

# Safe in the city?

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THERE have been several publicized cases over the past few months which raise concern about the lack of safety of women in our cities, a recent one being the molestation of two women by a crowd of men outside a hotel in Mumbai. In another incident, two young women were molested in a cyber café on the Delhi University campus. Within a single month we heard about a woman being molested in the basement of a Gurgaon mall, sexual harassment of a British journalist by a hotel owner in Udaipur, and tourists molested in a crowd in Kochi, among others. Even as these incidents provoked public and media debate, it became evident that the incidents were just part of the larger known reality of violence against women in public.

While the more gruesome and violent incidents make the headlines, the defining characteristic of violence

against women is its ordinary and continuous nature. It is the everyday character of violence and its normalization that needs attention. The notion of the violence of normal times focuses on the ways in which women's everyday lives and experience are structured and controlled.<sup>1</sup> Violence and the fear of violence are an integral part of women's experience of public spaces in India. Women as a group are vulnerable in a society which is deeply entrenched in patriarchal violence used as a means to control, exclude and deny them rights. The fear that women face is not merely a generalized one of physical violence, but specifically of sexual violence.<sup>2</sup> This fear is firmly embedded within patriarchal

1. K. Kannabiran, *The Violence of Normal Times: Essays on Women's Lived Realities*, Women Unlimited, New Delhi, 2005.

2. Shilpa Phadke, 'Dangerous Liaisons. Women and Men: Risk and Reputation in

constructions of the female body, where women and families fear shame and the loss of honour as much if not more than the actual bodily harm done to women.

**W**hile it is now generally accepted that violence against women in public spaces is pervasive, the question of how to deal with it has only recently begun to be addressed. This requires that the factors involved in the continuing violence need to be identified. This paper draws on the research conducted by Jagori, a Delhi resource centre for women, to identify what makes public spaces in cities so unsafe for women and how women are denied the right to fully participate in city life because of violence and the fear of violence.<sup>3</sup> Though historically Delhi has the dubious distinction of being among the most unsafe cities in India for women, this is becoming a salient feature of almost all cities around the country.<sup>4</sup>

The methodology used for this study was Safety Auditing, which involves walking through a space and identifying factors which cause it to be safe or unsafe.<sup>5</sup> The audits focus on

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Mumbai', *Economic and Political Weekly* 42(17), 28 April-4 May 2007, pp. 1510-1518.

3. JAGORI, *Is This My City? Women's Safety in Public Spaces in Delhi*, Jagori, New Delhi, 2007. In addition to the study, Jagori has over the past few years carried out a Safe Delhi Campaign which targets different sets of people in the city to take responsibility to address the issue of safety for women. The activities have included a media campaign, public outreach, awareness sessions with young men and women across classes, and working with the police and authorities. For more information visit <http://safedelhi.jagori.org>

4. The NCRB data on violence shows that Delhi tops in many forms of violence against women including molestation, rape and sexual harassment.

5. This methodology was pioneered by METRAC Canada in the 1980s. We have adapted the method to conduct the study in Delhi.

the built environment or infrastructure (lighting, trees, pavements, parks etc), the location of police booths, public telephones, shops and other vendors, identifying spaces that are male dominated and those that are more accessible to women. Jagori also conducted both a survey of 500 women across class, age and location and interviews in order to understand women's perceptions of their rights and access to different spaces. Diverse areas of the city were included, such as middle class residential colonies, resettlement areas, market places, metro stations, commercial areas, educational campus, railway station and industrial areas.<sup>6</sup>

The research shows that an overwhelming majority of women in this city fear the possibility of violence. But the experience of this fear differs depending on where one lives, travels and works. We recognize that gender is not the only or even primary axis of discrimination in urban spaces. Age, social class, occupation, disability, marital status are other identities which impact the experience of urban spaces. Women who commute by bus obviously face different vulnerabilities than 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 are residents and those who provide services can be very different and even opposing.

