

# INDIA

## MAPS FOR CHANGE: MAKING DELHI SAFER FOR WOMEN

By **Pamela Philipose**

Delhi (Women's Feature Service) – Delhi, which marked its centenary as the capital of India recently, is a city marked by paradoxes. While the per capita incomes here are almost twice that of the national average, half its children live in slums. While it has a history of a settled population that goes back several centuries, it is also the site of high levels of migration. Delhi has seen the emergence of some of India's most powerful women, yet its sex ratio is an abysmal 865 girls per 1000 boys. It is one of the most heavily policed regions, but is also the site of the highest number of rapes in the country.

Delhi's growth in terms of numbers has been dictated by external compulsions. The population flows following partition in 1947, as well as recurrent droughts, occasional disasters and the constant search for better livelihoods, have seen a city that was 0.4 million in 1911 become a megapolis of 16.7 million a century later.

A modern urban existence hinges on the equal participation of women and men. This, in turn, presupposes basic safety, freedom from harassment and the right to free movement for everybody. So how do you secure the public safety of millions of women in an urban sprawl that has 28,508 kilometres of roads and a metro on which over two million ride every day? How do you ensure that women are not assaulted, attacked, sexually harassed in a city with hundreds of markets, parks, schools, colleges?

Kalpana Viswanath, advisor to an innovative project that focuses on women's safety in public spaces – Safer Cities Programme, Delhi – believes that the first step towards securing women's lives begins when public safety is not viewed just as a 'women's issue' but the concern of all. "Through this project we want to send out the message that everybody – from street vendors and bus conductors to schoolchildren and the government – needs to be involved in keeping Delhi safe," says Viswanath.



(Credit: WFS)

Safety is central if women are to step out of the home and achieve their potential but creating that feeling of security in the minds of women, especially those from vulnerable communities living in tough localities, is a huge challenge.

The Safer Cities Programme, Delhi, is being supported by UN Women and anchored by the women's resource centre Jagori, in partnership with the Delhi Government, the Safe Cities Campaign, the International Center for Research on Women and UN Habitat. It reaches out to communities in nine districts of the capital, all with very diverse populations, and forms partnerships with various civil society organisations and activists, as well as with 'Awaaz Uthao', a women's safety intervention of the Delhi government.

"We know that safety is central if women are to step out of the home and achieve their potential. Yet, creating that feeling of security in the minds of women, especially those from vulnerable communities living in tough localities, is a huge challenge," elaborates Anupriya from Jagori, one of the coordinators of this programme.



Delhi has seen a lot of public action and protest around the issue of women's safety ever since the terrible night of December 16, 2012, when six rapists set upon a 23-year-old student in a Delhi bus and ended up killing her.

Take 35-year-old Sohoni (name changed), a widow who supports her 15-year-old daughter and a 12-year-old son by working as a nursing assistant in a private home. Trepidation walks with her every night as she returns home to a small hutment in an unauthorised colony straddling the historic Tughlakabad fort in south Delhi. This return journey is usually after nine at night and the crowds that mill around her neighbourhood during the day have melted away. Says she, her forehead crinkling with anxiety, "I realise anything can happen. Someone could leap out from behind a tree and snatch my purse or, worse, drag me into the bushes. It has happened here to other women."

Sohoni feels particularly vulnerable when she is waiting for a bus at night. "As I sit alone, cars drive up to me and men gesticulate invitingly. How do I convey to these animals that I have as much right to move on the streets without harassment as they have? 'Mein kya karoon, aaj ka mahaul aise hi hain (what can I do, today's situation is like this). Men rub against you

in crowded buses, they pass suggestive comments and laugh amongst themselves, they make you feel like dirt," she adds. These are also experiences that Anushka (name changed), who is doing her third year History honours at Delhi University, can corroborate.

The experiences of Sohoni and Anushka are clearly those undergone by a wide section of women in Delhi. According to a 2010 baseline survey initiated by Jagori, public transport, buses and roadsides are reported as spaces where women and girls face high levels of sexual harassment. It also underlined that the most common forms of harassment reported were verbal (passing comments), visual (staring and leering) and physical (touching/groping, leaning over etc).

Farah Naqvi, women's activist and National Advisory Council (NAC) member, believes

such behaviour emanates from an instinctive disrespect for women and she attributes it to the strongly patriarchal nature of Delhi's public culture. "In this city that trades in power, almost every human relationship has been commodified. Everything, whether it is a hamburger, a mobile phone or a woman is to be consumed or possessed."

Many believe that they can get away with anything if they have the right connections. "Delhi's VIP culture breeds impunity. Calls to change the law are understandable, but how many times can we change the law? For laws to actually work, we also need a better understanding, among every section of society, of a woman's right to bodily integrity and free movement," observes Madhu Mehra, activist lawyer and executive director, Partners for Law in Development (PLD).

Safety has many dimensions. There is a tendency to perceive women's safety through the prism of middle class experiences, but Delhi's reality is far more complex. "Perhaps the most unsafe category of women in Delhi today is the homeless," states Indu Prakash Singh, Head, Citymakers Programme, Indo-Global Social Service Society, which works among the destitute.

He points out that in the capital there is only one dedicated and permanent shelter for women, which can house about 40 women and a few girls. "In the NDMC area of Delhi, which comprises 43 square kilometres and where most of the city's ruling elite live, there is not a single permanent facility of this kind. Yet, hundreds of homeless women live here and are forced to seek refuge within the precincts of temples and gurudwaras."

Many of them are young mothers in dire need of medical care. "When a woman delivered a baby on the street in 2010 and the media went to town on it, the courts directed the Delhi government to provide facilities for pregnant women and lactating mothers. Today, although two small facilities have been set up – in Sarai Rohilla and Jehangirpuri – nobody knows about them," reveals Singh.

It is for this reason that the Safer Cities Programme, Delhi, emphasises the need for information sharing and convergence of actors and actions by building broad partnerships on issues of safety and access to support. According to Jagori's Anupriya, while there are many service providers, all supposedly there to make the city safer, when someone is actually under attack, she doesn't know what to do, where to go, how to access the right service. Says she, "Even when a woman seeks help, she is often sent from department to department and ends up feeling, helpless, isolated and fearful. It is this scenario that we are trying to change. The vision is to build 'a city where girls and women from diverse sections of the society are able to move around freely without the fear of harassment and violence at all times'"

A city that witnessed the terrible night of December 16, 2012, when six rapists set upon a 23-year-old student in a Delhi bus and ended up killing her, must do all it can to hold on to that vision and work towards making it a reality.

JAGORI ('AWAKEN, WOMEN') is a women's documentation, training and communication centre with the aim of spreading feminist consciousness to a wider audience using creative media. Established in 1984 Jagori is rooted in the experiences of the Indian women's movement with a vision to *help build a just society through feminist values*. It defines its mandate as building feminist consciousness through identifying and addressing the capacity-building, information and networking needs of women, particularly those belonging to oppressed groups in rural and urban areas.

Mission Statement: To deepen feminist consciousness with diverse stakeholders at the national and local levels through advocacy, perspective-building and supporting struggles against human rights violations of women and generating new body of knowledge.

## Our Objectives

- Action research and production of creative feminist materials
- Consciousness-raising and leadership development on women's rights and gender equality
- Supporting women's struggles against all forms of violence ensuring access to safety, dignity, justice and rights
- Creative campaigns and educational materials on key feminist concerns to respond to the programming and resource needs of women's groups, community and field organisations, media and development organizations
- Advocacy and Networking to enlarge and claim democratic spaces and strengthen women's movement building efforts



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