

Best Practices around the world for Women's Safety in Public Spaces- An overview

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Abstract:

Being a developing country, no doubt India is meeting the needs of economic, physical and socio-economic growth. But meeting the social growth is something that the nation is lacking behind in. India has been ranked amongst the top 10 most unsafe countries for women by the Thomson Reuters Foundation in the years . It is generally considered that women's safety is an issue solely related to social and psychological aspects of the society, but the paper demonstrates the principle thoughts on relation between women's safety and urban planning. Increasing safety is not just about responding to violence, it is also necessary to create an environment that enables women to roam around freely, without the fear of assault or harassment. The paper presents best practices adopted by the planners and architects around the world in order to meet the need of women's safety in public places.

Keywords: Women's safety, Urban planning, Assault, Harassment, Public places.

Introduction: "Any act of gender based violence that results in or likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women including threats of such acts, coercion of liberty whether occurring in public or private life is known as sexual violence"[1]. Various types of crimes against women include Assault on women with intent to outrage her modesty, insult to modesty of women, kidnapping and abduction, rape, immortal traffic act, etc. [2]. A survey conducted in year 2018 revealed that 60% of women still feel unsafe to roam around freely in the streets of Delhi which was expected to be opposite after the Nirbhaya case of 2012. Violence against the female gender continues to curse the roads, public facilities and even places dedicated for leisure activities. In New Delhi, 92% of women have experienced some form of sexual violence in public spaces during their lifetime according to a study conducted in year 2018. A woman is raped every 20 minutes in India [2].

Urban planning has conventionally never been allied with 'Safety', which is fundamentally a matter of law-and-order in the nation. Yet, town planners play an imperative role in creating safer cities by incorporating and advocating safe designs. Increasing safety is not just about responding to violence, it is also necessary to create an environment that enables women to roam around freely, without the fear of assault or harassment. Study showed that there are many factors that play an important role in shaping women's approach to the city

including: Urban planning and design; Community contribution; Enhanced policing; Management of space [3].

Purpose of the paper is to relate women's safety in public places to the urban planning strategies and present how the strategies may help in making cities better, safer and happier places for women to live and roam around in. It consists of best practices from various countries around the world and how and why the steps taken differ from that in India.

Case Studies: The issue is not a matter of concern in just a country or two, many countries around the world have started taking it seriously and have started working for the same. A team including planners, architects and designers are responsible for proposals and strategies as solutions for increasing problem of violence against women in public places.

Following are some of the case studies that help in understanding the situations and best practices around the world for the same.

- **Barcelona-** Barcelona, turned out to be the one of the first one to understand basic needs of women to be safe. It is now a city designed for women, by women. Cooperation of feminist architects, sociologists and concrete planners is been making an attempt to make equity into Barcelona's streets since many years [4]. Following are some of the strategies that came out as solutions when the members interrogated common women and girls in the city:
 - i. **Toilets:** Women, physiologically spend comparatively more time in washrooms than men, spending 3 times as long in the bathroom. According to the study conducted, women's toilet needs to be 3 times the size of men's toilets. If not provided, it is seen that women prefer going in open. Hence, increasing the chances of being attacked.
 - ii. **Play fair:** Visibility is the key, but there's much more to it than just the lightning. In properly lit places wherever there are no activities, no eyes on street, individuals aren't aiming to feel safe anyway. Hence places like open grounds or open areas are converted into play grounds or play areas for children or different ages and gender keeping in consideration their needs and interests.
 - iii. **The way she moves:** Using public transport is found convenient and safe only till a particular time period of the day and if followed by certain routes that are lively and properly lightened. Hence the designers of Barcelona came up with certain routes and strategies that would help women feel safe during their rides. Specific routes are designed and proposed for the same.
 - iv. **Kill the car:** Super blocks have been designed to reclaim the streets. The speed limit of cars is to be reduced to a certain number while entering the super blocks and the parked cars go underground which makes walkability easier and safer for women, children and old aged people.
 - v. **Take a seat:** Area units of city streets puzzled with dark corners and props that create excellent concealment places for attackers to cover. Massive recycling and waste containers, parking's and over

full-grown plantations are tweaked or repositioned to cut back lurking spots. Seating places for people irrespective of their gender and age are designed in a way that these look visually attractive and also, serve the purpose. Women, in such places feel safe to commute and roam around when compared to the places with earlier conditions.

