Safe Cities For Women
From reality to rights
Acknowledgements

Safe Cities for Women: from reality to rights is commissioned as a tool to support national launches of the Safe Cities for Women multi-country campaign involving 35 cities in 20 countries. It seeks to make visible the lived realities, perceptions and fears of women living (or forced to live) in cities. The report sets out women's horrific experiences of harassment, sexual violence, discrimination, and exclusion from public spaces and services. It shows how women face institutional sexism and how men are not held responsible for these crimes. It highlights the compelling need for the Safe Cities for Women campaign.

Safe Cities for Women: from reality to rights provides a context to the Safe Cities for Women campaign. The information contained in this report is grounded in local work with, and the experiences and voices of, women living in poverty in cities in Bangladesh, Brazil, Cambodia and Liberia, and their respective coalition groups.

ActionAid would like to thank the following people for their contributions big and small to the extensive research, consultation, gathering and shaping that went into the compilation of this report: -

Agnes Hall, Alice Wynne Wilson, Belinda Calaguas, Bridget Burrows, Boramey Hun, Charlotte Armstrong, Christy Abraham, Daphne Jayasinghe, Dorothy Brislin, Elizabeth Gbah Johnson, Farha Sarawat, Glauce Arzua, Jessica Barbosa, Kasia Staszewska, Kate Carroll, Kate Seewald, Korto Williams, Marcelo Montenegro, McKinley Charles, Neelanjana Muklia, Nina Borges, Putheavy Ol, Rachel Noble, Sajid Raihan, Savann Oeurn, Sopheary Ou, Sumathi Pathmanaban, Tahmina Huq, Tanveer Khan, Tasleem Mazhar, Theresa Nguyen, Tricia O'Rourke, Vandana Snyder.

The report was written by Annie Kelly, edited by Stephanie Ross and designed by Nick Purser.
“When we are leaving the factory, there are crowds and gangsters often come to touch women’s bottoms and they laugh and feel it’s normal.”
Garment worker from Phnom Penh, Cambodia

“I walk on the busy roads of Dhaka city every day, and I am aware of the curious eyes and hands of the male pedestrians. I even know how far the inquisitive hands can go. I always advise my daughters that they should walk on the road like a ghost, so no one notices them.”
Nazarene, a domestic worker from Dhaka, Bangladesh

“At class one night, I saw a girl entering a place that is noted to be a camp for bad boys. I had seen her earlier in a short jeans skirt and she was drinking alcohol. Later the boys gave her soup that was drugged. When I came back I saw her on the floor lying with only her blouse on with burst condoms around her; she seemed unconscious. I assumed that she had been raped. This happened right around the bathroom.”
Female university student from Monrovia, Liberia

“We have no more freedom to go out at night, the streets are too dark.”
Young woman from Pernambuco, Brazil

“We always live in a constant condition of fear.”
Street vendor from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

“Sexual harassment of women in public places seems to have spread like an epidemic.”
Sultana Kamal, a human rights activist from Bangladesh
Introduction

“I walk on the busy roads of Dhaka city every day, and I am aware of the curious eyes and hands of the male pedestrians. I even know how far the inquisitive hands can go. I always advise my daughters that they should walk on the road like a ghost, so no one notices them.” Nasreen, 34, domestic worker from Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Nasreen is just one of millions of women worldwide who experience a daily culture of fear of assault, sexual harassment and rape in an urban environment. Over 3.3 billion people now live in our booming cities and towns, with 65 million more added to the urban population every year. Many are women looking for a chance to broaden their horizons and open their lives to a myriad of economic, political and social avenues. Instead they are faced with the persistent threat of sexual violence constricting and controlling their lives.

In this report ActionAid lays out the current crisis in cities, drawing on existing research reports and on ActionAid’s programme work in Bangladesh, Brazil, Cambodia and Liberia.

While cities and towns contain dangers for both men and women, it is women – and more specifically poor women – who are particularly at risk from attacks due to poor lighting, dark streets, dangerous public transport systems and inadequate policing. The problem is widespread and shocking – of the women interviewed by ActionAid Bangladesh as part of our Safe Cities programme for instance, 87% said they faced harassment in bus terminals and train stations, 80% by the roadside, and 69% outside their schools and colleges.

Such persistent exposure to attacks and the fear of rape, sexual assault, humiliation and harassment infringe upon women’s rights to enjoy public spaces, pursue education, work and recreational opportunities and participate in political and community life. Instead of societies recognising and preventing the problem, women are often blamed for provoking attacks and are left feeling afraid or unwilling to go to the authorities – or even their own families – due to the obstacles, discrimination and ridicule they face.

Meanwhile, those who perpetrate violence against women in cities do so with impunity and with little fear of justice, while the authorities fail to adequately report or even acknowledge the extent and scope of the problem. Living in constant fear of sexual violence and the judgement, blame and denial that often follows places an incredible burden on the shoulders of women living in cities across the world. Sexual violence and the threat of it not only limits their movements and endangers their safety, it also silences their voices and crushes their freedom.

Why is this an urgent issue to address?

It is reported that in São Paolo, Brazil, a woman is assaulted in a public space every 15 seconds.

The violation of a woman’s right to live in cities because of the sexual violence and harassment she faces is one of the key crises of rapid global urbanisation. The crippling effect that violence and the threat of violence has on a woman’s talent and potential is an attack on her rights.

ActionAid challenges the central idea that urbanisation is a ‘rising tide that lifts all boats’. Instead we want to highlight that rising urban poverty and male dominant and controlling attitudes towards women, which pervade all levels of society, are feeding rising levels of sexual violence and a culture of fear in cities and urban spaces.
Urbanisation – key statistics

Cities and urban environments are growing at an exponential rate as millions move from rural areas to try to seek a better life.

- Over 3.3 billion people – more than half the world’s population – now live in urban environments.
- In 1950 there were 80 cities with populations of over one million. Now there are 480.
- By 2030 it is estimated that 60% of all people will live in urban areas.
- Up to 95% of this growth will be in developing countries.
- Dhaka (Bangladesh), Kinshasa (DRC) and Lagos (Nigeria) are each approximately 40 times larger than they were in 1950.
- One-third of all urban residents live in poverty.

Thanks to the efforts of the global women’s movement, momentum is finally growing around the issue of women’s safety in urban and public spaces. Some positive signs are emerging and governments are increasingly demonstrating a willingness to acknowledge and open a dialogue on the subject.

However this dialogue is still not having a tangible enough impact on the ground. In cities across the world, the sexual violence and harassment facing millions of poor women and girls still all too often remains a neglected and often unacknowledged issue, with few laws or policies – or the political will and resources – to prevent and address it. Even when laws are in place, they are not necessarily effectively implemented. Urgent action is needed to change infrastructure, policies, mind-sets and behaviours to prevent millions of women from experiencing sexual violence on the streets of our cities, and to stop sexual assault and the constant fear of it remaining a persistent feature of many women’s lives.

Background to the Safe Cities movement

The global Safe Cities for Women movement emerged in the 1970s with groups of women in different countries organising protest marches, such as ‘Reclaim the Night’, to highlight women’s equal rights to our cities and public spaces. Over the next 30 years, work on women’s urban safety began to be coordinated, starting to drill down to the central need for gender-sensitive city planning and the role of women themselves in mobilising and creating safe spaces to live and work.

