

BUILDING SAFE URBAN SPACES FOR WOMEN: WOMEN'S SAFETY AUDIT APPROACH

-Prof.(Dr) Upma Gautam¹, Dr Deeksha Bajpai Tewari²

¹ Professor, University School of Law and Legal Studies (USLLS), Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, Dwarka, New Delhi.

¹ Associate Professor, Department of Geography, Dyal Singh College, Lodi Road, University of Delhi.

Introduction

For a long time, disciplines concerned with space have operated under the misnomer that space is primarily objective and thus innocent of the social dynamic that operates in it. The same, termed as 'Spatial Illusions' by Lefebvre (Lefebvre et al., 1991), has been critiqued. The "illusion of transparency" being the first, views space as being completely transparent to human comprehension (Lefebvre et al., 1991); the second, "illusion of opaqueness" sees space as objective, material and essentially physical (Soja, 1989). The two together paint space as being neutral. However, all general spaces, especially urban ones, are characterized by uniformity, differences, contradictions and dialectical relations (Lefebvre et al., 2003). They are constituted by spaces of differences and as differentiated spaces, plural in nature. Urban spaces are thus spaces of power and contestation, anonymity and opportunity, freedom and control – all at once.

Of the many things that give urban spaces their pluralistic character, merely one is that of 'Gender'. Gender divisions are important structuring elements of urban space and urban processes (McDowell, 1983). Men and women conceive, experience and use space in different ways and it is this difference that also influences and informs the perception of what is safe versus unsafe for them (McDowell, 1983; Valentine, 1990).

Building "safe spaces" becomes the main priority in order to achieve the goal of "inclusivity" since it is necessary to understand and prioritize women's safety in order to create inclusive cities. The word "safety" requires careful consideration. In a sustainable city, safety ensures each person a place to live free from danger but also has the possibility of movement that is essential to place attachment and one's quality of life" (Ceccato et al., 2020). There are two concepts involved in safety - perceived and real. The perceived component relates to people's impression of insecurity via the prism of fear and anxiety, while the actual dimension pertains to the likelihood of being a victim (United Nations System-Wide Guidelines on Safer Cities and Human Settlements, 2012). The primary feature of inclusive cities is that they offer a secure daily environment to everybody, particularly to historically marginalized and disadvantaged populations, such as women. These kinds of cities are only possible through a people-centric design process in which members of marginalized and vulnerable groups actively participate in the planning and construction of safe

¹ Professor, University School of Law and Legal Studies (USLLS), Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, Dwarka, New Delhi.

² Associate Professor, Department of Geography, Dyal Singh College, Lodi Road, University of Delhi.

spaces for themselves, offering their perspectives and opinions to increase their level of safety in urban areas.

