and in certain sections of the area, there were no electricity poles. When we discussed this with the women working in the area, they shared with us that they never left the factory alone after dark. They went to the bus stop in a group, often accompanied by a male colleague. One factory worker shared with us that

Our shift gets over after dark – summer or winter does not matter. We are in a hurry to get to the bus stop but cannot walk fast as, in stretches, we can barely see where we are walking. Then we have to pass all these men who urinate on the pavement. And if we have to wait for a long period of time, we are harassed by the men on the road. We just wait to reach home.

We observed that the number of women at bus stops in all parts of the city reduces as the evening progresses and very few single women are present at stops after dark. But women pointed out that they feel safer at bus stops than on the road and prefer to wait for auto rickshaws or for their friends at bus stops than on the roadside. If they are alone, even if it is not a very well lit place, women find the bus stop to be a legitimate space to be in after dark.

In other places women described the problems faced when walking on dark roads and inner colony streets. Women fear that men would accost them in the dark while walking to the bus stop or walking home from the stop. In certain residential areas, the bus stop and sections of the road leading to the block were dimly lit and women often faced verbal harassment.

Streetlights and other forms of lighting in commercial and educational areas have different implications than in residential areas. Women’s ability to work late at offices or in libraries is

curtailed as they feel threatened once they step out of their workplace. For instance, in Nehru Place we came across very few women, especially a single lone woman, after late evening. Similarly, in the office areas of Connaught Place, there were very few women on the roads around late evening. Students in University of Delhi shared with us that they were reluctant to step out after dark as large sections of the roads were dimly lit and women were harassed by men on two wheelers and cars. Even if libraries were open, women students were rarely present after dark. Movement within the campus was also restricted.

Second, broken or dug up pavements are common sights in Delhi as underground pipes or wires are constantly being laid for various services such as telephones, internet, electricity, water supply, etc. If a woman needs to move away quickly from someone harassing her, she would find it impossible to move on to the pavements. In certain areas, there are no pavements and women are forced to walk on the road. She has to cope with fast moving traffic and avoiding men on two wheelers and cars who harass her verbally and physically. We also found many open manholes which could be dangerous for all users of the space.

The other problem is that of encroachment. Even though vendors lend a feeling of security to women using the public space, we found that they often take over the pavements or the pedestrian path. For instance, in Sarita Vihar a section of the pavement on the road leading to D block has been taken over by a 'kabadiwala' (junk dealer), a dairy, and a taxi stand. In many other places, vendors have their stalls on the pavements, forcing people to walk on the road. In many places such as Paschim Vihar, the pavements on the main road are uneven as each house or shop has built its own pavement.

Spaces Where Women Feel Unsafe

'But I Don't Feel Safe Here'

We have already seen that research has highlighted that women users of public space are often seen and see themselves as illegitimate users of public space at night [Andrew 2000; Whitzman 1995]. Women are not seen as legitimate users of certain spaces – and as Jacqueline Coutras (1996 as cited by Andrew 2000) points out that even when women use a street for a "legitimate" activity as going to work, they give way to men or avert their eyes, and this behaviour is a "symbolic representation" of urban space that "belongs more to men than to women" [Andrew 2000:159]. While walking and observing public spaces during audits, it was clear that men use public space very differently from women.

We found that women feel uncomfortable in male dominated spaces such as cigarette shops, 'dhabas' (roadside tea and food stalls), taxi stands, certain street corners, helmet stands in car parks, liquor shops, and certain parks. Women not only hesitate to use any of these spaces but also are reluctant to be present near them for fear of harassment. We found women were accompanied by men at tea stalls and dhabas except in Saket and the university.¹⁰

During the course of the audits conducted over a year long period, parks were one of the most striking spaces used differently by men and women. Studies have shown that parks are places where women feel comfortable to use during the day, especially with their children but become unsafe after dark [Whitzman 2002a]. As she points out, women do not use parks after dark to protect their reputations as well as protect themselves from attack. In terms of infrastructure, we found that many parks and

green areas pose a threat to the safety of women after dark. Lighting was again the main area of concern as lights were often hidden by the trees in some parks while in some other parks they were not working. Some parks as the one in D Block Saket was pitch dark in late evening, as were many other parks in different parts of Delhi. This park was used by a large number of women and children before dark. The link between usage and good lighting was evident in the high usage by women of the J Block park in Saket located 200 metres away.