So far there have been three International Conferences on Women’s Safety, in 2002, 2004 and 2010, resulting in the Montreal Declaration 2002, Bogotá Declaration 2004 and Delhi Declaration 2010. More recent partnerships include the Gender Inclusive Cities Programme, a three-year initiative funded by the United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women. This initiative aims to create inclusive and gender-sensitive cities, which enable and support women to live, work and move around without fear.
Key declarations and their content

Montreal Declaration on Women’s Safety (2002)
Bogota Declaration on Women’s Safety (2004)
Delhi Declaration on Women’s Safety (2010)

Each of these declarations arose from one of the three International Conferences on Women’s Safety, drafted by representatives of women’s groups, grassroots, community and non-governmental organisations, cities and municipalities, the research community, international networks, United Nations agencies, government agencies and police forces from up to 45 countries across five continents.

The declarations build upon the Beijing Platform for Action (1995), CEDAW (1979) and other international commitments on gender equality and empowerment of women and girls. They affirm that good urban governance, along with a holistic approach to preventing violence against women and girls in public and private spaces, are prerequisites to the empowerment of women and girls. Such a holistic approach must put women and girls at the centre of the action, challenge local, societal and political attitudes that uphold unequal relationships between men and women, and reinforce the capacity of women’s and girls’ individual and collective actions while respecting local values, knowledge and expertise. Further, the declarations affirm that the success of initiatives to address women’s safety and security depend on the full involvement of men as well as women.

The declarations form a call to all those concerned: women, men, community organizations, NGOs, cities and municipalities, media, governments (at local, regional and national levels), international organisations, the education sector, police services, donors and the private sector to take action to build inclusive cities that allow movement, day and night, to all parts of the city for all women and girls, including the poor and those with disabilities and special needs, so that they have equitable access to water, sanitation, transport, energy, secure tenure and housing, economic development and recreation. They also call for inclusive cities that ensure the enjoyment of social, economic and cultural rights among all citizens, including women and girls, and for cities where women and girls are able to live free from violence and the fear of violence in the private, domestic sphere and in all public spaces.

UN Women’s Safe Cities Global Initiative, launched in 2010, includes a flagship programme run in partnership with UN-Habitat, 50 global and local partners and a ‘Safe and Sustainable Cities for All’ joint programme in 16 cities across the world.

The overarching aim of the Safe Cities movement is to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls by challenging deep-set cultural, political, economic and societal drivers that breed and nurture gender inequality, and by empowering and allowing women and girls to make changes within their own communities.
What is the right to the city?23

The right to the city is the right of all inhabitants to:

- freedom from violence and harassment including the fear of violence on the streets
- safe public spaces where all inhabitants, especially the most excluded women and girls, can move freely without fear of assault
- access to water and sanitation, electricity, transportation, education, health services and other public amenities
- freedom from sexual harassment and abuse in the workplace
- report violence and obtain redress
- systems and structures for all inhabitants to enjoy social, economic, cultural and political life.
Section 1: the problem

“A woman like me is very vulnerable and has nothing to do to protect us from male violence. Nobody is giving us security.” Minar, a Bangladeshi restaurant worker in Chanmari.

Sexual violence and harassment have become persistent and corrosive features of our public spaces and a grim reality for women living in cities across the world.

For many women, the fear of sexual violence is a constant undermining reality of their day-to-day lives. “Sometimes I have to wake up and leave home as early as 3 and 4 am for work, to deliver goods for sale that will be taken by truck drivers to other towns or the countryside,” says one street vendor in Ethiopia. “I’m afraid of the risks of rape and robbery when I leave home at this hour.”

Instead of expanding their horizons and potential, cities are becoming places of restriction and anxiety. “The violence has no time or day…”, explains one woman from the Brazilian city of Mirandiba.

This is not only an issue of personal safety. Sexual violence limits women’s access to employment and health services, education, justice and recreational facilities. It stops them from moving freely from their homes, and blocks them from enjoying the same rights to public spaces as men have.

Women street vendors taking part in a discussion group in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, vocalised how this affected their lives: “We are worried about not having a place to vend. We fear robbery when we go out early in the morning and return late at night… We are mistreated by many – from home to society…”

Audience insight research conducted for ActionAid paints a picture of how cities have become different places for men and women. Whilst men can feel threatened by violence in the city, especially at night, they also feel that cities are theirs for the taking. They feel that women are weak and should only walk around during ‘safe’ hours, advising the women in their family how to stay safe by forbidding them to go out at night.

For women, the cities they live in have become threatening places where they need to remain constantly on alert. They find it hard to move around as they face harassment on buses or when walking in the streets. They feel unsupported, suspicious and mistrusting of the authorities. They go home early and advise other women not to leave the house at night.

Such daily and persistent exposure to attacks and the fear of rape, sexual assault, humiliation and harassment infringe upon women’s rights and freedoms as equal citizens to enjoy public spaces, pursue education, work and recreational opportunities and participate in political and community life.

Lucy Fundo, barefoot lawyer working in Kibera informal settlement, Kenya

PHOTO: TINE HARDEN
Violence against women: a global epidemic

Violence against women is an epidemic of staggering proportions. Across the world, up to 70% of all women will experience violence in their lifetime.  

There are few public or private spaces where women are free from some form of violence, which manifests itself in a myriad of ways – from rape to female genital mutilation or cutting, dowry murder, so-called honour killings, unsafe abortions, early marriages, acid attacks and trafficking. In conflict situations, tens of thousands of women are raped, abducted, humiliated and made to undergo forced pregnancy, sexual abuse and slavery.

Yet there are signs that things could be changing. In the past few decades, violence against women has been steadily gaining pace as a global development issue. Inequality and discrimination are also beginning to be recognised as other forms of violence against women across the world.

The number of countries recognising gender-based violence as a crime has risen from almost zero to 76 since 1977. Stopping violence against women and girls has emerged as a key priority in the post-2015 agenda, with more than 100 UN member states signing up to end gender-based violence in March 2013. In 2009 UN-Habitat and UNIFEM (now UN Women) jointly established a global programme trying to make urban spaces safer for women, now running as the Safe Cities Global Initiative.

The scale of the problem

Although the majority of violence women face is still at the hands of people they know, women from different countries across the world have also spoken to ActionAid about how living in cities exposes them to the daily threat of violence. They talk of children as young as 10 being raped in the dumpsites of Mombasa, Kenya. Women in Brazil have spoken of their fear of the drug traffickers who have come to dominate and control their neighbourhoods. Garment workers in Cambodia are abused and harassed in and around their workplace. One woman who works as a street vendor in Ethiopia says, “We always live in a constant condition of fear.”

Yet despite the scale and gravity of the problem, violence against women in public spaces remains underrecognised and underreported, making it difficult to assess, analyse and map out the real extent of the problem.

Data on the links between urbanisation, urban poverty and gender-based violence is still patchy. Combined with underreporting of sexual violence incidents, this has an impact on the development and design of gender-sensitive public services, as well as the implementation and monitoring of existing programmes and interventions trying to reduce attacks on women in public spaces.

However, research has been published that strongly indicates that violence against women in urban and public spaces is growing. The World Health Organisation states that urban women in public spaces across the world are at particular risk of gender-based violence.