Participatory City Planning: Women's Safety Audit

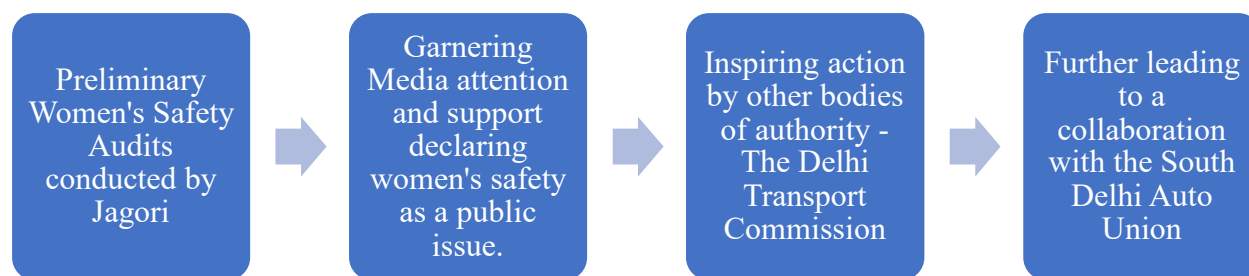
The Metro Toronto Action Committee on Public Violence Against Women in Children (METRAC) introduced the concept of women's safety audits as “a method to evaluate the environment from the standpoint of those who feel vulnerable and to make changes that reduce opportunities for assault.” Thus, this particular form of auditing is intended to serve as a methodological tool for participatory planning that places women at the core of decision-making processes that impact the city, its public spaces, and their accessibility. It contributes to the formulation of proposals for making cities more inclusive of women and other people, based on their individual experiences as well as subjective perceptions of safety, fear, and violence. According to (WOMEN'S COMMUNITY SAFETY AUDIT GUIDE, 2005), Safety Audit can be defined as a “process which brings individuals together to walk through a physical environment, evaluate how safe it feels to them, identify ways to make the space safer and organise to bring about those changes”. The fundamental principle or driving force behind safety audits is the recognition of women as experts in determining the physical modifications necessary to make a space safer or more secure for daily usage. It not only gives them a voice but also equips them with the technical know – how to come – together, organise and make their collective voice reach the ears of planning professionals and legislators to bring about a real difference. In addition, they employ walking as a cooperative and political tactic to encourage women to take action against redefining crime and terror in public areas. Over all it can be said that this methodological tool has great strength because it facilitates the complete integration or mainstreaming of concerns associated with women's safety in and their exclusion from urban public spaces within the larger framework of urban planning.

Women's Safety Audit: An Evaluation

The use of WSA tools has resulted in the creation of several studies on safety audit experiences in various cities and nations, initially in Canada and Europe and subsequently in the rest of the world. These have yielded insights that have helped refine the method further and customize it for different regional situations. Perhaps the first such example can be taken from India, where the checklist, another tool used as part of the women's safety auditing process, first introduced by METRAC, consisting of questions pertaining to 15 key considerations of lighting, sightlines, isolation, presence of people, possible assault sites, maintenance, signage, animals, accessibility, stairwells, elevators, crisis prevention and intervention, parking garage, lobby/main entrance/waiting room and overall design, was modified to include questions that had specifically to do with the setting of micro – spaces such as those of streets, bus stops, residential areas, parks, subways and market areas. Furthermore, the concerned lists were also found differing by way of paying greater attention to people factors – how many people at a given point of time, whether they were men, women or children, if there were places encouraging the gathering of a largely male – dominated crowd (paan shops, alcohol vendors, etc.); and aspects of physical design, such as the presence of recessed doorways and alleys, vacant buildings/markets or shops/buildings/houses under repair, access to phones, public toilets and security, if there were scheduled timings for the opening and closing – down of the place. Introducing more diverse and engaging practices still, (Bhatt, 2020), in her work in parts of Madhya Pradesh, was found making use of more creative means of bringing out the participants' experiences and perceptions through poetry, visual art, photography and even the construction of community maps. With each member,

both male and female, constructing his/her own map, the study succeeds in bringing out the differences in terms of how men and women, resulting from their gendered interaction, end up forming almost diametrically opposite perceptions of the same place, particularly in the context of safety and accessibility.