- vi. Say no to sleaze: Barcelona is known for its late night parties which as social gatherings have proven to be unsafe for women and girls. When inquired it was found that more than 80% of the acts of violence or harassment take place during these parties at nights. Women of various age groups demanded the shifting of times of such parties also, with better infrastructure for them to feel safer and easily accessible.
- vii. Corners, stairs, porches and different designed aspects area unit tougher to tackle retrospectively. “New bylaw: to ensure all the entrances to new housing buildings are on street level and avoid creating hiding places”
- viii. The collectively recommended vegetation is not any beyond one meter, thus you'll be able to see at the back of it and also the plantations are maintained in a way as to not stop lightning.[5]

- **Vienna-** Vienna turned out to be the first country to be implementing strategies and solutions in order to reduce the alarming rates of increasing number of violence against women in public places. The designers and authorities focused on planning and designing of safe public places for females. Safe planning and design for the females is crucial because it comes up with public spaces where women and other users get equivalent chance to be vigorous and protected. This sort of planning depends upon the verity that the physical plan of spaces in urban areas affects women’s purpose along with satisfaction of the public area [6].

Gender mainstreaming is an initiative taken when Vienna’s links of public parks commissioned a study to see how both men and women utilize park space. The evaluation further mentioned the need to make sure that these parks are secure and useable public places for women and girls which helped to set up gender specific criteria for planning decisions. Some of the gender oriented criteria incorporate:

- i. Adequate lightning all over the park and on park trails
- ii. Sufficient visibility covering the vicinity
- iii. Few recreation areas neighboring to housing to allow social monitoring
- iv. Transparent spatial layout of the play areas and other public parks.
- v. Multi-purpose game zones i.e. specific zones for activities preferred by girls.
- vi. Spaces in the open ground that can be used for games, as arenas, for calisthenics, community gatherings and sunbathing [7].

- **Australia, Austria-** Sexual violence against women is one of the most common issues amongst the countries irrespective of them being developed or developing nations. Countries of Australia and Austria faced issues like sexual assault and harassment against women at public places like parks and bus stops. 1 amongst 3 Australian women experiences violence since the age of 15 and 1 in 5 experiences sexual violence in public places [6]. Women who face violence usually fall under the age of late teens and 20s according to a study conducted [8].

The major reasons identified for the same included lack of street lights in such places which turn out to be dead places after a certain period of time of a day, lack of liveliness of the parks and the studies conducted showed that the trees along road sides acted as encroachment which further reduced visibility and hence, got promoted as a crime spot. As strategies or solutions, the countries came up with guidelines by and for the city planners for safer parks. Gender mainstreaming along with good visibility and clear orientation and maintained pathways turned out to be the goals to be achieved in minimum period of time. Other strategies for the same included efficient lightning and well maintained toilets and spaces.

- **Brazil, Argentina-** A woman is raped every 11 minutes in a country like Brazil. Four girls are raped every hour in Brazil. A woman is murdered and such cases increased by 4% last year [9]. Issues promoting such crimes in these countries include improper roads, lack of violence responsive services like shelters, rape crisis centers and legal aid, isolation from neighbors, lack of public facilities like: lightning infrastructure, public transport, water and sanitation, public toilets, Proper policing etc. Strategies and solutions accepted by the countries include provision of formal surveillance and access to help, spatial designs in terms of re-designing of dead parks and open spaces etc which would take place with the help of community participation [10]. Various laws laid foundation to the varying networks including legal aid of victim's social services, education, health etc. The cities built women's police stations and brought them into work [11]. Support services like shelters, mobile brigade for the aid of the victims and various other programs hosted by the government included: Victim's assistance center; Women's helpline; Community centers for victims [12].
- **Nepal-** A research done in 2000 showed that 66% of the women faced verbal and 33% emotional abuse. 30% of total crimes enlisted are rape cases [13]. The country has recorded as many as 2,296 complaints related to crime against women while 1213 incidents have been dealt with in first six months of the current fiscal year [14].

