

INDIA

MIXED CITY SPACES ARE SAFE CITY SPACES

By **Suneeta Dhar**

Delhi (Women's Feature Service) - How do we make our cities safer for everybody, especially women? This is a question that has become insistent and urgent at a time when assaults and attacks on women have increasingly become commonplace. The recent gang rape in Mumbai and the torture and murder of a young Dalit woman in Haryana remind us of the rising tide of violence against women in urban spaces.

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Countries the world over have had to grapple with this concern. We have seen grassroots networks like the Huairou Commission and Women In Cities International (working in Latin America, Africa and Canada) that have envisioned their urban spaces as gender inclusive. The safest cities are designed to enable their residents and those that come there to work and study, from different ethnic and class backgrounds, to live and interact together as a community. This teaches respect, tolerance, regard for each other and also ensures the social ownership of the concept of safety.

In India, in contrast, metropolises are getting increasingly segmented. In both Delhi and Mumbai – purportedly world-class cities – the well-off live in privileged pockets and gated communities, while the less-privileged are relegated to under-resourced neighbourhoods, often at the fringes. Ironically, in earlier times, both cities had far more mixed neighbourhoods. Yet, if we are to go by the work that Jagori has done in recent years on making cities more secure for women, it emerges clearly that mixed city spaces make for safer cities.



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The women who are potentially the worst affected in unsafe conditions are the very ones who have no voice in deciding the contours of the city or ways to make it safer. One has often wondered why it is so hard to involve communities in planning their own living and working spaces. We know that top-down planning, no matter where it takes place in the world, is never effective. Urban design should better reflect the aspirations, imaginations and requirements of all sections of the population. Where should the public toilet be? Where should the water source be located? Which is the best site for the school?



(Credit WFS)

Proper street lighting is necessary to ensure a safer environment for women and children after sundown.

Jagori has tried to bring in the perceptions of women and the youth into urban plans in various localities in Delhi where it has been working – many of them resettlement colonies like Bawana, Madanpur Khadar, Molarband, and others. Young people here can then dream of alternatives to make everyday spaces into living habitats in the best sense of the term. In Madanpur Khadar, for instance, the local youth undertook a house-to-house survey as well as conducted safety audits, and highlighted the concerns that emerged through special campaigns, gender sensitisation workshops and street theatre. In this way, they could actually reclaim a park and get its surrounding walls painted. For the first time in nine

years, girls who had never played collectively in public actually reported that they were cycling and taking part in games in a park that they had helped to create.

Sadly, though, with no sustained follow-up by the local authorities, their efforts were laid waste and the space quickly lapsed back into a garbage dump. Had such a park been developed further, the next generation of kids, inspired by their older counterparts, would have imprinted their right to this public space and ensured greater safety for their young peers.

The collapse of that park only illustrates the huge gap that exists between service providers and the community on how they imagine public spaces. Investments in infrastructure continue in the mainstream of the city benefiting only some sections, even while there is so much to be done to improve the derelict spaces in the neglected neighbourhoods.

In Bawana, young people filed petitions under Right To Information (RTI) Act to track expenditures on public infrastructure in their localities. A gender analysis study of the annual budget for essential services conducted by the Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability (CBGA), a Delhi based research and advocacy organisation, found huge disparities in investment in such settlements, as compared to the main city.

Why is it so hard to get gender-sensitive, low-cost community infrastructure in place for everybody? Toilets, for instance, were not seen as important, although they were crucial to women's safety and well-being. Simple innovations could meet the specific needs of women – pregnant women, women with disabilities, menstruating women – leading to a greater life of dignity.

Changing public attitudes on some of these issues is another huge challenge. As part of the 'Safer Cities Initiative', supported by UN Women and in partnership with the Delhi government's Department of Women and Child Development, Jagori has undertaken trainings for the 'Awaaz Uthao' programme of the Delhi government that seeks to involve the larger community in safety and empowerment issues. Efforts are underway to set up safety guidelines for school-going girls, including good sanitation, lighting, counselling support, and awareness campaigns on the unacceptability of sexual harassment in any form. At a recent meeting of Mission Convergence – a part of this intervention – a young woman from a west Delhi colony shared how young people in her area had, after conducting safety audits, taken up local concerns with the police, resident associations and the public works department.

While these indicate some stirrings, much remains to be done. What happened on December 16, 2012 in that Delhi bus held a mirror to society and forced us to reflect on the deep-seated patriarchal mindset and culture. An international community network, 'Delhi and Beyond' – located across 60 cities of the world – was formed, and women followed up on safety measures in their communities. At the city level, the state government set up an inter-departmental core group that meets regularly on this issue, which is chaired by the Chief Secretary of the state government. A special helpline – 181 – has also been set up in the Chief Minister's office, and has received over 2,00,000 calls related to sexual harassment and stalking, a crime not even recognised earlier.

This takes us to the crux of the issue. We need to be pro-active about putting policies and infrastructure in place to bring about the desired results. A few sensitisation programmes are certainly not enough and the struggle has always been to ensure that such interventions actually permeate a society marked deeply by a culture of impunity and unaccountability.

Ensuring change is not just the responsibility of the state. As a society, we need to deeply reflect on various, inter-connected concerns and work together to make our cities sites of empowerment, not spaces of fear and violence.

(The writer is director of Jagori, the Delhi-based women's resource centre.)

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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