



ILLUSTRATION: ZARIF FAIAZ

How to build a safer city for WOMEN

NABILA HOSSAIN

More than half of the world's population now lives in cities and urbanization is causing cities to grow at an exponential rate. The impacts of urbanization are felt by everyone, but the experiences of girls and women in cities and their use of the city and its public amenities are strongly impacted by their gender.

A huge amount of people now live in booming cities and towns with more being added to the urban population every year. Among these numbers are women who are looking for an opportunity to broaden their horizons and open their lives to economic, social and political avenues. Instead, they are faced with the constant threat of sexual violence, which is constricting and to a huge extent controlling their lives. The violation of a woman's right to live in cities because of sexual violence and harassment is one of the key crises of global urbanization.

Outside the home, violence can affect women and girls in the workplace, at schools, in streets, parks, public squares and on public transports. The responsibility of ensuring safety is often put on the women themselves, where they are advised to change their behaviour such as modifying their outfits

or at which time of the day they go out. This idea is bringing about a crippling effect on the talent and potential of women and is an attack on their rights as a human being. The repercussions also go beyond the psychological and physical toll on individuals who have experienced such said harassment. For women, the cities they live in have become threatening places where they need to remain constantly on high alert. Such daily and persistent exposure to attacks and the fear of sexual assaults infringe upon women's rights and freedoms as equal citizens to enjoy the niceties of life.

Part of the problem is that most city planning projects are headed by men without any regard for gender-sensitive city planning. Even today, women don't feel safe, welcome or comfortable in the public realm and the difference between the number of women who appear in public during the day versus their presence at night should be an apparent indicator of the health of a society and the safety and livability of a city.

While sprawling metropolises cannot be simply razed and rebuilt, measures can be taken to improve the dire situation. For

this, women have to take an active part in the planning process. Women have to be kept in the inner circle for planning the new urban developments.

Safety First

A London survey called 'Making Places Safer' identified that public places with good lighting and a wide range of people contribute the most to women's sense of safety. Designers and decision-makers need to think more about how to attract a wide range of people to come and enjoy the public spaces of towns or cities.

Making every aspect of transportation safe

Transportation infrastructure can have a huge impact on women. Well-lit and well-surveilled parking lots with clear sightlines to the street and the buildings surrounding it are important, especially at night. Train stations, train platforms and bus stations that feel safe and comfortable for women are also extremely important. Women-friendly transportation infrastructure ensures that women have equal access to all parts of the city. Well-lit sidewalks are also an important consideration for a safe and comfortable built environment for women.

Design for children

Women are often the main caregivers for their children and it is important that the built environment is welcoming to children as well. This means our built environment must be built with women and children in mind. Are trains, train platforms, stations and bus stops designed for children as well as adults? If they are, then they will attract more women to use them.

Provide amenities for women

Nursing mothers often find themselves in a quandary when they are out in public and they need to nurse. Often, they have no choice but to duck in their car or go into a place where they have to purchase something like a coffee to get a little space to nurse their baby. Safe, free and comfortable spaces for women to stop and nurse their babies in the public realm must be designed into the city.

Currently, most architects, planners and policymakers are still men, and this means we are going to get a built environment designed by men for men until we change that. When we get more women at the table, naturally the perspective, the needs and the talents of women can start showing up in the built environment and lead to the creation of safer cities for women.