**R**esearch has highlighted that women are often seen and see themselves as illegitimate users of public space.<sup>7</sup> In fact even when women use a street for a 'legitimate' activity such

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6. The findings of the safety audits have been published in Jagori, *Is This My City*, op. cit.

as going to work, they give way to men or avert their eyes, a 'symbolic representation' that urban space 'belongs more to men than to women'.<sup>8</sup> Another study of comparative perspectives on use of public spaces in London and Jerusalem found that fear of harassment cut across the experience of women in both cities and across identities of marital status, nationality and sexual orientation.<sup>9</sup>

**W**omen's access to and visibility in public is determined by several factors including time, place and purpose. In order to be seen in and use public spaces without censure, women have to manufacture legitimacy. Thus, if they are on their way to work or study, to drop or pick up children, walk in a park (at certain times), or shop (at certain times), they are seen as legitimate users of the space. This legitimacy does not necessarily prevent harassment, but it does categorize them as decent and respectable women.<sup>10</sup> Thus many spaces that women are able to access during the day become inaccessible or more difficult to use at night. Women have to be conscious of time and space while negotiating their movements.

The ideology of respectability influences the ways in which women

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7. C. Andrew, 'Resisting Boundaries? Using Safety Audit for Women', in K. Miranne and A. Young (eds), *Gendering the City: Women, Boundaries and Visions of Urban Life*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, 2000, pp. 157-168; C. Whitzman, 'What Do You Want To Do? Pave Parks? The Planner's Role in Preventing Violence', in M. Eichler (ed), *Change of Plans: Towards a Non-Sexist Sustainable City*, Garamond Press, Toronto, 1995, pp. 89-110; Elizabeth Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1991.

8. C. Andrew, op. cit., p. 159.

9. Tovi Fenster, 'The Right to the Gendered City: Different Formations of Belonging in Everyday Life', *Journal of Gender Studies* 14(3), 2005, p. 224.

10. Shilpa Phadke, op. cit.

handle harassment. Usually women do not report violence to the police for fear of being questioned on their reasons for being out in public spaces. Young women often do not tell their parents about harassment that they face in public for fear that their movements would be curtailed. Women routinely make decisions which are based on the implicit understanding that they have to manufacture legitimacy. 'I always stand at a bus stop whether I am waiting for a bus, an auto or friend. If you stand anywhere else, cars will slow down. At least I can stand at the bus stop without feeling uncomfortable,' stated a young college girl.

**T**he cars slowing down implies that the woman standing on the road could be picked up for a sexual or social encounter. Thus, by standing at the bus stop, she is asserting that she is a 'good woman' and has a legitimate purpose in being in public. Our survey and several others reveal that though women face harassment at bus stops too, they still find it safer. There are numerous cases which demonstrate how women in public at the 'wrong' time or place have faced severe consequences – a young woman going to the fields in the early morning was violently raped because she was out in the dark; another woman was raped after dark in a parking lot at an auditorium.

The public response after the initial shock is often to put the onus of safety back on women. For example in 2004, the Delhi police issued a set of 'do's and don'ts' like not going out alone in the dark, not talking to strangers, avoiding lonely areas and so on. More recently, the Delhi police advised women from the Northeast on how to avoid sexual harassment which included advice about dress and behaviour.

Women are expected to be responsible for their own safety. As harassment is sexual in nature, the issue of virtue and honour get foregrounded. This discourse invariably places the burden back on women to control their behaviour and movement. Having to manufacture legitimacy forces women to control their own movements and access public spaces with specific purpose, or at least the semblance of purpose. What women don't have is the right to just 'hang out' or occupy public spaces without a purpose or a clear destination. Thus while it is common to see men enjoying leisure in parks, women use parks very differently – either with children, crossing over to reach another place, purposefully walking for exercise, or maybe sitting and talking, but only in some parks, often those that are located close to home or within a residential area. Specific parks such as India Gate are accessed by women but mostly with family or in groups. Parks at night are definitely not places where women feel safe.

These notions also carry a bias that women are only out when they choose to and that their rightful place is in the home. This ignores the reality of many working class and middle class women who have to navigate through different kinds of public spaces through the day, including roads, buses, parks and other spaces like the school, the workplace and the hospital.

**T**he lack of safety affects the poor or working class more severely as girls and women have to often give up, or at least compromise on, their right to education or earn a livelihood because of a lack of safe transport to schools or places of work. In new resettlement areas, parents of many young girls withdraw their daughters from school because of the fear of sexual violence

on the way to school, especially by bus. Alongside a feeling of fear, this has an irrevocable material consequence on the lives of these girls. Students in University of Delhi shared that they are reluctant to step out after dark as large sections of the roads are dimly lit and they face harassment by men on two wheelers and cars. Even if the library is open, women students are rarely present after dark. All this hinders women's ability to work and education and eventually their fuller participation in city life.

The above analysis reaffirms that though there has been a 'reconstitution of sexuality as desire' in recent times through media and popular culture, it has consistently reiterated 'norms of sexual respectability'.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, women attending a party late at night are seen as fair game and face the danger of molestation and rape as we saw on the 1st of January this year.