UN-Habitat has concluded that the various forms of urban violence – which includes domestic violence – makes women twice as likely as men to suffer acts of aggression. According to Brazilian research, in São Paolo, a woman is assaulted in a public space every 15 seconds. In Lima, Peru, only 12% of women
surveyed for one piece of work reported that they could move freely without fear of aggression. In Kenya, two of every five abused women report that they believe there is “nothing they can do to make Nairobi safer”.

In New Delhi, a baseline survey conducted by UN Women in 2012 revealed that 92% of women experienced some form of sexual violence in public spaces in their lifetime and in Quito, Ecuador, a UN Women survey in 2011 showed that 68% of women had experienced sexual violence or harassment in public spaces at least once in the previous year.

An ActionAid Bangladesh baseline research focus group also reveals the extent to which women feel the daily threat of sexual violence. According to their survey, the vast majority (74%) of urban women said that they felt threatened by violence and sexual assault and harassment at any time of the day or night, and that their mobility was almost entirely restricted after dark. They said they faced harassment in bus terminals and train stations (87%), by the roadside (80%), and outside their schools and colleges (69%). Their attackers were both individuals and groups of men. From the survey a picture emerges of women whose lives are severely curtailed by violence and the threat of violence, avoiding public spaces, crowds and public transport and living in constant fear.

“Sexual harassment of women in public places seemed to have spread like an epidemic,” says Sultana Kamal, a human rights activist and executive director of Ain O Salish Kendra, a women’s rights NGO in Bangladesh.

“It has a very serious detrimental impact on women’s lives. We have witnessed various consequences of this social crime, ranging from girls being stopped from going to school, to being restricted in their movements outside homes, subjected to underage forced marriage and getting killed or being driven to commit suicide. It does not even spare the protestors. Over 250 people have been killed simply because they took the courage to protest. In short, women’s rights to mobility, education, choice of partners and above all security and right to life, especially that of young girls, have been shaken and shrunk severely. This is a direct assault on women’s constitutional and human rights.”

At a glance: sexual violence facing women in public spaces across the world

Reliable global statistics on sexual violence against women are difficult to access, with a huge issue of underreporting. There is an increasing awareness of the sexual violence facing women in urban and public spaces, in part due to a series of high-profile cases picked up by national and international media. The horrifying gang rape and murder of a young woman on a bus in Delhi in 2012 led to mass protests on the streets and a change in the tone and political profile of gender-based violence, but there is as yet little evidence that this has led to increased reporting or prevention of sexual assaults and harassment.

Women interviewed by ActionAid in all the countries working on the Safe Cities programme have spoken of their fear or inability to report the sexual violence they have experienced or witnessed. This means that the statistics quoted in this report are likely to be just the tip of the iceberg.

Yet a glance at the reported crime statistics in some of the countries where ActionAid has piloted its Safe Cities work still gives an indication of the extent that rape and other forms of sexual violence are committed with impunity.
In 2012, 60% of all gender-based violence cases recorded by the Ministry of Gender and Development in Liberia occurred in and around the capital Monrovia. Of this, sexual assault, rape and gang rape were the most prevalent. While 19% of the perpetrators were arrested, only 2.5% were convicted.\(^{40}\)

In 2012 Brazil recorded 50,617 rape cases, equivalent to 26 rapes per 100,000 inhabitants, which was an 18% increase on the previous year. This figure surpassed the numbers of homicides with intention to kill (47,136) recorded by the police in the same year.\(^{41}\)

In Cambodia rape is a widespread and barely prosecuted crime. In 2012, according to the Cambodia Centre for Human Rights, the Cambodian media reported 665 cases of rape. Less than half (283) resulted in charges being pressed and only seven resulted in a prosecution.\(^{42}\)

Evidence gathered by ActionAid also shows that urban women often feel unable or unwilling to report when they have become victims of sexual violence. As well as suggesting a widespread mistrust of the authorities, it also indicates that many incidences of sexual assault, rape or harassment simply go unreported.\(^{43}\)

For example in Bangladesh, over 60% of women interviewed for an ActionAid baseline survey said they would not advise their female friends to go to the police if they were attacked. Eighty two per cent believed the police would not record the complaint, 70% believed the police would not take the matter seriously and 64% believed the police would blame the girl instead of the person who attacked her.\(^{44}\)

**Case study: the long fight for safety, security and justice**

Recent high profile cases have brought shocking accounts of gang rapes to the world’s attention, but many more of these crimes continue to pass beneath the radar.

Sumi, a 17-year-old factory worker at Apex Footwear Ltd. in Dhaka, Bangladesh was on her way home with three colleagues after working overtime in early 2014. “We clocked out at ten that night. Suddenly from nowhere eight or nine young men pounced on us and we all ran in different directions. Before I realised what was happening, I was in their clutches. They dragged me through a dark alley to a quiet place,” she said.

Throughout that night Sumi was repeatedly gang raped, released only the next morning. She went home to her mother, who at the sight of her knew exactly what had happened and took her to hospital. To avoid any scandal in the city, her mother took her to their hometown in Rangpur for treatment. As the news spread in the ward, local leaders came forward to ‘take responsibility’ to settle the issue.

“Despite my resistance, the matter was settled by mutual understanding; the offender paid money through influential people so that my family would not to take the matter any further. We were powerless in this situation,” said Sumi.
There are many others with stories like Sumi’s, but which no one is aware of. Garments workers in Bangladesh are compelled to do overtime in a perilous environment, both at work and on the journey there and back. Factories do not provide transport facilities, even for those working extremely late shifts, and public transport does not offer a safe option at night. The focus of factory owners is often on maximising profits, rather than ensuring the safety of their female workers.

Who is most likely to be affected?

“Look at this place, there is no lighting, everything happens over here, people come here to use drugs, there were cases of rape, bodies of dead people were thrown here. I don’t ever like to come here....” Brazilian woman from Cabo Pernambuco.

The insecurity and vulnerability of women to attacks in urban and public spaces transcends economic, racial and social barriers and is an emerging concern for urban policymakers in developed as well as poorer countries. For example, a recent study by the End Violence Against Women Coalition found that 43% of young women in London had experienced sexual harassment in public spaces over the previous year.46

Yet the fact that the majority of the world’s city dwellers now live in developing countries and that urban safety is so closely inter-related with poverty and inequality means that poor women in developing countries are the most likely to be exposed to sexual violence on the streets and in other public spaces such as markets, bus terminals, train stations and dark streets around their homes or workplace.47

One-third of the world’s urban population – over one billion people – now live in the poorest urban areas such as slums, townships and illegal settlements.48 They often lack even the most basic services such as sanitation, electricity and access to clean and safe drinking water.

In work done on the link between poverty and violence, poverty has emerged as an aggravating factor in levels of gender-based violence. Women living in poverty are also the least able to remove themselves from violent environments.

