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Gender and violence in cities

Rapid growth, entrenched gender identities drive gendered violence in urban spaces

In Khayelitsha Township, just outside Cape Town, indoor plumbing is a luxury. For 21-year-old Sinxolo Mafevuka, a simple trip to the toilet involved a harrowing walk through narrow, dark laneways to a communal latrine. On a March evening in 2016, when she set out alone and did not return, her family at first thought she had stopped over with friends. The grim truth emerged the next day when her half-naked body was found stuffed into one of the cisterns. She had been raped and strangled.

As rapid urbanization outpaces planning in cities of the global South, many residents — especially the poor — live in sprawling informal settlements, with poor transportation links and gaps in basic services such as water and sanitation. Millions, especially women, live with a deep sense of insecurity and experience violence in a multitude of forms each



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What can work to defuse gender-based violence?

- Counselling and mentoring that help young men express their manhood in nonviolent ways.
- Investments in domestic violence prevention and shelters for victims.
- Education and employment programs that give youth positive alternatives to crime.
- Improvements in transport, lighting, water and sanitation so that women can safely use public space and services.
- Legal support and advocacy to help women exercise their housing and other rights.

day. According to WHO figures from 2013, 35% of women worldwide have experienced some form of sexual violence, and research tells us that how people experience, confront, or even contribute to violence is shaped in part by their sex, gender roles, and societal expectations.

Over three years, expert teams supported through the Safe and Inclusive Cities program have explored the different ways in which men and women experience urban violence. Their findings highlight how values and beliefs about masculinity or femininity can stoke frustrations and push youth towards a life of crime and how gaps in city infrastructure and services put women and sexual minorities at greatest risk. They reveal how lack of planning, corruption, and state neglect deepen the insecurities and tensions already experienced in impoverished communities. Evidence points to new pathways for tackling urban violence, by promoting healthier, more equitable gender roles and by ensuring all residents have equal and safe access to public space, water, sanitation, and transportation.



Access to services and violence against women

Access to basic sanitation remains a major global health issue, but for women and girls, the challenge of accessing clean water and safe toilets comes with the added risk of sexual predation. And in societies where femininity equates with domestic chores, women carry the brunt of family frustrations over chronic water shortages or sewage overflows.

In interviews carried out in low-income suburbs of three Zimbabwean cities — Bulawayo, Harare, and Kadoma — researchers found women were at risk as a result of deficits in water, sanitation, and other services. Respondents in Bulawayo, for example, fear being raped when they venture outside their homes to use toilet facilities or gather firewood for fuel. In all of the suburbs studied, they reported how breakdowns in the water systems regularly undermined sewage. As one woman living in the overcrowded Mbare Flats Township of Harare explained, “Each floor has only one male and one female toilet. Sometimes the toilets and bathrooms get blocked. [W]hen this happens people just use the ones on the next floor and this causes over congestion leading others [...] to use nearby bushes.”

“[My father] tells us not to use water all day – but how can we perform our duties without it? When the bill comes we try to hide it from him, otherwise he beats my mother and me.”

–22-year-old woman in Bin Qasim town, Karachi

Women in Bulawayo felt they had no one to turn to about incidents of rape in public spaces. “The solution is to have police patrolling these dangerous places but unfortunately the police are corrupt and they seem to work with these criminals.”

The research shows that municipal authorities are complicit in violations of national housing standards, issuing rental cards and levying charges for rent and for services that are woefully inadequate. Women are particularly vulnerable to eviction and abuse by corrupt officials as their names are rarely recorded on leases or deeds.

In Pakistan, women are traditionally responsible for replenishing the domestic water supply and maintaining a hygienic home environment. However, research has shown that the gaps in cities' infrastructure and service provision, especially access to water and safe sanitation, have emerged as a key source of violence against women. In Rawalpindi-Islamabad neighbourhoods where flooding is routine, stagnant water in homes and streets add to household tensions. In Karachi, 'water mafias' are violently exploiting gaps in water services, seemingly in collusion with local officials in surveyed neighbourhoods. They divert government supplies and resell water to residents at extortionate prices. Where masculinity is defined by providing for the family, men are humiliated, and lash out at female relations for their "wasteful" practices. The results? Over 80% of survey respondents who had poor or no access to water had experienced violence, compared with only 10% who had excellent water supply.