We found that most parks are open to public even after late evening. They have low boundaries and no system of locking. Some parks even have structures housing small horticulture offices, rooms for guards, or pump rooms while others as in South Extension I, have historical monuments in parks. Some of these monuments are locked whereas others are open and dark inside which can be threatening to women.¹¹

In sharp contrast, the parks around India Gate which are used extensively by families had a large presence of women. Though only the area near the India Gate is well lit, groups of women were present in the area till late evening and reported that they had never faced harassment nor had they heard of any instances of harassment in the area. It is significant to note that India Gate lies in the high security zone of New Delhi with the Rashtrapati Bhavan and the Parliament close by. The entire area has heavy police presence.

Besides the police, we also found that the high numbers of vendors present in the area also make it safer for women. Though we came across only one woman vendor, the presence of all vendors brought in a factor of comfort as they are by and large, not perceived as threatening to women. In sharp contrast to India Gate, we came across parks which are not used by women after dark as they are used by men engaged in activities perceived as threatening such as gambling or drinking alcohol.

During the course of the audits, we felt unsafe in almost all the car parks that we audited. They are not uniformly lit – all car parks had dark corners, dark entrances, or sections in darkness. Many car parks, including the underground ones, have a few abandoned vehicles lying in a corner. The attendants are present only at the entry/exit points and women feel uncomfortable getting to their cars after dark. In some places, we found the attendants drinking alcohol with drivers or even sleeping on cots in the car park. The problem is compounded in underground car parks as in Nehru Place and Baba Kharak Singh Marg, where few people would be able to hear a cry for help. For instance, one woman in Nehru Place recounted:

There was a phase that I had to work late in office. I used to park in the underground parking and felt very creepy with all the attendants looking at me. There are so many of their friends hanging around. After a few days, I started parking my car at the ground level parking – if I scream at least someone will come.

Some of the car parks are located near unlit green areas. We audited one of these near a movie theatre. Some of the users we spoke with, including men, said that they were scared to get to their car after a late night show as they expected someone to jump out of the dark areas or from behind a car.

Subways are becoming a regular feature of Delhi's topography. We found that most subways are well lit, though often not at the entry/exit points. Further, the signage at some of these points are not clear. Most of the subways do not have guards or attendants and we felt unsafe using them late in the evening when the number of users rapidly declines. Some subways, as the one in Nehru Place, have a few shops which are open till the closure time of the subway. Regular women users of the subway shared

that they felt safe using it even after dark because of the presence of the shopkeepers over a period of time. Even in Connaught Place, women users of the subways said that they feel comfortable as there were a large number of vendors inside. In contrast to these, users of the South Extension subway even felt unsafe to use it alone during the daytime, because of the isolation and lack of regular vendors.

Besides the frequently encountered infrastructure issues which influence the use and safety of women in urban spaces, we found that certain other places such as debris dumps, partially demolished buildings, and dark alleys and corners were identified as unsafe areas by women. In many areas we found some demolished buildings with easy access making them vulnerable spaces for women. We also found construction debris in almost all areas of Delhi – lying near roadside, or pavements – and obstructing easy movement of pedestrians.

Spaces Where Women Feel Safe after Dark

'I Would Not Worry Here'

We found certain common features in public places used by women after dark. In market places we found that women were present only in areas with certain kinds of shops. There were more women in Connaught Place and South Extension than in Nehru Place which has a large number of computer and shops or in Paschim Puri with a section of the market occupied by auto parts shops. In market areas as South Extension and Connaught Place we came across very few women who were shopping or commuting alone well after dark. Most women were present either in groups, or with men, or with families.