Women's safety audits have succeeded in addressing challenges associated with multiple themes; urban regeneration, poverty alleviation and raising consciousness about violence against women being three of them (Whitzman et al., 2009). The application of the said methodology in the city of London, England, resulted in the re – routing of a path through a park which was earlier seen as a problem area, the re – designing of a pedestrian tunnel and an overall improvement in the condition of lighting. In parts of Moscow, Russia, the adoption of women's safety audits gave rise to a 'culture of dialogue' among different local actors, which was earlier missing. This, in turn, resulted in improvements in not just the overall neighbourhood design, but also that of public houses, and an increased partnership between local women's groups and the police, leading to a simultaneously positive spill – over impact on cases of family violence. The implementation of this techniques in Dar – es – Salaam highlighted issues that aren't typically noted in relation to women's safety as studied in wealthier cities and countries of the west – those of the lack of accessibility of streets to emergency vehicles and conditions of endemic unemployment and the associated challenges of home – made alcohol production and prostitution. In the aftermath, therefore, changes in the physical layout of the study areas were coupled with job creation programmes and the provision of seed capital to women engaged in prostitution and the brewing of grog, so as to provide them with alternate and safer income – generating activities. Work done using this methodology in Mumbai has also contributed to urban theory building by means of articulating concepts of women's right to risk and to loiter in the city, as its active and rightful citizens. They argue how the notion of worry is used in the context of women's safety in a way that leads to their increased isolation from normal, everyday urban life ridden with elements of risk. The spread – effects of using women's safety audits are also highlighted in the example from Delhi, where the use of this participative tool led to an intense media interest in the process, which enabled the declaration of women's safety as not just a women's issue but that of the entire public, firmly placing it on the map, while also inspiring individuals from other bodies, the Delhi Transport Commission being one of them, thereby resulting in the organisation of a safety survey involving 500 women, the creation of a gender sensitisation campaign which provided training to over a thousand drivers and conductors within the city, and a collaboration with the South Delhi Auto Union, resulting in union members printing and carrying over 5000 stickers advertising women's safety.

Figure 1: Spread – Effects of Women's Safety Audits: An Example from Delhi

Women's safety audits, as participatory methodological tools, therefore, are capable of bringing about wide and far – reaching change in terms of the safety and inclusion of women and promoting a more diverse and inclusive urban interaction, in general. They have been determined to be in line with the fundamental ideas of safer cities, as stated by the (United Nations System-Wide Guidelines on Safer Cities and Human Settlements, 2012), when they are applied globally. They come to constitute a strategy that is rights based, for they bring attention to and help assert women's right to the city – the right to belong to, participate in and make use of urban public spaces in everyday lives, free from the fear of violence and safety concerns;

Women's Safety Audits: Inclusion of Women in Planning

Safety Audits facilitate the inclusion of women – all groups of women, whether poor, disabled or racialised (Basu, 2016), (Women's Safety Audit: A Report on the Safety Audits Conducted in Dhakuria, Bagha Jatin and Ballygunge Stations, Kolkata, 2012), (UN Women (Nepal), 2022), (Women's Safety Audit in Public Places (Karachi, Dadu, Khairpur, Quetta, & Rawalpindi), 2020). The very activity is meant to engage women in the assessment of spaces, acknowledge and address their specific needs and interests. Therefore, the widening and/or clearing of footpaths, covering of man holes and open drains, maintenance of bushes and trees along roads and in parks, ensuring proper lighting, promoting a mixed used of public spaces, making provisions for policing, introduction of self – defence classes, etc, point to measures suggested by and taken for women, following safety audit exercises, to make cities safer and more inclusive for them;

They make space for local governance and the decentralisation of safety and security policies – safety audits pass power into the hands of local government leaders, heads of RWAs and community actors, local inhabitants of the city to pool their resources and present recommendations and solutions for existing and still emerging challenges to women's use of public spaces, adopting a bottom – up approach. The success of women's advocacy groups and an ad – hoc neighbourhood group of women in producing a 'Safe City Report' with 37 recommendations and having the same being taken up by local councillors, along with regular meetings to review implementation, progress and future course of action can be seen as an example in favour of the principles of decentralisation of power to the lower most level – the level of the citizen/inhabitant; As tools, Women's Safety Audits also help facilitate the complete integration or mainstreaming of concerns associated with women's safety in and their exclusion from urban public spaces within the larger framework of urban planning;

They make for a 'Knowledge – Based Approach' – the dissemination of WSA tools, first across Canada and Europe, then throughout the rest of the world, has led to the generation of several

studies on safety – audit experiences in different cities and countries. These have produced learnings that have worked to further improvise on the technique, adapting it to various local contexts. The resultant emergence of new knowledges of methods, approaches and likely results have allowed for social learning to take place and have also led to the compilation of reports and more sophisticated WSA toolkits and the organisation of international conferences aimed at achieving the goal of making cities safer for women;