Feeling unsafe in public spaces

Across South Asia, mobility itself varies widely according to gender. Masculinity affords freedom of movement in public space, while femininity is bound up in the domestic sphere. Mobile phones and the Internet may be slowly breaking down barriers, but gender norms still shape the choices that most men, women, and sexual minorities have for work, education, and recreation. Poverty and social exclusion compound the dilemma.

In Sri Lanka, women and girls carry a burden of guilt for "inducing" the abuse they face daily in public. In research carried out in Sinhapura by the International Centre for Ethnic Studies, respondents felt that verbal harassment of girls on their way to school each day was 'normal' or 'unavoidable'. When one young woman defied norms by arguing back, her tormentors threatened to undress her in public. Among neighbours, she was condemned as creating the problem and criticized for dressing differently and for 'going here and there' at all hours.

In the Indian cities of Ahmedabad and Guwahati women experience sexual harassment and violence daily in using public transportation. Simply to reach transportation, they must navigate poorly lit streets and lanes lacking safe sidewalks. Since 2009, Ahmedabad has boasted a world-class rapid bus system, but it is affordable only to those better off. A case study on women and transport in Guwahati catalogued the extent to which a lack of safe transportation undermines the opportunities women and girls have for education and employment. Along with the daily onslaught of harassment, women detailed poor street lighting, poor road conditions, and overcrowded and infrequent buses as the biggest barriers to their public mobility.

In Pakistan, interviews conducted in Karachi and the twin cities of Rawalpindi-Islamabad by the Institute of Business Administration and King's College London similarly found widespread fear among women for their safety in public spaces. Transgendered women, while tolerated in Pakistani society, face even more severe restrictions, with most limited to begging or prostitution for their livelihoods.

"There is a lot of bullying here. Men will catch your hand so I go out only if I am accompanied by my sister-in-law."

– Rubina, a 24-year-old home-based worker in an informal subdivision of Ahmedabad

Research also uncovered signs of change and resilience, as young women found ways to increase their mobility and exercise control over their lives. For some, this was by making personal choices in love and marriage that defied family wishes; for others, it meant escaping violent relationships through divorce and remarriage.

Cycle of violence starts at home

In Rio de Janeiro, one of the world's most violent cities, men are responsible for the vast majority of lethal violence — and account for most of its victims.

Research undertaken between 2013 and 2016 by Instituto Promundo, a gender-focused nongovernmental organization, underscores how this violence begins at home. For one young police officer interviewed, family violence was a two-way street, as casual as conversation. He recalls his mother's taunting response to his father's aggression: "[She] put her hand on the revolver and pointed to him saying, 'Yell at me if you're macho, yell!' and we laughed that day, my brother and I."

In the city's low-income favelas, boys are socialized from a young age to exercise a hyper-masculine identity, and groomed for a role in the violent criminal networks that lace Rio's underside. Promundo's findings suggest that early exposure to violence is strongly linked to the perpetration of violence as an adult. Men in all groups interviewed had witnessed violence in the home, most often their fathers abusing their mothers, or their parents abusing the children. An average of 83 percent had experienced or witnessed at least two violent acts before the age of 18. This violence in turn shapes their sense of 'manhood' and increases the chances that they too will turn to violence as part of being a man. Where rates of urban violence were high, relations between men and women were



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more adversarial and gender norms less equitable. Lower levels of exposure to violence were linked to more equitable gender norms.

While men tend to be the main victims of public acts of violence, such as homicides and kidnapping, women and children bear the brunt of domestic violence. Research in selected cities of Costa Rica and El Salvador by Facultad Latinoamericana de las Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO) found violence in the home, mainly directed at women and children, to be widespread in both countries. In El Salvador, where overall rates of violence are higher, there is a consequential dynamic whereby violence in the home spills over into violence among neighbours in already hard-pressed communities.