In residential areas we found that women and children were using well lit parks (as in Saket, D Block Sarita Vihar, South Extension) or were present in the inner colony streets, especially if the parks were dark (as in E Block Sarita Vihar, Sunder Nagri). Women were also present in large numbers on well lit streets with a large number of vendors (Patpargunj, Sarita Vihar, Paschim Puri). In high-income residential areas such as Saket, Nizamuddin, and South Extension we found very few women on the roads or streets outside their houses after dark. In contrast to these areas, we found that a large number of women in lower income group housing or in resettlement areas like Paschim Puri, Kalyanpuri, or Sunder Nagri were present in the lanes just outside their houses but not on the outer lanes of the colony. Most women in these areas who return home after dark said that they prefer to walk back from the bus stop with other women.

Women reported feeling safe in moving around after dark because of the presence of familiar vendors selling vegetables and other household items, the local ironing person and others who are regularly present till late in the evening. They also felt safe walking around local night markets, especially the weekly evening markets. These vendors and markets can be seen as "safety valves" for the area.¹²

Problems Faced by the Urban Poor

Thrown out of the City

The urban poor particularly those who have been relocated to the peripheries of the city are faced with inadequate infrastructure and high rates of crime against men and women. Besides the main residential areas, unsafe spaces also include public transport, isolated or unlit areas as dark paths and lanes, and isolated

bus stops or public toilets. In such areas, they are subject to violence because of working hours which require them to commute either very early or late [Moser 2004].

The safety audits also revealed that there is an infrastructure divide between the Delhi of the upper and middle classes and the areas occupied by the lower classes, especially those who are resettled in far flung parts of the city. It is clear that varying (and even discriminatory) parameters are applicable to different parts of the city. Street lighting in Sunder Nagri is poor, as is the case in the resettlement colonies like Khadar and Bawana whereas middle class housing areas such as Sarita Vihar, Vasant Kunj, South Extension are relatively better lit.

In most resettlement areas, girls faced harassment in public transport – in the form of lewd comments from bus drivers and their companions, or loud suggestive music, and from male passengers. In certain cases, parents of young girls had discontinued the school education of their daughters because of the fear of violence and dishonour.

Some resettlement areas are perceived to be so unsafe for young girls that many stop going to school as it is no longer safe to commute by bus from their home. Even within the area, most of them hear lewd comments from boys on a daily basis. A 15-year old girl, Geeta, in Bawana told us that she is allowed by her parents only to visit houses on either side of her house.

Older women feel unsafe as well though they challenge the perpetrator more often than the younger girls. Many of these women work in the informal sector and the compulsions of earning a living force them to commute by bus, autorickshaws, and even walk on poorly lit roads. As in the case of younger girls, besides facing harassment from other commuters, they are harassed by drivers and conductors of public transport.

The usage of public space here is also very different than the rest of the city. As noted in the previous section, large number of women are present in the lanes outside their homes. These women not only chat here but also use the space for their daily household chores. In a sense, they use public space, that is, the streets for private use. This is marked by the very nature of such spaces occupied by the urban poor where the line between public and private spaces get blurred.

This can also be seen in the case of spaces used in lieu of toilets. We noted that certain infrastructure issues such as public toilets are specific to slums and resettlement areas as the residents here have no private toilets in their houses. The inadequate facilities make lives of women in these areas acutely vulnerable. Public toilets in most of the slums and resettlement areas were found to be unusable as they have broken doors or are in a filthy state. Even when the toilets are in a usable condition, many women are unable to use them as they are paid toilets and many women cannot afford to pay the requisite amount. Women often expressed the view that they would rather buy vegetables for a meal than to pay for the toilets. The filthy state or the economics leave no option but to use the open fields. Women in Khadar and Bawana narrated instances of harassment by men in the fields on a daily basis. They cope with this threat by going in a group to the fields.