WSA's pave the way for a cross – cutting, whole society approach for the co – production of safe spaces at a global scale, making for an approach that cuts across borders. With their adaptation to and use in varied local contexts and the need to share knowledges emanating from these unique settings, WSAs have repeatedly encouraged and led to collaborations between community advocates bringing their lived experiences to the table, local politicians with access to government resources, femocrats with the ability to create pressure and facilitate action, and researchers gathering evidence through empirical studies at national as well as international levels (Whitzman et al., 2014). Partnerships between international organisations such as UN Women, UN Habitat and local action and advocacy groups like Jagori, along with WICI and PUKAR can be quoted as examples of the positive difference that such efforts can make and how they go about doing so (JAGORI et al., 2010; Mehrotra et al., 2010; Safetipin, 2019; Safetipin & The World Bank Group, 2021; UN Women (Nepal), 2022).

Coupling Women's Safety Audits with Technology

In line with ongoing developments that have placed technology at the very centre of all aspects of our lives, women's safety audits have also been coupled with the same, introducing yet another modification, thereby adding another dimension to the process. The most commonly used application in this regard has been that of **SafetiPin** – a technological platform that allows its users to score select routes in terms of nine broad parameters of safety – lighting, openness, visibility, security, people, walkpath/footpath, transport, gender and public toilets, thus serving as a digital extension of women's safety auditing. For serving its intended purpose, the app makes use of crowdsourced data, which is further shared with members of the local government, so as to bring about required changes in the city infrastructure. Touted as one of the first such platforms in India, the making of this app is also said to have been aimed at countering the challenge of women's lack of information on public spaces (Polonyi, 2021) . Making use of real – time data then, SafetiPin can serve as a means for women to access the same, facilitating an easier and secure navigation of their environments (*Safetipin | Connecting Women to the City: How Tech Can Improve Women's Access to Public Spaces, 2023*)(*Safetipin | An Outsiders' Take on the Digital Safety Audit Tool Shaping Cities, 2019*). A quick glance at the app's website reveals its features, namely – 1) Tracking – by means of sending requests to people of the user's choice, enabling them to view their location, while also sending the user notifications that flag unsafe areas, indicate prolonged stops and route changes, and, more importantly, place control of when one wants to be tracked or not in the hands of the user; 2) Explore Nearby – making it possible for the user to spot bus stops, hospitals, markets and other relevant services in the vicinity, while waiting; 3) Safest Route – meant to, as the name suggests, highlight the safest alternative based on audits that have been recorded using the app; 4) Find Support – equipping the users with a facility to find verified assistance – centres, such as, police stations, legal centres and NGOs, etc.; 5) Safety Audits – conducting a safety audit of their own by listing safety issues observed/felt at a given location and thus generating a safety score for them, contributing towards identifying areas that call for improvements in order to be made safe for all. Described as a “women's safety companion”, it is

said that the app works to enhance women's claims to and use of the city's public spaces, placing more control in their own hands. Whether or not this actually holds true shall be discussed in the following sections. The app today has several reports, based on women's safety audits conducted using the services of SafetiPin, to its credit as well (add references). Similar to this is the **SafeWalking** app, introduced by the National Security Forces of Honduras, a Latin American country. The said app was brought in in the backdrop of women's high – risk of victimisation in the country, with the objective of arming women with information pertaining to “safe” versus “high – risk” spaces for them in the city of Santa Rosa de Copan, thereby providing them with what has been termed as “actionable intelligence” that enables them to adopt behaviours that are precautionary in nature and work to protect them against possible victimisation (Capellan et al., 2022). In addition to these are the **Safecity** app, launched in 2012, in the aftermath of the brutal gang – rape that took place in the capital city of India; and the **bSafe** app (BSafe - Security and Safety Solutions), launched just a year prior to the former, in 2011 (Das, 2021). With phrases that read, “New smart technology that saves lives” and claims of envisioning safer spaces for all, but especially for women, these apps too add to the optimistic narrative of harnessing tech for improving women's engagement in and with different spaces of the city by way of maximising their safety, however, there happens to exist a flip side constituted by those sceptical of the nature and extent of the said role, thus critiquing the given use of technology as yet another incursion into women's access and freedom.

