Reimagining the city from a Woman’s Perspective
ABOUT

This primer aims to highlight urban design, policy strategies & citizen actions that can make for a more inclusive & safe urban environment for women.

The Urban Vision

The Urban Vision is a think-do-tank on Livable cities. The social venture was instituted to inspire next generation urbanization. The organization focuses on solutions driven research & tactical action; advocates & consults on best practices in policy and design; facilitates public dialogue on policy choices. Placemaking, Urban Design, Urban Leaders Program and Urban Innovation Labs are its major program areas.

Safecity

Safecity is an initiative of the Red Dot Foundation. The platform crowdsources personal stories of sexual harassment and abuse in public spaces. This data gets aggregated as hot spots on a map indicating trends at a local level. This data is useful for individuals, local communities and local administration to identify factors that cause behavior that leads to violence and find local solutions.

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Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law (CDDRL) at Stanford University has collaborated widely with academics, policymakers and practitioners around the world to advance knowledge about the conditions for and interactions among democracy, broad-based economic development, human rights, and the rule of law.

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Reimagining the City from a Woman’s Perspective: A Primer
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Reimagining the city from a Women’s Perspective

PRINCIPLES OF A WOMAN FRIENDLY CITY

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World over, an everyday life of a woman, like walking to the metro, going to school, selling vegetables in the market or even simply hanging out in the park can be an uncomfortable and anxious experience. This is because most women and girls are subject to widespread sexual harassment and violence in the city. Statistics are in agreement with what the #MeToo movement indicated. 2 in 5 women in Brazil, the UK, India and Thailand have said they have faced sexual violence before the age of 18. A whopping 92% of women have been subjected to harassment in the streets of India’s Capital, New Delhi.

This harassment inhibits women and girls from living up to their true potential by restricting their mobility, limiting their opportunities and affecting their mental health. We understand that various steps have to be taken to make our communities safer for women from cultural reform, behavioural change, better policing to responsive governance. But re-imagining cities from a woman (non-male)’s perspective can lead to transformative change.

A city designed to make women, children, vulnerable communities or elderly safe is a great city for all. A city must be just in order to offer equal opportunities to all its citizens. It recognises and provides the right not only to safe mobility, but also the right to loiter, peaceful protest, recreation, open air and green spaces.

A just city provides all its citizens, irrespective of gender, race, class or caste the right to live with dignity and without fear of physical or psychological harm.

It is imperative to understand the importance of Urban Design in the building of a safe and just city because it is the design of the built environment that forms the setting upon which the lives of all its citizens is experienced. It is
the physical shell within which all other efforts toward safety and inclusion will play out. Urban Design has the power to enhance those efforts, or render them useless.

Through this Primer we highlight 10 principles that can make a city inclusive. These 10 principles are meant to inform, educate and advocate for better planning processes but also for citizens to be more informed about how they can demand better urban spaces from those who govern them.

Street Art demanding Women’s Equality in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India |Photo Credit: Adam Jones
Mixed use planning is key to ensuring a 24x7 urban environment. An urban plan that divides the use of the city on the basis of function, i.e. residential areas separated from commercial and office areas, results in certain parts of the city unused during certain time periods. Building neighbourhoods with 100% commercial use makes it usable for only part of the day.

Consequently, those areas remain dark and dingy turning them into centres of anti-social activity that require further surveillance. In addition, this kind of planning increases the pressure on public transport systems.

For example, the former mill areas in the mid-town region of Mumbai have some spaces that are single use and yet to be developed and are derelict. These spaces are known to be unsafe for women. A few years ago in 2013 a journalist was gangraped and her male colleague was assaulted whilst on a film shoot. Another example is the Bandra Kurla complex (BKC) which is densely populated during working days and is completely deserted during non-working timings.

Our safety audits have revealed, there is an absolute lack of street-lighting on the backroads of BKC and the only lighting available originates from commercial buildings causing the area to become very dark once offices shut down. The offices are housed in large buildings, creating a huge distance between two points at which security guards may be present. There are very few people after office hours end and autorickshaws are concentrated in a few areas, leaving other areas deserted.