**W**hile patriarchy plays a significant role in determining women's access to the city, our research and safety audits show that urban design and planning can make an impact on women's experience of safety. For example, use of spaces for a diversity of purposes is more conducive to the production of safety. Planners and sociologists argue that this diversity ensures that different kinds of people use the space and through all times of the day. Jane Jacobs argues that the problem of insecurity cannot be solved by getting people off the streets and speaks about 'eyes on the street' as the only solution to lack of safety.<sup>12</sup> The streets are meant to be inhabited and used by people. She advocates for diversity in

11. N. Menon, *Sexualities*, Women Unlimited, New Delhi, 2007, p. xxxi.

12. Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Vintage, New York, 1960.



the use of public spaces as a way to ensure that there are different sets of users of a space at all times, thereby ensuring a higher level of safety and comfort.

Throughout the audits we found that people using and moving around in a space led to its perception as being safer than spaces which were more deserted. In middle class residential areas women and children used well-lit parks or frequented the inner colony streets. They were also present in large numbers on well-lit streets with a large number of vendors. Women reported feeling safe to move 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 markets. Women users of pedestrian subways shared that they felt safe using them only if they were well lit and had regular vendors or shops.

**A**dequate lighting emerged as an important factor in determining the safety of a space. Thus parks that were well lit were used more by women. Similarly lighting in residential areas ensured more safety for women. Urban spaces are very different during the day and after dark. We began the audits in the evening before it turned dark and continued into the night to examine the difference. Thus the walk from the bus stop to the home became significantly less safe once it turned dark. We observed that lighting throughout the city was very varied. Middle class and upper class areas had much better lighting than working class areas. For example in Mayapuri industrial area, it was pitch dark outside the factory and women always waited for others to walk with. Bus stops often

had no lighting and were only lit from the streetlights or from vendors.

The urban landscape of Delhi is being recast to remove the poor and working class through measures like factory closures, slum demolitions and resettlement in far-flung places on the periphery of the city.<sup>13</sup> The urban poor in Delhi live in slums, illegal squatter settlements, or in remotely located resettlement colonies with inadequate infrastructure. Safety issues here range from total lack of infrastructure, poor lighting, state of public toilets to poor public transport.

**T**he lack of public toilets for women in public spaces such as markets, cinema halls, parks and commercial spaces limits women's access to these areas. The number of public toilets for women in Delhi is a tenth of those for men. Nevertheless, houses in resettlement areas do not have private toilets and women have to use public paid toilets or the adjacent open fields. Fields are preferred, due to lack of maintenance of toilets or because of financial reasons. Across slums and resettlement areas, women narrated stories about harassment in the fields – flashing or just staring at them when squatting.

It is clear that infrastructure such as lighting, pavements, state of roads, parks and trees can affect whether a space is seen as safe by and for women to use. Similarly the nature of usage of the space also has a role to play in creating conditions of safety. Thus liquor shops which often have men in larger numbers can make a space less comfortable and safe for women. On the contrary, the presence of regular and familiar shops and vendors creates a feeling of safety for women who

use the space. We are not suggesting that this alone can guarantee safety, but rather that it plays a role and therefore needs to be considered.

**W**hat makes a space safe or unsafe? For whom do we need to make spaces safe? Discussions about safety of women often get constructed around the middle and upper class woman who is participating in the global city and economy. Therefore, the public outcry at violence committed on a woman working in a BPO is in direct contrast to the lack of interest in the large number of women who have to work and return home at night without any support from employers. These include nurses, domestic workers and others working in the informal sector. Similarly middle class residential concern for safety of women is deeply class based. Thus many middle class residential areas premise safety on keeping out 'lower class' men such as vendors. These same people are rarely concerned about the safety of women who work in the colony such as domestic workers.

The discourse around safety must be located within a broader framework of rights. Lack of safety in fact prevents women from fully participating in the life of the city. Thus providing safety or finding solutions also need to be posited within a framework of rights. Women cannot be told to find their own solutions for their insecurity. Solutions like carrying a pepper spray or learning self-defence are individualized and not based on the notion of safety as a right. The solution has to come from the community and the state. It must emerge from a consultative process where the voices of all people, especially vulnerable populations, are heard and given value. Only then can women access the full range of rights of being an urban citizen.

13. Amita Baviskar, 'The Politics of the City', *Seminar* 516, August 2002.