Women’s vulnerability to sexual violence is often exacerbated by the lack of basic amenities in poor and insecure urban places. They often need to commute long distances to work or move from their houses to get clean water or sanitation services. Many poor women live in areas affected by high levels of unemployment, alcohol and drugs and inadequate, corrupt or invisible policing, all of which also contribute to rising levels of violence and insecurity for all who live there.49

A study from the Philippines showed that living in urban slums can lead to higher levels of gender-based violence, and women have a higher risk of being attacked by someone who is not their partner.50

In South Africa, an extensive study of criminal trends in Cape Town showed that the poorest urban dwellers are the main targets of violence across the city and that gender, ethnic origin and social class are determining factors in who was
A safe city is one that facilitates and ensures the elimination of gender-based violence, while at the same time providing equal opportunities for men and women in all the spheres of social, economic, cultural and political life…

For ActionAid, in a safe city women and girls can: travel without experiencing violence, dress without facing discrimination, go to school without being excluded, work safely in the knowledge that employment rights will be upheld, access and use public services such as education, health, shelter and water provision without fear or harassment, enjoy recreational activities, approach justice services and the police without suspicion, judgment or fear, contribute to planning the future of the city, and speak out about issues which are important. Women and girls feel safe in their homes, at school, at work and travelling with freedom around their neighbourhoods during the day and at night. Women and girls feel valued as equals and their voices are heard.
The following one page notes outline the context in those countries launching ActionAid’s Safe Cities for Women campaign in 2014.96

Bangladesh

With a population of more than 160 million people, Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated countries in the world. Despite millions still living in extreme poverty, Bangladesh’s economy is growing rapidly at around 6% year-on-year. Much of this growth is happening in its booming cities and towns. The capital, Dhaka, is one of the largest and most heavily populated cities in the world, growing exponentially as hundreds of thousands flee poverty in rural and coastal areas.57

Urbanisation is one of the biggest challenges facing Bangladesh today. As the population growth of Bangladesh’s cities outpaces its industrial development, many urban migrants end up in slums and squatter settlements. Here they face high levels of insecurity, crime and violence in their day-to-day lives. A World Bank study in 2007 found that 93% of slum dwellers in Bangladesh had been affected by violence in the space of a year and identified 33 different types of crime they had experienced.58

Female migration has been one of the defining elements of Bangladesh’s rapid and transformational urbanisation. Millions have moved to the city to work in Bangladesh’s export economies, mainly the garment export and other service industries. Although this has resulted in a level of economic emancipation previously unthinkable to earlier generations of rural women, their cheap labour and low social status has meant that their contribution to the national economy has had far-reaching implications for their personal safety.59

According to research carried out in Dhaka by One World Action and PaWasome studies, the unregulated and unplanned arrival of garment factories in Bangladesh’s capital city has led to an unprecedented surge in urban poverty and insecurity. The rapid influx of low-skilled, poor workers from rural areas in search of paid employment put pressure on already strained public services and urban utilities, and led to the rapid expansion of urban slums. This has had a disproportionate effect on women, who make up the bulk of workers in Bangladesh’s most rapidly expanding export industries.60

Outside the workplace, the increased visibility of large numbers of women on the streets has led to increased levels of sexual violence and harassment in urban and public spaces. In a deeply rooted patriarchal society, women’s social status has not risen alongside their economic independence.61

According to the baseline survey conducted by ActionAid Bangladesh, harassment on the streets and in other public spaces means that many Bangladeshi women living in cities feel continuously unsafe and anxious for their own safety. Ten per cent of women in cities feel unsafe in public spaces, 15% think public transport poses a danger. The fear is deeper as women experience multiple discriminations as a result of sexual
violence. In a study commissioned by ActionAid, a woman living in Chasara railway slum described sexual violence experienced by a neighbour. The neighbour's husband worked overnight as a driver, and in his absence a family friend approached the neighbour and raped her. There was no opportunity for justice and the woman was forced to move from her own community to another slum. She experienced financial, social and emotional dislocation as a result, withdrawing from society and becoming increasingly isolated.62

ActionAid Bangladesh has been working in partnership with a number of development organisations fighting for justice in cases such as this, where all too often victims of sexual violence are simply brushed off by society and sometimes even their own families, tainted as 'un-pure' or 'unholy'. These organisations have also been working with garment workers supporting them to claim their rights.

The Population Services and Training Center, (PSTC), a partner of ActionAid Bangladesh, initiated a project on promoting corporate social responsibility on occupational health rights, seeking to overcome the problems that workers experience inside and outside factory premises and to improve workplace safety and security. The project involves workers, communities, government officials and local leaders. Workers have been mobilised through this process and now they are voicing their concerns regarding safety on their way home at night. They are also demanding the provision of transport vehicles to drop them home after working late hours.

Brazil

Brazil’s population is now overwhelmingly urban. Of its 190 million people, almost 85% live in urban areas, many of them women.63 Although Brazil’s economy is one of the fastest growing in the world, its cities remain places of stark socio-economic, racial and gender inequality. The lure of paid work is pulling women towards urban areas, yet although in general Brazil’s women are better educated than men, over 60% end up working in the informal sector with no protection or labour rights.64 Brazil’s cities are also a dangerous place to be a woman. In 2010 there were 4,465 registered murders of women and girls, which puts the country seventh place in the global femicide rankings.65 In 2011 there were 70,270 registered incidences of women becoming victims of violence – 44.2% from physical violence, 12.2% sexual violence and 20.8% from psychological violence. Although the majority of assaults took place in the home, nearly 16% of women were attacked on the streets.66

ActionAid’s research into the sexual violence and harassment facing women in three cities in Pernambuco, historically one of Brazil’s poorest and most violent states, sheds light on the situation facing women in poor urban areas. Although the majority of murder victims are still men, more women are killed here than in any other state in Brazil.67

According to feminist NGO SOS Corpo, 55% of the murders in the state between 2002 and 2004 occurred in public places.68 When questioned about rates of sexual violence in the state, 78% of people surveyed said they thought sexual violence was increasing.69

Although Brazil has a raft of legal mechanisms that exist to protect its citizens from violence, there is a distinct lack of specific laws and policies addressing the issue of violence against women in public spaces.
Whilst there have been significant improvements in the legislation around domestic violence, sexual violence and harassment on the streets and in other urban and public places is not particularly recognised or acknowledged as a problem, leading to women feeling isolated and unprotected.70

Women interviewed in all the communities spoke of a deep fear of drug trafficking, saying that the presence of drugs and a drugs trade on the streets led to more violence and sexual violence. Women also generally mistrusted the police, who seemed to rarely enter the poorest and most insecure communities. Each city focused on by ActionAid for its research had fewer police stations than national requirements dictate based on city populations.71

In some urban communities domestic violence shelters, sexual and reproductive health services and especially services for rape victims simply did not exist. Women needing treatment for a sexual assault in some areas could conceivably have to travel between one and six hours to access services.72

As with other countries, poor or non-existent infrastructure was creating a fertile environment for sexual violence against women. When asked about how their lives were being affected by the violence or fear of violence they faced, women interviewed spoke of sacrificing their social lives, of not being able to travel to places where they could relax, dance or see friends. “We have no more freedom to go out at night,” said one. “The streets are too dark…”73

Data analysis carried out by ActionAid Brazil highlights the chronic under-investment of women at government level. Despite over 55,000 reported incidences of violence against women, the government only invested roughly US$0.05 per woman per year in Rio de Janeiro in 2013. In Pernambuco where there were over 19,000 reported cases of violence in the same year, the government only invested US$2 per woman per year.74

Liberia

The Republic of Liberia, on the west coast of Africa, has a population of just over four million, 64% of whom live below the poverty line.75

Liberia is a post-conflict, transitional society recovering from a brutal 15-year civil war that traumatised, mutilated and terrorised a large percentage of the population.