Mixed use planning involves creating land use patterns that are a blend of residential, office & social spaces with the street fronts lined with stores that can be active 24 hours a day. This design principle will lead to a social and active urban environment, populated with a diversity of people.
“Mixed use of commercial and residential neighbourhoods with integrated social amenities make for 24/7 urban environments. Design of the structures with podiums and staggered tower layouts can ensure privacy of residences. This successful model is a norm in the world’s most Livable city Vancouver which has high density residential in commercial downtown districts.”
Bandra Kurla Complex in Mumbai reimagined as a thriving neighborhood with active streets and residences alongside commercial spaces interspersed with social amenities such as health care facilities, bazaars, recreation and playschools etc.
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Before

After
‘Eyes on the street’ is a concept that can only be achieved with human scale architecture. Buildings with human-centric design create welcoming spaces for citizens to use the transition space between private public spaces. It is these semi-public areas that need attentive design, such as boundary walls which can be converted into social spaces by incorporating seating. Edges of buildings activated with retail shops, cafés or streets with hawkers can create eyes on the street which we believe is crucial to safety in a city.

The fort like walls around gated residential communities pose a threat by creating long stretches of street fronts that are deserted and lack surveillance. Windows overlooking footpaths, and easily visible, well lit and accessible building entrances are valuable contributions to improving eyes on the street.

New infrastructure projects such as flyovers and over-head metro lines are giving birth to deserted, isolated spaces that need immediate attention. The space below these flyovers can be used like the Matunga garden-under-flyover project to incentivise people to relax, play and socialise in a beautifully furbished space.
“There must be eyes upon the street, eyes belonging to those we might call the natural proprietors of the street. The buildings on a street equipped to handle strangers and to ensure the safety of both residents and strangers, must be oriented to the street. They cannot turn their backs or blank sides on it and leave it blind.”

- Jane Jacobs
Safe Urban Commons

The streets, squares, and public spaces comprise the vital element in any neighbourhood & city. They are the single most important component that add to the liveability of the city. The design and planning of public spaces should be inviting to all segments of the society.

The visual axis must remain unobstructed, i.e. public gardens should not be put in “left over” spaces, invisible from adjoining buildings. Parks and play areas too should be visible from windows of adjoining buildings, so that parents and neighbours can be aware of the safety of their children. Adequate lighting will ensure visibility and round-the-clock usage of public spaces.

Diverse users in public spaces can increase the sense of safety of that space. Public spaces must offer varied avenues of recreation in order to invite and cater to a diversity of users. For example, large playing grounds claimed by a select group of boys from the locality, make it difficult for other groups to use the space.
“In great cities, spaces as well as places are designed and built; walking, witnessing, being in public, are as much part of the design and purpose as is being inside to eat, sleep, make shoes or love or music. The word citizen has to do with cities, and the ideal city is organized around citizenship -- around participation to public life.”

- Rebecca Solnit
Walkable neighbourhoods are crucial to a wide range of issues from crime and health, to creativity and inclusion in cities. A street that is safe for women, children and elderly is a good city for all.

Pedestrian paths should be free of potholes and visual obstructions. Road crossings should be made along direct, shortest and preferred routes which are most convenient for local residents.

Road dividers should not be designed to become visual barriers but should include pedestrian refuges with accessible crossing. When roads are made too wide, they reduce the possibility of natural surveillance, creating formidable seas of concrete between islands of human activity.

Traffic speed limits should be pedestrian and cycle friendly. Adequate lighting enhances the feeling of safety. Several safety audits conducted by organisations like Jagori confirm that women avoid walking on unlit streets due to perceived threats to their safety.