It is safe to say then that, in spite of all their positives, there exist certain lacunae that work to keep the proposed technique of Women's Safety Audits from addressing the challenge of women's safety and inclusion in city spaces, fully. What stands, first and foremost, as a hindrance to the efficacy of women's safety audits is the challenge of funding. In encouraging co – ordination between and co – operation among actors working on different levels of a hierarchy and in diverse fields of interest, not only does the methodology pave the way for greater – reaching consequences, but also builds diverse connections for funding from authorised organisations. If the same isn't secured, the application of the tool that involves the conduction of seminars and training programmes of the target population, becomes difficult and limited. This was observed in the case of Dar – es – Salaam, where the recommendations were first made in the year 2000, but could only be implemented two years later, in 2002, after receiving the required funding from an international organisation, resulting in the safety audit process to be repeated. This then, for one, led to a delay in the implementation process, while also requiring the data collection to be done again, leading to double the efforts and an additional loss of time. Furthermore, what remains to be seen is if conducting these safety audits at several different locations across the globe, each presenting unique contexts and challenges, has succeeded in bringing about a long – standing change in behaviours, attitude and perceptions of not just women themselves, but also of men and the society, at large. These audits may, also, not always include the most vulnerable groups of women, for doing so might prove to be challenging. Finally, their integration with technology, as highlighted in all the work done using the application of SafetiPin and in papers focusing on the workings of other such apps, also brings its own set of challenges to the fore. For one, SafetiPin, specifically, has been criticised for failing to allow the user to zoom in on smaller lanes and minor routes, thus being limited to a larger scale of the area and giving a more generalised idea of the level of perceived safety (Manazir et al., 2019). In addition to this, problems were also found existing with its feature of sharing and tracking the location of the user, further inhibiting the usefulness of the app. Generally speaking, the use of technology in the way of cameras (Kalms, 2021) and now,

safety applications, has been under fire and justifiably so. First, perceptions of fear and safety happen to be highly subjective and are rooted in the complex and layered identities of women. This is to say that not all women define safety in the same way and that the concept happens to be inextricably linked with the power dynamic that is normally found affecting our societies. Therefore, women belonging to different class, caste, religious and racial groups can and do, in fact, have quite varying takes on what makes them, or, where they feel safe. Safety applications often fail to take note of and reflect such nuances and are thus more likely to give a misleading or incomplete/one – sided picture of safety. Furthermore, in marking and indicating places as safe and unsafe, while the app may be providing women with information, it is the kind that is likely to heighten their fear of accessing certain parts of the space owing to the negative accounts or poor ratings associated with them. Second, and conversely, it may also work to generate a false sense of security. This can be understood using the following two apprehensions that come to mind – on one hand, does following a route marked ‘safe’ on the app actually assure one of a complete absence of the possibility of victimisation? On the other, are changes in the built environment, such as better lighting, cleaner walk paths, albeit much – needed, enough to ensure women’s inclusion in and claim to the urban public spaces? Do the concerned sites, after bringing about developments that, infrastructurally, design women in, cease to become sites of violence against them? No, they do not. The same also brings us to the third critique, that addressing the design alone cannot serve to fulfil the aim of having women be seen as rightful dwellers and users of city – spaces, for what is simultaneously required is a change in perceptions and attitudes that continue to render women to the status of second - class citizens (Gupta et al., 2022). Fourth, while each of the aforementioned applications was brought along with the intention of enabling women to claim the city, unhindered, in practice, they actually do the opposite, for when they suggest safe routes, as opposed to the unsafe ones, they end up compelling women to chart their path accordingly, thus keeping them away from the latter and, in essence, devoiding them of the ability to take a decision guided by their own free – will. Additionally, the same feature also continues to push women, perhaps implicitly, to make a trade between energy, opportunities and resources, on one hand, and their safety on the other. For instance, these apps do, reportedly, suggest longer routes over shorter ones based on the level of perceived safety. In such a case, as a user, a woman is likely to opt for the former, despite the fact that covering the said distance will require more of her time and energy, as compared to the latter, and may also, as a consequence, affect her access to opportunities in the public space. That women are responsible for their own safety is another notion that is strengthened by means of such apps. In the event that a woman chooses to use the shorter but less safe route, exercising the “free – will” that had been referred to earlier, and the same results in her being subjected to some form of violence, then in line with long – standing societal beliefs, she is likely to be blamed for the same, with her decision being seen as a transgression of the boundary set for her. Finally, these apps, with their tracking feature, allow for even greater control and surveillance of women’s movements in the garb of protecting them (Gupta et al., 2022) (Das, 2021). Safety applications and especially those incorporating features that allow users to score locations and/or mark them come to constitute an irony in the sense that, while women’s safety audits were initially designed and proposed as tools for facilitating women’s unrestricted access to and use of the city – space, freeing them of the fear of being subjected to violence, these (the former) end up restricting the same in suggesting certain routes, using notifications and other features that may alarm them and thus heighten their sense of fear and unsafety.