During the conflict, waves of people travelled to cities seeking protection and escaping destitution and violence in heavily damaged rural areas. After the end of the war, many chose to stay in the city rather than returning home, and they are joined year on year by thousands of migrants fleeing poverty in Liberia’s rural areas. The capital’s population, which was around 600,000 in 1989, was 1.2 million in 2012, with the majority of people residing in informal settlements.76

Life for women in Liberia’s poorest urban areas is extremely insecure. Many face the daily threat of eviction as Monrovia undergoes a wave of development and beautification, and live in areas with no public services, infrastructure or even basic amenities.77

The country has a devastating legacy of sexual violence, with rape becoming one of the defining characteristics of the civil war.
In 2013 61% of all gender-based violence cases recorded by the Ministry of Gender and Development occurred in and around the capital Monrovia, a 1% rise from 2012. Of this, sexual assault, rape and gang rape and domestic violence were the most prevalent. While 19% of perpetrators were arrested, just 2.5% were convicted.

Gender inequality and the marginalisation of women in Liberia are deeply entrenched and reinforced in the home, the schooling system, workplace and on the streets. Women’s inferior status in society is further bolstered by inequalities within inheritance and property laws, women’s poor representation in leadership roles and continuing low participation in education. Despite having a female president, there are no laws that prohibit or protect women from discrimination. Women’s access to justice is limited.

Research by ActionAid backed up the assertion that sexual violence against Liberian women in cities and urban spaces transcended all class, educational and economic boundaries. While education is key to breaking the cycle of poverty, female students studying at the University of Monrovia, for example are exposed to widespread sexual violence, including rape. It also painted a picture of blaming women for the violence they faced, a lack of reporting and impunity of men in power. University policies and national laws fail to begin to protect female students.

ActionAid’s research also showed that, while violence against women cuts across every sector of Liberian society, it affects different groups in different ways. University students are among the most physically mobile of all women in Liberia, yet this mobility also exposes them to sexual violence on the public transport and different routes they use to move independently through the city.

Cambodia

Cambodia’s urban areas are booming, with urban populations across this small south Asian country swelling by 4.3% year on year.

Already just over 10% of all Cambodians live in the capital Phnom Penh, one of the fastest growing cities in the world and home to 1.55 million people, over half of whom are women. In 1998 one in every 20 Cambodians lived in Phnom Penh, yet by 2012 this figure had doubled.

Recent growth in both the construction and garments industries has led to a rise in the demand for low-skilled labour in the capital and other urban areas, with 300,000 people already employed in Cambodia’s garment factories. Of these workers, 90% are women. According to Cambodia’s Ministry of Planning, the drivers for urban migration are divided down gender lines. Most men move to the capital for education, while women migrate for work.
Women leaving the house and entering the workplace in Cambodia has not resulted in equality. While the female labour force is increasing in size, especially among young women in trades such as garments, beer promotion, karaoke and waitressing, these tend to be informal low paying and insecure jobs, pushing many into sex work for additional income.

Their status in the workforce reflects women’s wider position in Cambodia’s heavily patriarchal society, which views women as subservient to men in all areas of life. In 2005, just 4.5% of the population was aware that violence against women is ‘wrongful behaviour’ and a criminal act.

For women moving through Cambodia’s urban and public spaces, sexual violence and harassment is an everyday reality. Gang rapes are horrifyingly common with a 2013 United Nations analysis concluding that gang rape is widely considered as a recreational activity among young men, particularly in urban areas.

Research undertaken by ActionAid in Cambodia showed that women garment workers are exposed to violence on multiple levels. More than half of garment workers interviewed had experienced or witnessed harassment in the workplace. Even when they leave work they are at risk of rape, verbal abuse and sexual harassment from men who hang around the factories. Another report by the International Labour Organisation showed that one in five women felt they had been sexually harassed or sexually humiliated, and were particularly at risk when they left work and had to walk home along deserted roads, storehouses and empty areas with no lighting and insufficient policing.

Despite this, Cambodian criminal and labour laws do not explicitly prohibit sexual harassment in the workplace or stipulate punishment for offenders. This lack of acknowledgement is mirrored in the political environment in Cambodia, which is not keyed into tackling or even touching on the root causes of sexual violence in urban and public spaces across the country.
Urbanisation has long been seen as an opportunity for the poor and excluded to seek new economic and social horizons. Cities are often represented as key “lift-off” points from poverty. Three-quarters of all economic production is now taking place in cities and city-dwellers are almost universally better placed to access employment, education and health services.92

Yet for many, especially the most vulnerable and excluded women, this lift-off remains an elusive prospect. Urbanisation is a double-edged sword. On the one hand a force for progressive economic and social empowerment, on the other an increasingly risky and insecure prospect for the world’s poorest people.93

Despite generally having better access to education, healthcare and employment than poor people in rural areas, the poorest urbanites are living with a different set of challenges, such as a lack of decent income-generating opportunities and precarious employment conditions (if they can find employment at all), the high cost of food and basic services, lack of recognition as full citizens,94 substandard housing and, increasingly, their exposure to higher levels of crime.95 They can also find themselves susceptible to forced eviction, insecure and unsafe working environments, racism, xenophobia and the absence of basic services.

A rise in violence has become a hallmark of the world’s rapid urbanisation. In 2011 the World Development Report highlighted violence and inequality as a core development issue for the first time and concluded that global violence is morphing, becoming less focused around civil war and conflict and more on criminal violence and civil unrest.96

Much of this violence is becoming concentrated in urban areas. Over the past five years, 60% of all urban residents in developing countries have become victims of crime.97 Our cities are becoming epicentres of multi-layered violence with a considerable number of middle- and lower-income cities exhibiting above average rates of violence, insecurity, inequality and poverty.98

As well as the direct impact on victims, endemic urban violence corrodes people’s lives, eating away at the social fabric of communities, restricting mobility, shutting down access to jobs and education and undermining relationships between the authorities and the people they are supposed to be protecting. It is a vicious cycle of violence, inequality and poverty.

Poor infrastructure, crumbling or inaccessible public services, discrimination and no recourse to protection all make cities dangerous environments for enterprising and increasingly mobile women wanting to improve their economic opportunities.

While urbanisation is not in itself a cause of gender-based violence, the unstable and insecure nature of cities makes violence in urban environments more likely.99 In Cambodia, for example, recent research by AusAID has indicated that domestic violence against women in urban areas has approximately doubled compared to rural areas.100

Gender blind urban planning

Many women who move to escape failing agriculture, communal violence, extreme poverty, class discrimination, violence and a lack of investment in rural areas101 end up living in urban areas that are not designed with their safety in mind. Cities are still largely designed by and for men, and this can often lead to an increase in the risk of sexual violence for the women who inhabit public spaces that bear no relation to their needs and safety. Violence against women is routinely excluded from urban planning and is rarely considered by policy makers or factored into decision-making processes.
It is now widely accepted that improving women’s safety and reducing the levels of sexual violence and harassment they face is contingent on gender-sensitive urban planning.