Major streets should be hawker friendly to encourage activity along the pedestrian path. Presence of hawkers adds to the ‘eyes on the street’ along with offering spaces for economic activity to a wider class range of people.
Before

Andheri, Mumbai

After

Andheri, Mumbai

CREDITS- The Urban Vision - Reimagine Public Spaces Program

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Jacob Circle Junction in Mumbai is a major upcoming transit hub with Metro, Trains and Mono Rail links. This photo simulation envisions great public spaces and walkable streets connecting the various modes of transit. Open and active public space in the circle is also highlighted here as opposed to the current park that is closed off visually and grilled physically making it an unsafe urban space from a woman’s perspective.
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Before

After
Public Transportation

The city’s transportation network can have a huge impact on women. The goal of planning should be to ensure dependable, accessible, and flexible transport options for all communities in the city. There is a need to ensure equal access to various economic groups.

Transit centres like bus, train or metro stations should function as thriving public spaces integrating connectivity with social and commercial activity. Transit points and means of transport need to be designed keeping the needs of all genders in mind. To ensure that these spaces feel safe and comfortable for all persons, for e.g., transit points need to incorporate better lighting, security measures and easy to access helpdesks and personnel. They should be equipped with well-maintained toilet facilities for women and also have visible police presence.

Bus stops should be in places easily visible from surrounding buildings. This will enhance the natural surveillance of the area, inhibiting unwanted behaviour and enhancing the sense of safety.
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**Before**

Chakala Station

**After**

Chakala Station

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MODES OF PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

- BUS
- TAXI
- MONORAIL
- METRO
- RICKSHAW

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Safety in last mile connectivity is imperative as a majority of urban populations depend on public transport. As discussed in the previous section, a well-designed transit centre ensures smooth shift from one mode of transport to the other until a commuter reaches her final destination. The last mile is most often covered by road, in busses, auto-rickshaws, taxis, bicycles or on foot.

**Below are some ideas to make last mile connectivity better:**

> Create a culture of cycling and add bike lanes in the city.
> Wide and clear footpaths make walking safe and pleasurable.
> Transit centres must be well equipped with clear information regarding the frequency and timings of other transit modes
> Designated areas for auto-rickshaws and taxis.
> Taxis with women drivers will not only improve safety for the commuters but also create safe employment opportunities for women drivers; a profession that remains entirely male dominated in our country.
> India has a propensity to build Pedestrian subways as well as skywalks for walkers so as to create ease of movement for car owners. These types of infrastructure that are without natural surveillance, must be entirely avoided as these spaces have high reported incidences of molestation. We must build our cities to be human-centric instead of car-centric. It should be cars that must go through a tunnel if required, not pedestrians.
> Car parking areas have a tendency to remain devoid of human activity, making them formidable places for women to access. There is a need to increase natural surveillance in them and ease of access from pedestrian paths.
Increase Female Participation In Urban Workforce

It is a well known fact that increased participation by women in the workforce is good for the economy. The latest study by McKinsey Global Institute report, The power of parity: highlights how advancing women’s equality can add $12 trillion to global growth states that India could add $700 billion of additional GDP in 2025 if gender equality was achieved.

Yet today most civic workers from the train conductor to a police officer or planning professionals like architects to policy makers or city services like cab drivers are still largely men. This results in men planning and designing a city from their perspective whilst not consciously taking into the needs of half the population. We therefore need to increase women’s participation in the workforce in governance, planning and city services. This will result not only in a more balanced perspective but also encourage women to be part of the workforce.

When we get more women in our community’s workforce; the desires and the needs of women will be reflected in our community.
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Safe Sanitation Facilities

Most of the women and girls who grow up in Indian cities don’t have access to basic sanitation facilities. There is a dire need to provide safe sanitation facilities for women in urban areas of India. A large percentage of our citizens live in low-income, unplanned, slum-like conditions that do not provide toilet facilities. The few public toilets that do exist for women often have a notorious reputation for being unsafe as they remain dirty, ill-maintained, un(wo)manned and badly lit. Due to the lack of indoor toilets within their homes; women are vulnerable to sexual violence every time they have to go to the outdoor “bathroom”. It also has a health impact because women and girls regulate and restrict their consumption of food and liquids as they have no access to a proper toilet.

The idea of a good quality of life for most women & girls in Indian cities is nothing more than getting access to a toilet, so she can go about her daily biz without fear and embarrassment. The Safecity data shows that several public toilets in low income neighbourhoods are vulnerable hotspots for sexual violence due to lack of infrastructure like adequate lighting, proper doors and windows and security. The location of the outdoor toilet blocks should be planned in such a way that there is 24/7 community surveillance in these areas.

