

# 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 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



(Credit: Maya Krishna Rao)

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.'



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 (UTTIPPEC) 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.

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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