

# **Spatial Planning and Gender Equality: Challenges of Creating Safe Cities for Women and Girls**

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## **Executive Summary**

Being the first session to focus on the implementation of the New Urban Agenda (NUA), the Ninth session of the World Urban Forum (WUF9) promotes the ideas of planning for all and to let no one behind (The World Urban Forum 9 2018). At the forum, many argue that more needs to be done in order to tackle gender inequality in the city on issues such as accessing public spaces. Many argue that when women cannot access public space as well as men do, women would be limited in terms of their access to opportunities and civil rights. To address gender inequality and create safe cities for all, some organisations at the WUF9 reported that they are using big data to prevent sexual harassments for girls and women in cities. In addition, some organisations have also

introduced innovative and participatory tools to increase girls' safety and inclusion in cities. However, in order to achieve these ambitions, there are still many challenges ahead. This policy brief focuses on the implementation of the NUA in regard to creating safe cities for women and argues that there are three main challenges. This policy brief will also give recommendations to governments on spatial planning and policy making.

## **The Needs and Challenges of Creating Safe Cities**

In 2017, The New Urban Agenda (NUA) commits to promoting a safe and secure environment in cities and human settlements for women and girls to live, work and participate in urban life without fear of sexual violence and intimidation (United Nations 2017). Furthermore,

gender equality is also deeply embedded in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) such as SDG 5 Gender Equity, which demands that all forms of sexual violence against women and girls should be eliminated (Sustainable Development Goal 2017a) and SDG 11 sustainable cities and communities which states that by 2030, universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible cities should be provided to all women and girls (Sustainable Development Goal 2017b).

Safe cities enable females to participate in social activities, however, at current, there are still many women and girls who feel unsafe in cities which turn also limits their mobility. According to research from the International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW), in New Delhi, the capital of India, about 95% of females are concerned about sexual violence in public spaces, while approximately 65% of women and girls feel fearful when they go out at night. Moreover, more than 90% of women have experienced sexual aggression or violence at least once in their lifetime whilst being in a public space whilst half of the male respondents of the

survey admitted to committing acts of sexual violence in a public space at least once in their lifetime (Gaynair 2013).

In order to address these issues, the WUF9 provides an important platform for organisations to share their experience in implementing the NUA and the SDGs. At the WUF9, several grassroots organisations have taken on the main role of planning for gender equality and for creating safe cities for women and girls:

Firstly, organisations such as Safecity and Safetipin, try to prevent sexual harassment and other forms of sexual violence through collecting data of personal experiences and geographic information of sexual violence. The objective is to create an online platform which can raise the awareness of sexual violence, improve community engagement in tackling such issues and enhance institutional accountability. The crowd-sourced data can also provide information for individuals and help them choose safer routes when walking around in the city.

Another organisation, which has made progress in implementing the NUA is Plan International, which launched a programme called 'Safer cities for Girls' in Kenya. Though using a multi-faceted approach, the programme focuses on protecting girls from sexual violence in cities. The programme works with local community members, local authorities, local and national governments and community-based NGOs to improve gender equality and protect girls from sexual violence. Although there is no financial support from UN-Habitat, the 'Safer cities for Girls' programme benefits from the experience and knowledge gained from the UN's previous works on 'Safer Cities Programme' and other ongoing work. It is currently running in five other cities: Cairo (Egypt), Delhi (India), Hanoi (Vietnam), Kampala (Uganda) and Lima (Peru) (UN-Habitat 2017a). Together with UN-Habitat, Plan International was also involved in co-developing the Urban Programme, which aims to create safe cities for girls by providing them with a platform to discuss the difficulties they face and how the spatial development

strategy of cities can in any way assist them (Plan International 2017).

In addition to the achievements of these grassroots organisations, the UN-Habitat from 2012 to 2016 also introduced several measures in order to encourage safer cities for women such as the UN Guidelines on Safer Cities; City to City Cooperation; Global Award on Safer Cities; Global Safety Index for Cities; Global Safer Public Spaces Awareness Campaign; and the Global Social Media Portal on Safer Cities (UN-Habitat 2017b).

Although it was possible to identify some achievements in creating safe public spaces for women at the WUF9, the impact of these projects and grassroots organisations are quite limited. In order to better implement the New Urban Agenda and the SDGs, this policy brief suggests that improvements in the following areas are necessary.

Firstly, the current approaches from grassroots organisations to prevent sexual violence in public spaces mainly ask women and girls to be in charge of their

own safety and to identify measure to prevent sexual violence by themselves. However, the prevention of sexual violence in public space should not be only the responsibility of individuals but instead needs to be implemented on a larger scale involving communities and more crucially governments and institutions. If the sexual violence prevention only relies on individual awareness and without the backing of local governments then high rates of sexual violence in cities cannot be reduced.

Secondly, for too long, spatial planning has tended to ignore the fact that man and women experience cities differently. There are not enough basic infrastructures for women and girls in some developing countries, such as good street lighting, safe public transport and public toilets. The unsafe public spaces in some developing countries lead to the high rate of sexual violence. Furthermore, even in countries where there are good street lighting, safe public transport and public toilets, different forms of sexual violence still exist. According to the Comedia Report, in Britain, young men are more like to

become drunk at bars and clubs and pose a higher risk for women (Trench et al. 1992). On the other hand, the drunk and disorderly behaviours are less likely to occur at venues such as bars and cafes. Creating safer cities should, therefore, be an explicit objective of spatial planning strategies in cities.

### **Conclusion and Policy Recommendations**

There is no doubt that grassroots organisations have achieved some considerable success in promoting gender equality and creating safe cities for women and girls. However, in order to better implement the aims of the New Urban Agenda and the SDGs, simply relying on grassroots organisations which mainly focus on improving individual awareness is not enough. More needs to be done in order to increase the accountability of local governments and it will require the cooperation between different levels of governments, NGOs and other stakeholders. To address these shortfalls, this policy brief would give the following recommendations:

Local planning authorities could make better use of crowd-sourced data collected by grassroots organisations. For instance, local planning authorities can work closely with an online platform and make use of crowd-sourced data to build female friendly infrastructures in some high-risk areas, such as lonely bus stop, unstaffed stations, poorly-lit and quiet streets as well as dark corners in cities.

Secondly, currently, there is no strong and powerful policy on planning for safer cities for women. Creating safer places for women should, therefore, become an explicit goal for planning policies. Policymakers can collaborate closely with grassroots organisations to develop effective policies and again make use of crowdsourced data collected by organisations such as Safetipin or Safecity.

In conclusion, the WUF9 has provided a very useful platform to understand to what extent the aims of the New Urban Agenda and the SDGs have been implemented at the local level. Although there have been some achievements by grassroots organisations to create safe cities for

women, more efforts are needed from different levels of governments, institutions and the wider society.

## References

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