Lack Of Access To A Toilet: Top 5 Countries

According to a report by WaterAid titled Out Of Order: The State of the World’s Toilets 2017, 355 million women and girls lack access to a toilet in India.

Above Photo: Low-cost toilet installed in a house in Karnataka
Credit: ADP

Below: State of community toilets in Indian metros.
Credit: SuSanA Secretariat
The big Infrastructure any of our cities build from metros to expressways create big walls within the city and segregate people as powerfully as a mountain. The areas with big Infrastructure feel like some of the most unsafe spots of the city. There is a great need to have a strategy to add soft infrastructure into these spaces and make it more human centric. Also, it is important to actively have the concept of “Meanwhile” spaces as we build these big infrastructure projects that often take decades. New Infrastructure can take many decades to be fully built. Often citizens find themselves navigating a city that are construction sites during this time. We should use placemaking tactics to activate these spaces while they wait to fulfill their longer term purpose.
“The importance of pedestrian public spaces cannot be measured, but most other important things in life cannot be measured either…pedestrian places are essential to a city’s happiness.”

- Enrique Penalosa
There is a need to develop and implement grassroots level innovative tactics to increase safety of women in our communities.

**Below are some ideas**

> SOS alarms in public spaces: In the absence of police, it is necessary to have visible and easily accessible alarm systems that can be alerted by victims of assault in case of an emergency.

> Increased access to public phone booths with clear signage which can also serve as hotspots for internet access.

> CCTV Cameras installed at strategic points with unobstructed visual axis.
> More women transportation professionals who drive taxis, autos, buses and trains.

> Increased by-stander intervention where every citizen is aware of their rights and socially conscious to intervene and prevent a crime from taking place.

> Participatory planning is crucial to inclusive city building. Vienna in Austria is seen as the most women-friendly city in the world and the city had a major civic engagement campaign to include women’s perspective in the design process. Ease of access to services like education, healthcare, social amenities close to work and home has been a major result. Other manifestations of the policies based on this participatory planning program include residential buildings designed close to mass transit with childcare services, kindergartens, community health clinics, community markets, social parks for play dates and caregiving services close by.
Tips for Citizens Action

1. If you see something not right, do something about it. You can report any infrastructure damage or malfunction to your Municipal office. e.g. BMC helpline in Mumbai 1916

2. If you see someone being harassed or abused, please call for help. Always have the local police number in your phone directory. e.g. in India women’s police helpline is 1091 and for children it is 1098. All other queries is 100

3. Ensure you maintain the cleanliness of your neighbourhood. According to the Broken Windows theory, a clean neighbourhood is less likely to attract crime.

4. Do not be afraid to access public spaces at all times of day and night especially if you are a woman.

5. Do take adequate precautions like being situationally aware but remember the more women out on the streets, the more confidence you create in society.

6. Speak up and challenge gender stereotypes and inappropriate behaviour. The more we make it less acceptable the easier it will be to have a gender equal society and city.

7. Participate in your local urban planning commission. Make sure your voice is heard.

8. Use public transport wherever possible or cycle or walk. This is not only environmentally friendly but also builds confidence in the system.

9. Volunteer some time for community based projects. There are plenty of opportunities to contribute to organisations working on human rights, urban issues, sanitation, climate change etc.

10. Read up on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as we all need to do our bit to ensure we have a liveable and sustainable planet by 2030. Know your rights. It gives you confidence as a citizen to exercise your democratic duty and responsibilities and demand a quality life.
#ACTONSDG’s
#BETHECHANGE

You can also download the **Safecity app** from the Google and Apple playstores. You can audit a place, report sexual harassment anonymously, find resources to help you and access data that can give you insights into location based sexual violence. You can write to us at info@safecity.in

Would you like to improve the quality of urban spaces in your neighborhood? Write to **The Urban Vision**’s placemaking team at placemaking(@)theurbanvision.com
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