Many toilets were found to be unsafe as only paid toilets have attendants – women reported incidents when men have entered women's toilets and have reported harassment by attendants as well. Most public toilets close at 10 pm after which women are forced to use the open fields. Bawana has a water canal adjacent to the residential area used by women to bathe or wash clothes where they are harassed by men from neighbouring villages. It is clear that a very private activity such as having a bath or using

a toilet are done in open public spaces – not because they find these spaces safe but due to the lack of infrastructure. Yeoh and Huang's (1998) research in Singapore also examines the ways that domestic workers have to use public spaces such as parks for private meetings as their home is not a private space for them.

Politics of Safety

In reflecting on issues of unsafety, it is important to emphasise the politics of safety. What are the reasons that spaces are unsafe? For whom do we need to make spaces safe? In a gated community, if safety strategies are only directed towards women who live there and not for the women who provide services, this is an inadequate solution to the problem.

Safety audits and solutions must be located within a broader framework of rights for the most vulnerable. In a city like Delhi (and many other cities), women face tremendous vulnerabilities in negotiating public spaces. In addition, there are other factors which compound this vulnerability – such as age, class and others. There are also women (and men) who are forced to live and work in public spaces and their experiences would illustrate the extent of their insecurities. These would include the homeless, sex workers, and others for whom the boundaries between public and private are fluid.

Solutions to the lack of safety and security must put the burden on different sets of actors who use and are responsible for the space. Thus solutions like carrying pepper sprays or learning self-defence are individualised solutions to community or collective problems. Women cannot be told to find their own solutions for their insecurity as the problem lies outside them. The solution has to come from the community and the state. In a world of increasing privatisation, security is also being privatised in the desire to protect one's own property, belongings and people. This cannot be the solution to increase in violence and fear of violence. The solutions have to come from consultative processes where the voices of all people, especially vulnerable populations, must be heard and given value. Only then can women access the full range of rights of being an urban citizen. 

Email: kalpana@jagori.org
surabhitm@gmail.com

Notes

[This article builds upon the research done by Jagori on safety in public spaces in Delhi since 2005. We would like Kalyani Menon-Sen for her inputs in the section on Delhi.]

- 1 Mega cities are those with a population over 10 lakh.
- 2 A survey done by NIPPCID for Delhi police showed that almost 45 per cent of the reported cases of molestation were in public buses and another 25 per cent were at the roadside. While 40 per cent reported that they felt unsafe after dark, 31 per cent reported feeling unsafe even in the afternoon. In another study done by an NGO, AID India, of 200 young women in Delhi, 175 reported that they had faced incidents of sexual harassment in public, primarily in buses and on the roadside.
- 3 We take this phrase from a book by the same title edited by Kalpana Kannabiran (2005).
- 4 Metropolitan Action Committee on Violence against Women and Children, Toronto, Canada.
- 5 Delhi Human Development Report, 2006.
- 6 World Urbanisation Prospects 2003, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 'Partnerships for Progress', OUP, New Delhi.
- 7 In a few cases, we audited the area in the evening and then traced the route again after dark to map the changes in the usage of the space. We did not conduct audits late at night as the issue of safety of our team

members was also crucial. Being a large city, many of us had to commute to far off areas, and for our own safety, we completed our audits latest by about nine thirty at night. Even then, on a few occasions our team members were harassed by men on the streets. In most instances, we confronted these men which led to the involvement of local people as well.

- 8 In the US a recent national survey the difference in fear of crime between African Americans and European Americans was greater than the difference between men and women. [National Crime Prevention Council 2001 quoted in Whitzman 2006]. This illustrates that there are different ways and causes of vulnerability and gender is a significant one, though not the only one.
- 9 We thank Radhika Chopra for this insight.
- 10 The university is a place with many young women and in Saket it was at the PVR cinema complex, which is also a place where many young people hang out.
- 11 There was well known case in 2003 where a young medical student was raped in broad daylight inside a monument in the centre of the city.
- 12 This idea of "safety valves" was put forth by Syeda Hameed, member, Planning Commission at the launch of the Jagori Report 2007.

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