While women are often the targets of domestic abuse, they also perpetuate — or even perpetrate — it. Children in El Salvador study sites were frequently punished, psychologically and physically, by their mothers. Women were also actively involved in disputes with neighbours. In South Africa, focus groups in the informal settlement of Khayelitsha, near Cape Town, similarly revealed that women participate in public violence as both spectators and participants —

albeit at far lower rates than men. Young women encourage gang fights and women have been known to take part in vigilante action.

In several areas under study, violence against women and children was disturbingly “normalized”, accepted to a degree even by victims and their families. In Côte d’Ivoire, rape is both widespread and widely denied. In 66% of rape cases documented by the UN between 2012 and 2015, the victims were children — some as young as four months old. The violence is fed by the demeaning beliefs and images of the female body, according to research findings. Yet rape is rarely prosecuted in Côte d’Ivoire: social and cultural norms largely treat the offense as a domestic matter, to be settled outside the courts. Victims must pay for a medical exam to certify their rape. And while the national criminal code lays out penalties for rape, it does not clearly define the offense, making it difficult to prosecute.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, an explosive and uncontrolled population growth — with an average of 10 children per woman — has led to an urban sprawl. Poorly planned

neighbourhoods are teeming with idle boys and girls, with easy access to drugs and liquor, who are lured into growing youth gangs with promises of social belonging. Lack of public lighting and inadequate water supply has also exposed young women to sexual assaults and further unwanted pregnancies.

Solutions: Defusing the gender-violence nexus

The complex links between gender, inequality, and violence call for multi-pronged solutions tailored to each unique urban context. It was clear across study sites that infrastructure and service gaps enflame domestic and community tensions, but they cannot be tackled on their own. Harmful gender norms and inequities in the use of public space must be addressed along with upgrading water, sanitation, and lighting, and regulating transport.

Research on violent masculinities in Rio de Janeiro pointed to several factors that can help young men escape violent pathways. Chief among these were: becoming fathers; taking part in domestic tasks; having supportive social networks; gaining education; and learning strategies that allowed them to step away from conflict. Recommendations include moving beyond confrontational policing methods to invest in measures that can nurture nonviolent, equitable, and caring versions of manhood. These might include youth counselling, employment creation and training programs, and interventions targeting men who use violence against women.

Findings in Pakistan underscore how gender and violence must be seen within a larger context of social vulnerability. They echo the need to raise awareness of changing gender roles and promote alternatives that can defuse the frustrations associated with traditional roles: men as 'providers' and women as 'nurturers'. Along with these attitudinal shifts, they stress improved services for the poor, the creation of safe spaces for women and other victims of violence, and easing civil registration for migrants and minority groups who emerged as among the most vulnerable to urban violence.

In Côte d'Ivoire, the DRC, and Ghana, research highlighted the need for ministries to increase resources for the poor to seek justice, urgently mandate the free registration of rape cases for victims, and building stronger partnerships between the state, civil society, and legal clinics to implement solutions to fight rape.

In Zimbabwe, research underlined the wide gap between women's constitutional rights, which exist on paper, and the lack of enforcement of these rights. Routine practices, such as a bias toward recording only male householders on leases or land titles, must be challenged. To do this, women need greater awareness of their legal rights, and access to legal counselling.

Looking forward: Gender Transformative Cities

Research under the Safe and Inclusive Cities program is shedding light on how violence in the city is gendered. Continued research on gender and violence in cities can provide further evidence of how urbanization processes can lead the way in transforming constricting social structures that are perpetuating systematic, daily violence against women and men.

Cities are places in a constant state of change; on a daily basis social interactions construct, reinforce, modify and tear down rules and norms that dictate how we see and interact with others. The Safe and Inclusive Cities initiative's findings on gender and violence highlight that there is a need to go beyond gender equality and women's empowerment programming that focuses on the female individual, and to target gender relations and the structures or social systems in which men and women live. By building global networks, feeding into relevant policy and practice, and examining urban dynamism, research can provide a more comprehensive understanding of how cities themselves can be gender transformative.

Safe and Inclusive Cities is a global research effort jointly funded by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) and Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC). Launched in 2012, it supports 15 multidisciplinary teams working in 40 cities across sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America to build evidence on the connections between urban violence, poverty, and inequalities.



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