The application of women's safety audits as participatory methodological tools, therefore, requires a closer and more critical evaluation, so as to gauge the real extent of their efficiency and effectiveness – a framework for which has been proposed by (Whitzman et al., 2009).

Figure 2: Framework for Evaluating the Success of Women's Safety Audits

Table 1: A framework for evaluating the success of women's safety audits (modified from Whitzman, 2007 which in turn is based on Disney and Gelb, 2000)

<i>Goals</i>	<i>Mechanisms for Success</i>	<i>Measurements of Success</i>
Achievement of policy objectives (goods, services, policies, programmes)	Cooperation and negotiation between organizations, governments, and possibly, the private sector	Measurable outcomes (Did the change lead to improved built environments, new policies or new participatory processes? Did it reduce insecurity and/or crime?) Are results written up? Is success replicable to other places and at other scales? Do these improvements or policies endure over time?
Organizational adaptation and survival (sustainable planning mechanisms and organizations)	Developing and maintaining economic and human resources: getting money, new members and new partnerships	Has the organization survived? Has it made new partnerships? Has it received funding to implement recommendations?
Building a resource base for future organizing (better informed and more representative planners and institutions)	Renegotiating internal organizational structures, including the recognition of diversity	Were diverse women involved? Has it led to changes in the way the organizations works or its priorities?
Challenging patriarchal ideas and norms (policies, analysis, governance, theory)	Expansion of a feminist agenda within the planning and governance environment	Have the lessons from audits informed training of planners, architects or local government officials? Has the organization been successful in embedding an understanding of gender or other grounds of difference within planning and governance? Are there equity improvements traceable to women's safety audits?

Of all the mechanisms suggested in the aforementioned figure as measures of success, it is those of developing and maintaining economic and human resources; and renegotiating internal organisational structures that come to constitute the biggest challenges, at present. In the case of use of technology as well, the methodology calls for refinements that make applications more detail – oriented, user friendly and, more importantly, such that they do not end up reinforcing patriarchal and masculinist norms that have been dictating terms for women in the public space, thus far.

Conclusions

In sum, Women's Safety Audits are a radical, multi – dimensional approach in the sense that they're based on the involvement of residents who lack crime prevention and planning expertise but can be trained to use their everyday experiences, in tandem with the expertise of professionals, to negotiate and overcome the many insecurities of the urban public space and put forth

suggestions that can pave the way for positive changes with concrete action, but there is scope to make them better and more effective still.

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