INDIA

From 'Rape Capital' To 'Safe Capital': Women Rethink Urban Planning

By Amrita Nandy

Delhi (Women's Feature Service) - Not far from the metro station in Delhi's downtown Connaught Place – now officially known as Rajiv Chowk – the incessant hustle bustle of a weekday evening ended for a while. Office goers, tourists, vendors and shoppers stood still, much like the majestic white Edwardian columns near them. They were stopped in their tracks by the sight of a few women who walked in slow motion and asked aloud in chorus: "Can I? Can I walk on the street at 12 midnight? Should I? Should I lie in the park? I should. I can." Highlighting the issue of shrunken spaces and the restricted public life of women, this street performance is one of the diverse efforts underway to re-organise the cultural and physical landscape of Delhi and turn it from 'rape capital' to 'safe capital'.

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While institutional reforms and capacity-building through better policing, stronger laws and quick justice are indeed imperative in ensuring women's safety, they are among an array of measures required to address this multi-faceted concern. Changing mindsets and attitudes towards women is certainly the proverbial elephant in the room or, in this case, the street.

Street performance, like the one that happened in Connaught Place, is a creative tool for collective reflection, feels Maya Krishna Rao, the brain behind the performance entitled 'Walk'. After it was performed at a number of venues, including festivals and schools, Rao decided to take it to the streets with the members of the Citizens' Collective against Sexual Assault (CCSA), a local group of individuals and organisations that raises awareness about sexual violence against women, girls and the transgenders. "'Walk' is meant to help us dig deeper into



In Delhi's downtown Connaught Place — now officially called Rajiv Chowk — the incessant hustle and bustle of a weekday evening paused at the sight of a few women, who asked aloud: 'Can I walk on the street at 12 midnight? Should I lie in the Park?

I should. I can.'

our beliefs and conscience. Women's desires, needs, fears, vulnerabilities and demands can be put across forcefully to the masses. I think it is such reflection done by men and women that can lead to the assertion of our rights. Art and drama are an effective means

to explore such complex themes," she adds. Rao has used 'Walk' to initiate conversations about consent and saying "no" among adolescents and teenagers in Delhi's schools.



Voices demanding a rethink in urban planning are growing louder by the day as issues of shrunken spaces and restricted public access for women take centrestage. (Credit: Maya Krishna Rao)

A cultural intervention of this kind is one of the ways to transform societal attitudes towards women. The need of the hour is to encourage efforts to create more equal access to public spaces. For instance, a 2010 baseline survey conducted by Jagori, in partnership with UN Women and Department of Women and Child Development, Government of Delhi, revealed isolated and/or unlit roads to be significant problem points. What came through clearly was that the fear of crime keeps girls and women from fully living their lives, be it in the arena of education, work or leisure and recreation.

Sunanda, 29, a resident of a gated enclave in South Delhi, shares her hesitation in accessing public spaces. "I feel sad that despite living right next to a lush green park, all I can do is look at it from the verandah but not go into it and

walk on the grass or sit and read a book. It only has men who play cards or drink late into the evening. There are hardly any women who go there, either because of these men or a general feeling of insecurity," says the marketing executive.

Unlike Sunanda, Naseema, 48, a domestic worker, does not bemoan the lack of a recreational park but pleads for streetlights in her locality, a dense slum cluster in West Delhi. She reveals, "In winters, it gets dark early and neither I nor my daughter feel safe coming back home. Men stop their scooters or cars and stare at us, pass lewd remarks on that dark stretch of the road. I even know of women who have been harassed there."

Women's concerns about access to public transport, public toilets, street lights and so on have been chronicled well enough. The Jagori baseline survey highlighted, among other tangible gaps and structural lapses, the need for inclusion of women's safety concerns, including that of the people with disabilities, in Local Area Plans. It also argued for public consultations with women before all urban project proposals are conceptualised.

Says Kalpana Viswanath, Senior Advisor, Jagori, "Street lights and public toilets are features that should definitely encourage women towards public spaces. While main roads and certain areas of our city are often well lit, what we really need is uniform lighting across all kinds of colonies. The Municipal Corporation of Delhi's (MCD) own survey has revealed a sharp shortage of toilets for women. Of the women's toilets around, only a few are actually usable. So apart from the construction of toilets, their maintenance is equally important."

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In a city with only 3,712 toilets for men and 269 for women (as per figures shared by civic agencies in Delhi in May 2013 in response to a PIL filed in the Delhi High Court), disabled women are doubly marginalised. Samarthyam, an organisation that works on barrier-free and accessible transportation and public infrastructure for the disabled, claims that even in colleges and universities, the disabled do not access libraries, laboratories or even toilets for fear of sexual harassment or assault.

In consultation with Jagori, urban planners at Delhi Development Authority's Unified Traffic and Transportation Infrastructure Planning and Engineering Centre (UTTIPEC) created a comprehensive set of guidelines – both short- and long-term – especially geared towards women's safety. The underpinning philosophy of the guidelines is 'public' need and nurturing human contact as against elitist infrastructure (flyovers, malls, showrooms and so on), ghettoised colonies and gated communities.

To cite a few examples, the guidelines entail spaces for hawkers as "eyes on the street", the creation of night shelters, re-designing bus stops, making GPS mandatory for autorickshaws and taxis, and so on. Submitted to the Lt. Governor and Chief Secretary, Delhi, the guidelines re-imagine a city where women and other marginalised sections are less isolated.

Retrofitting Delhi with a progressive perspective, one that is also gender and disabled sensitive, should make India's capital truly vibrant. A city where pavements and streets reflect its multiple diversities and where the underprivileged are not "encroachers" and women are not "careless" if out late at night.

For women, accessing public spaces and living a fuller life should be, literally and metaphorically, a walk in the park.

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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.

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