One major difference from the other nations, observed in the study includes the age factor. It is seen that younger the women are, more they are at risk of facing the assault or harassment. Possible strategies that people in Nepal accepted include availability of proper signage's, "eyes on street"

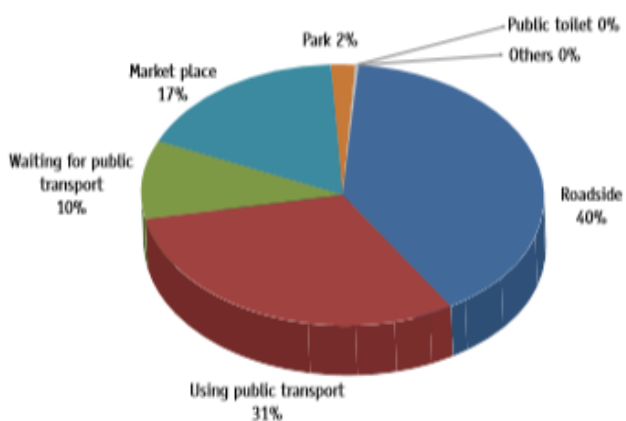
concept i.e. avoiding dead streets and ensuring presence of people in terms of vendor services that would make women feel safer to commute from the roads.

- **New Delhi, India-** Increasing population in the capital city of India, along with economic development, has also given rise to increased number of crimes especially against women. The city tops the list of crimes against women with a record of 33% cases. Amongst the 35 mega cities in the country, which have around 10 lakh population, Delhi alone reported 33.2% of the total rape cases. 67% of the female travellers feel that Delhi is the most unsafe place to travel in India [15].

Factors contributing to lack of safety include parks and isolated areas like the subways or deserted streets. Focused Group Discussions conducted revealed that women felt safe only near their own homes and their localities, i.e familiar places. Key causes for women to feel vulnerable and insecure in public places include: poverty and socio-economic status; travelling in the city; lack of proper infrastructure; attitude of police; societal attitudes etc. [16]

Various parameters identified for such violent acts all over the country include inadequate sidewalks, lack of visible policing, unlit bus stops and subways, lack of adequate public transport and isolation from neighbors. Strategies accepted by the authorities around the country include implementation and launching of portals and apps like safetipin, panic button system and promotion of informal markets in dead routes [15].

Figure 1: Unsafe Public Spaces reported by women [15]



The figures show different types of harassment faced by women in Delhi and the unsafe public places reported by women. The maximum numbers of violent incidents, as reported by 74% of the respondents, take place in broad daylight rather than the often believed, after dark (13%). One of the major reasons is that women prefer accessing public places during the day as the picture of risk increases after dark. Also, the

growing exposure of such incidents by the media, coupled with stress from family members restricts the free mobility of women after dusk.

Figure 2: Forms of sexual Harassment faced by women [15]