For ActionAid, gender sensitive city planning is where planning takes into account the practical and strategic needs of women and girls, and includes women in design, budgeting, implementation and evaluation of planning projects, as well as ensuring women and girls can use services safely and effectively.

While policymakers may argue that policies are not deliberately excluding women, women will remain excluded if policies do not address normalised forms of exclusion, violence and inequality in patriarchal societies.

In none of the countries where ActionAid is running Safe Cities programmes does urban planning or policy recognise the gravity or scale of the sexual violence that women face – or the impact it is having on their lives.

In Liberia, the aim of the Monrovia City Corporation, responsible for urban city planning, is to transform the capital of Liberia into Africa’s cleanest and greenest city by 2016. Yet despite the appalling violence routinely faced by women in the city, there are no blueprints within any city planning that cater for reducing sexual violence against women. The city ordinance code on urban planning design also has no clause that promotes women’s safety in public spaces.

After undertaking a policy analysis of government legislation around women’s safety in cities, ActionAid Cambodia concluded that: “It appears there is very little urban policy and planning at present that links urban development to safety, and certainly no existing policy that takes into account safety and violence against women specifically... To a large extent urban planning tends to be reactive and not regulated.”

### Evictions and displacements

Rapid urban development, which has pushed up land prices and pushed already inadequate public services to breaking point, is also further increasing the insecurity of poor women and girls living in cities.

In Cambodia, poor informal settlements in the capital Phnom Penh, home to hundreds of thousands of the city’s poorest inhabitants, are routinely cleared out and residents pushed further out to the edges of the city. In the last 20 years, hundreds of thousands of people have been forcibly evicted to make way for shopping malls, cafes and apartment buildings. This ‘beautification’ of the city and the massive construction that follows it, leads to an ever increasing displacement of poor women and men. This in turn leaves them starved of access to even the most basic of services – it is estimated that over 70% of all relocation sites have poor or non-existent infrastructure and 43% have no access to utilities. This leaves women stuck in poorly serviced areas and exposed to higher levels of violence and insecurity.

In Brazil, progressive housing policy has been undermined by huge development and infrastructure projects through the national Development Accelerating Programme (PAC) and preparations for huge global sporting events such as the World Cup and the Olympics. In the Cabo de Santo municipality in Pernambuco, the expansion of the Suape Harbour and the construction of the Transnodestina railway have led to an influx of 40,000 new workers, which has created a huge housing deficit and quadrupled land prices. Communities around Suape Harbour have been forcibly removed. Entire communities have been displaced to make way for hotels and stadiums for the 2014 Rio World Cup. In Pernambuco, women interviewed by ActionAid talked of being unable to sleep at night because of their fears of eviction and the violence happening in other communities.
The disruption to poor women’s lives due to this style of rapid development, which sees enormous resources being channelled into unstable and poverty-ridden areas and the arrival of large numbers of single working men, has been enormous. According to ActionAid’s baseline research, this has led to increased violence and sexual abuse, exploitation of children and young people and people trafficking. All of this has been enabled by the absence of state, city and local policies aimed at preventing social instability and violence through the proper provision of public services and a focus on human rights. In an example of institutions’ actions leading to violence, states have not fulfilled their duty of care to their citizens: the concerns of women have been largely set aside by governments who have prioritised private corporate – or international in the case of the World Cup – needs over citizens’ rights.106

Lack of gender-responsive public services

As cities boom, the pressure on existing urban infrastructure keeps mounting. In countries around the world, the pace and scale of rural to urban migration is outstripping the ability of city authorities to keep up with the demand for public services.107

What are gender-responsive public services?

ActionAid believes that everyone has a fundamental right to access and use public services such as education, health, water and sanitation, shelter, transport, energy, policing and justice systems. However many women and girls are currently denied or unable to access these basic services or public services. This under-provision contributes to gender inequalities, gender-based violence and exclusion.

So what does a Gender-Responsive Public Service (GRPS) look like?108 For ActionAid, a GRPS is one that takes account of the practical and strategic needs of women.109 That means that as well as providing the service itself – for example clean water or basic health care – a GRPS will also address long term goals such as legal rights and equal wages.

In order to make this a reality for women, governments must first fund services that support women and girls. They must also include women and girls in the design, delivery and monitoring of services. In addition, their design and delivery must be informed by a gender analysis. This means asking key questions at every stage of their creation: ‘will women and girls be able to access and use this service safely? Through accessing and using this service, will women and girls have a greater ability and potential to challenge different gender inequalities and unequal power relations in other parts of their lives?’

In terms of addressing women’s safety in urban and public spaces, this could mean adequate street lighting around factories and bus stops or the adequate provision of clean water so women are not at risk of attack by having to travel far from the home. In addition, adequate policing and gender-sensitive healthcare services and safe and affordable public transport are vital to ensure women’s safety.
It is the responsibility of the state to ensure that women are provided with gender-sensitive public services that respond to their needs. Yet women have spoken of how a lack of access to decent public services – such as bad roads, inadequate or no street lighting, minimal or dangerous public transport and no public toilets – coupled with low police presence and a lack of information and legislation to help improve safety in insecure areas, affects their way of life.\textsuperscript{110}

Not only are states failing to provide the most basic of amenities such as water, sanitation and electricity, but neglected, abandoned or non-existent public services create an environment in which sexual violence – fuelled by sexism, discrimination and negative attitudes towards women – can flourish.

In research by the Africa Youth Trust on urban vulnerability issues affecting children, young people and women in informal settlements in Nairobi, residents spoke of the dangers faced by women linked to poor infrastructure:\textsuperscript{111}

“\textit{There are no roads.....no electricity....now when women pass in dark places it scares them. So, there were a lot of rape cases, violence and even pick pocketing, and then when [the thieves] run away they disappear into the darkness. Because there are no roads, women [must] pass through side-roads where they were waylaid by attackers who attacked women and girls because men are stronger.}”

Another said, “\textit{Most of the areas in Bombolulu there is no street lighting. So it is very dangerous for girls and women to do something in the evening hours; like go to the shops or if someone wants to go visiting or have dinner with my relatives back home. It can be very dangerous for them because a lot of thugs live in Bombolulu.}”

A lack of basic sanitation and water services in poor urban areas also means that women are exposed to sexual violence and harassment when they are forced to use public sanitation facilities and communal water supplies. In Kenya, for example, a 2006 population survey revealed that while 60% of those living in the capital were in slums, only 22% of slum households had water.\textsuperscript{112}

Inadequate and unsafe public transport is also a key danger point for women, who often have to commute long distances to work. A 2010 baseline safety study conducted in Delhi by woman’s rights group Jagori showed that public transport, buses and bus stations were reported as places where women and girls faced high levels of sexual harassment. Over 50\% of respondents said they felt unsafe and vulnerable in crowded public transport and at bus stops, and around 80\% of respondents said they faced sexual harassment at bus and metro stations.\textsuperscript{113}

In Bangladesh, one woman spoke to ActionAid about witnessing sexual assaults on public transport. “\textit{After completing overtime at the factory we were going home in a local minibus and as there was no space in the back one of us had to sit with the driver,}” she said. “\textit{After a few minutes the driver started groping the girl sitting in the front...she got nervous and did not utter a word... when the minibus came to a halt she immediately got out of the bus and slapped the driver with her shoes in front of everyone...}”