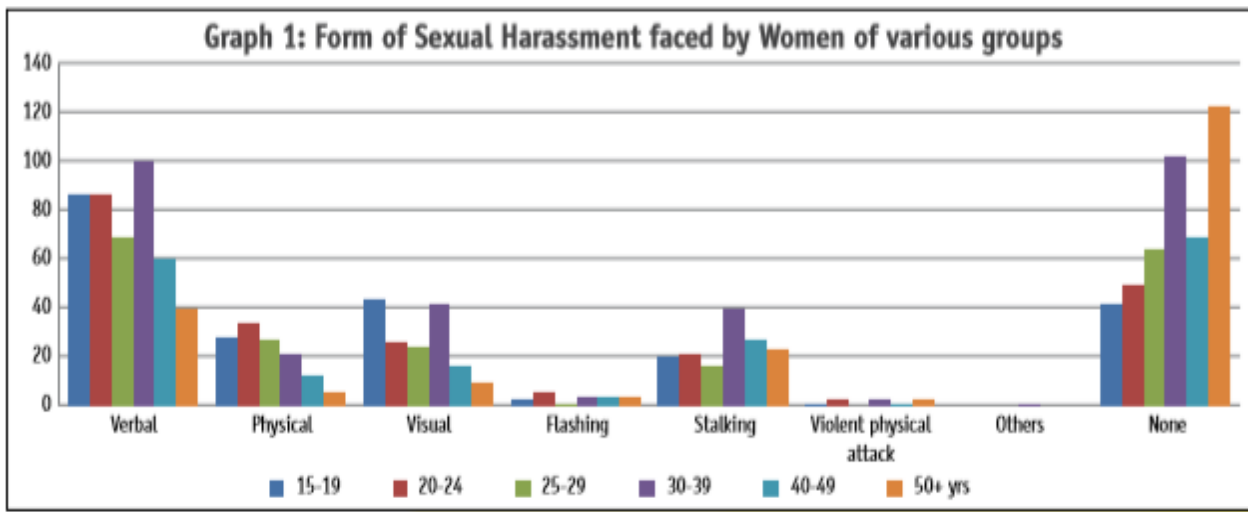
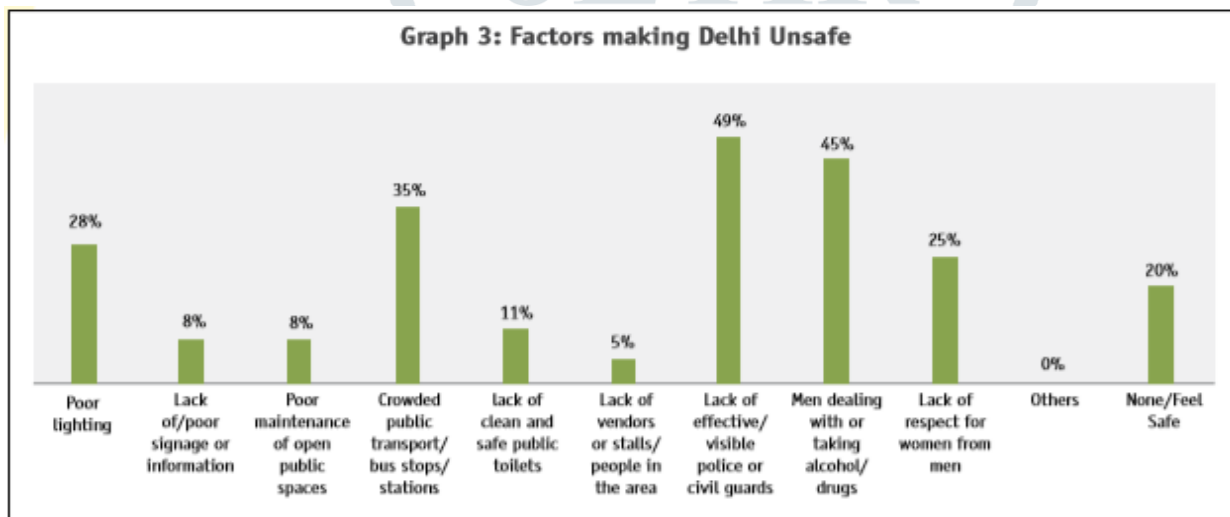


Figure 3:- Factors making Delhi Unsafe [15]



An appealing result of the research was that a huge percentage of women (43%) reported confronting the harasser in some way or the other. This shows an assured degree of confidence among women, in spite of their persisting anxieties regarding the city. Similarly the data also shows that an approximately equal number (41%) do nothing when encountered with annoyance [15].

It is revealed that women irrespective of their age groups are not safe in public places all over the world. The planners along with architects and designers have started working for the same in order to avoid the situations from getting worse. Major common parameters identified amongst these case studies include lack of public infrastructure like street lights, public toilets; bus stops their maintenance the dead streets i.e. lack of eyes on street etc. which have turned out to be the major considerations by the teams working for women’s safety in public places.

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