In Liberia, young women studying at Monrovia University said that they were routinely harassed and assaulted on the public transport they relied on to get to and from the campus. Limited and cramped public buses meant that women students were often forced to sit on men’s laps, exposing them to sexual harassment. Long waits at isolated bus stops with poor or non-existent street lighting also exposed them to danger. When asked whether they reported the attacks or harassment they face on public transport, most women students said they feared they would be blamed and that nothing would be done to increase their safety, as sexual harassment was so widespread and carried out with such impunity that their experiences were considered to be normal and an expected side-effect of commuting through the city.\textsuperscript{114}
The challenges of funding public services

When asked for better women-friendly public services, governments often say that they don’t have enough money. Tax helps governments pay for public services that keep women in cities safer, like policing, public toilets and street lighting. The biggest loss to government budgets is because big companies are finding sneaky ways to avoid millions of dollars of tax through legal loopholes and governments giving them harmful tax breaks.\textsuperscript{115, 116} The amount of tax big companies avoid worldwide in poor countries is much more than poor countries get in aid each year.\textsuperscript{117} Relying on foreign aid money makes a government less answerable to its own people’s demands, as foreign donors influence government decisions on where to spend it. Women in poor countries often don’t realise how much this tax dodging by big companies is hurting the public services they get.\textsuperscript{118} Women and men should demand that rich companies pay the tax they owe so that governments can provide better public services that help make cities safer for women.

In addition, governments are outsourcing services to the private sector. The private sector is not directly accountable to the general population in the way that the public sector is, and this can compromise quality. What is more, any costs – even low costs – exclude the very poorest and disadvantaged women and girls. For example, with regards to education, if parents have a choice to include one child in school, they will send their son.\textsuperscript{120} Women and men should demand that states uphold their constitutional responsibility to provide quality gender-responsive public services that improve women’s experience of the city.

The changing face of urban labour

For many women, a move from the country to the city has brought an economic independence that would have been almost inconceivable to earlier generations. Many are contributing to the family and national income for the first time. Money is returning to the countryside as women working in cities send remittances to their families. For example in Cambodia, women make up around 80-90\% of Cambodia’s booming garment industry, their remittances supporting around 1.7 million people.\textsuperscript{121} Millions more work in the informal sector, running small businesses or working as street vendors.

At the same time, labour market participation is slowly changing women’s status as their economic role becomes more established.

In countries such as Cambodia, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Mexico, India and China, export-orientated garment and electronics industries have opened up the formal labour market for poorer sections of the population, most notably young rural women with limited local employment options, for the first time.

“The mass migration of largely very poor women from the countryside to the cities to work in industries like the garment sector is seeing a cultural shift start to take place,” says Fayaz Ahmad, the former director of governance at ActionAid Bangladesh.

“It [migration] is helping raise the status of women in their families and home communities because they are becoming visible earners. Urbanisation has brought different opportunities to women and, as a result, the idea of girls getting an education and having jobs instead of getting married early is growing. The idea that women can be police officers, doctors, drivers, is slowly taking hold.”

Yet while women are entering the global workforce in record numbers, the conditions under which they work often serve to underline the growing gender inequality in urban and public spaces.\textsuperscript{122} Globally, men are twice as likely as women to work full time, with women regularly trapped in temporary, low paid and insecure employment.\textsuperscript{123, 124} In the garment industry in Bangladesh, for example,
women have proved an easy target for exploitation and discrimination. With an average age of 19, usually unmarried and with little education or training, many women enter urban employment with a comparative disadvantage in terms of pay, working conditions, the possibility of promotion and even getting paid for overtime. They earn 60% of the salary of male colleagues. While they might make up the vast majority of workers in the global export garment industry, they are likely to be on lower wages, and in insecure or dangerous working conditions. In Cambodia, women make up 80% of all garment workers, yet the overwhelming majority of the factory owners and line-managers – those people responsible for women’s safety in and around work – are men. Female garment workers in Cambodia interviewed by ActionAid highlighted how their work in the city has exposed them to risks, identifying factors like a lack of safety in factory bathrooms, harassment from both factory managers and men loitering outside the factory gates, poor lighting and bad roads, which exposed them to the risk of rape and sexual assault on their way to and from the factories, and a lack of support from police and factory authorities. One garment worker in Phnom Penh said, “When I have to work overtime at night, I often feel afraid of robbery, rape and harassment because it’s very dark on the way back home.” Another talked of her experiences leaving work at the end of her shift. “When we are leaving the factory, there are crowds and gangsters often come to touch women’s bottoms and they laugh and feel it’s normal.”

While highly exploitative and unequal working conditions still exist, the increasing feminisation of the labour force often makes women’s safety in the city even more precarious.

In Mexico and Central America, the brutal wave of femicides that have claimed the lives of hundreds of women are largely concentrated among female factory workers because of their migrant status, social isolation, low social status and the fact that they usually live in poor areas far away from the factories, leaving them more open to attacks.

Sexual violence and harassment is also following women’s increased visibility on the streets and in public spaces within the cities as they leave their homes to travel to and from their workplace and go about their everyday lives.

While cities offer women the opportunity to expand their economic and social horizons, they are followed by the same prejudice, judgement and control that they often faced in their rural communities. Young girls face harassment and sexual abuse on their way to school and in the classroom. Despite the fact that many female workers are leading difficult and dangerous lives in order to provide for their families, the idea that ‘good’ women should not be seen on the streets alone still feeds the idea that the violence and harassment they face is something they bring on themselves.

One Cambodian woman said, “I feel very hurt when I [hear] men saying woman garment workers are not good women. My former fiancé said I like to ‘go for a walk at night’ but I was working overtime.”

In the Philippines, one study found that where women had a role in decision making they were also more likely to experience violence, as traditional gender roles are challenged.

This also appears to play out in Colombia, where levels of sexual violence are increasing along with women’s status and participation in public life. In a 2003 report by the Centre for Policy Dialogue and UN Population Fund, there is a clear link between the increased sexual harassment of Bangladeshi women and their improved economic status, increased mobility and newfound visibility away from the home.
**Mobilising women garment workers**

In Cambodia, ActionAid and the local Worker’s Information Centre have been helping to mobilise women garment workers who experience abuse, harassment, violence and rape in private and public spaces. Many of these women meet regularly at a drop-in centre in Dangkor, near where they live and work. To begin with, ActionAid Cambodia worked with the women to raise awareness of their rights to freedom from violence, decent work, improved health and living conditions, and formal and informal protection mechanisms to prevent violence. Security is a key concern. One woman – Phon Srey Ny – has to pay protection money to local gangs:

“Gangs often come to me, they threaten and tell me to give them the money. If I don’t give it to them, they will kick me and hit my face. If I don’t pay, I will not be able to work at night where I normally work.”

In July 2011 ActionAid Cambodia carried out safety audits with the women, which enabled them to discuss their experiences of sexual violence and harassment and identify the changes they want to see in their lives. Phon Srey Ny now says, “I feel that I’m not alone facing fear of violence in the public spaces in the city”.

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**Work life**

Every morning, millions of women get up and make their way towards Bangladesh’s garment factories. Women workers make up 80% of Bangladesh’s 3.6 million garment factory workers and this female urban workforce is the country’s most powerful economic force, when you consider that the ready-to-wear garment industry accounts for the vast majority (80%) of the country’s vital export economy. Yet sexual violence and harassment has become a bitter by-product of women’s economic emancipation. A 2011 War on Want report found that 297 out of a total of 998 women workers reported unwanted sexual advances, while 290 said they had been touched inappropriately. A further 328 reported “threats of being forced to undress”, while almost half said they had been beaten and hit in the face by their supervisors. Yet reporting of workplace sexual violence and harassment is rare, as women feel ashamed, embarrassed and disempowered.
The acceptance of sexual violence within cities

Women not only experience sexual violence in the city as a result of living in an insecure, volatile and inadequately serviced urban environment. They also face violence as a result of their gender.

When women in Bangladesh were asked by ActionAid to identify why they felt unsafe, an overwhelming 85% said it was because of a lack of respect for women from men. Aside from physical harm, violence – especially sexual violence – is an assertion of power, policing and dominance over women’s bodies and a way of inhibiting women’s movements, denying her rights to equal access to the city, undermining her confidence and pushing her back behind closed doors. Sexual violence undermines women’s confidence, both in themselves and in wider society, and denies them the ability to mobilise and create their own solutions to the issues they face. In Kenya, two of every five abused women believe that there is “nothing they can do to make Nairobi safer”.133

Life through a mother’s eyes

“I walk on the busy roads of Dhaka city every day, and I am aware of the curious eyes and hands of the male pedestrians. I even know how far the inquisitive hands can go. I always advise my daughters that they should walk on the road like a ghost, so no one notices them.”

Nasreen, 34, is a domestic worker in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Her two daughters are aged seven and 15, and she also has two sons aged 11 and 14. Nasreen is not as worried about her sons as she is about her daughters, as “sons do not need as much attention in upbringing as daughters”. She continuously monitors the whereabouts of her daughters so that they do not leave the house unless it is absolutely necessary.

Nasreen wishes that her daughters could work and earn a respectable living without fear of violence or abuse. She wants to break away from the stereotype that home is the only domain for women, but she fears for their safety. “If I could give a suggestion to the government then I would ask them to increase police patrolling on the roads and severe punishment for men who commit sexual violence against women,” she says. Only then could girls such as Nasreen’s daughters have any chance of avoiding the ‘curious eyes and inquisitive hands’ of strangers.
With violence now accepted as an inevitable part of everyday city life, gender-based violence in public spaces has become ‘normalised’, often dismissed as random or isolated events instead of being recognised as stemming from wider issues of inequality, discrimination and misogyny. This in turn leads to continuing failure to create and implement policies to address these inequalities and discrimination, to promote women’s full participation in protecting and promoting their full rights to the city, and to hold duty bearers and perpetrators to account in responding to and protecting women from the increasing threat of attack in cities and other public spaces.

The ‘normalisation’ of violence means that gender-based violence such as rape, sexual assault and verbal and physical harassment is seen as nothing out of the ordinary. According to one study, female garment workers in India and Bangladesh sometimes struggle to recognise the abuse and harassment they face at work because their experience of violence is so routine that it has become just a normal part of life.134

“Men are still calling women names that are inappropriate, the men are still touching women’s buttocks. I have seen women struggling in matatus [local taxis], men will take advantage of that, you stand on her buttocks and you feel like it is okay but it is sexual harassment,” says one man who was interviewed for an ActionAid Kenya baseline survey, “So still those behaviours are there, I have not seen changes in that.”

Instead of targeting the perpetrators or addressing the deep-set societal drivers of this violence, a widespread culture of blame and denial heaps responsibility for sexual violence back onto women themselves, focusing on their movements and how they dress or conduct themselves in public.

A police deputy interviewed by ActionAid in Pernambuco, Brazil, summed up the situation facing many women on the streets. “The worst thing is that the blame goes to the women, as if they were attracting the violence themselves because they wear short skirts or because they walk on the streets alone… This is part of individual freedoms, of the choices one has, and sometimes of the necessities one has because she studies at night…” 135

These attitudes often percolate down from the highest levels. For example the Cambodian media reported that the Secretary of State for the Ministry of Women’s Affairs gave support to a public rally urging women to dress more modestly to try and cut down on the numbers of rapes.136

Speaking about the situation facing women in Bangladesh, Farah Kabir, a women’s rights activist and country director of ActionAid Bangladesh said, “In every society there are given dress codes, however, there is a difference when it is related to men or women. Men can choose to dress as they prefer, however an embargo is given on the length of a woman’s dress or the extent to which any part of her body can be exposed.”

Women consequently have to bear the responsibility of preventing sexual violence through restricting their lifestyles and mobility and modifying their appearance and behaviour.

“To avoid harassment, the women of the community rethink their way of life, including changing their mode of dress, in order to avoid ‘provoking’ the approach of men,” explains one woman in Brazil. “Even the schedules of women have changed, women have avoided work or working during the night and the girls have had to change the schedules of schools, courses and even the time of their leisure….”

Women interviewed by ActionAid said that speaking out about the sexual violence they face in urban and public spaces only leads to judgement and blame and further control and restriction of their movement.

One woman in Nepal told ActionAid, “I try to share the incidents of when I am harassed [on public transport] with my friends and my husband. But sometimes I cannot even share them with my husband for fear of being ridiculed. I cannot talk about it in front of family or society for fear of being scolded in return…”

According to the results of a baseline survey conducted by ActionAid Bangladesh, 76% of women said they did not get support from their community when dealing with sexual violence and 77% of women would not discuss a sexual assault with their family. When asked why, 47%
The role of the media in perceptions of violence against women in public spaces

An analysis of English-speaking global media coverage in 2013 commissioned by ActionAid showed that gang rape and sexual harassment became the most common themes of the wider violence against women debate covered by media outlets throughout the year.

The narrative of much of this coverage was outrage and shock about individual cases rather than analysis of the conditions that contributed to the attacks taking place in urban spaces.

Coverage regularly used words such as “shocking”, “anguish” and “horrific”. Yet this emotion and anger was not applied to the urban context or locations of the attacks.

Despite the graphic and emotive nature of the coverage of the attacks themselves, the word ‘inadequate’ was the term most frequently used to describe the state of public transport. In addition, there may be some outrage about the scale of the problem, but debate does not always focus on root causes nor on ways to address violence. In 2013, only 1% of media coverage focused on the position, status and dangers facing women in cities and public spaces, very little space was given to women’s voices or the mobilisation and collective actions of women themselves to protest and create solutions to the dangers they face.
The media however, has great influence; 47% of all debate around women and public transport in 2013 was triggered by the much publicised Delhi rape case, it also triggered a wider discussion on safety and women’s right to commute safely through cities and public spaces. This indicates a need to work with some sections of the media to highlight some of the root causes of violence against women – this could initiate useful debate and play a key role in changing attitudes and behaviours, as well as policies.

Exclusion from political life

The denial of women’s right to live safely in cities due to the sexual violence, harassment and intimidation they face at home, on the streets, on public transport, in the classroom, workplace and in leisure spaces is underpinned and facilitated by more subtle forms of discrimination and isolation. These include their exclusion from socio-political participation and decision-making.

Worldwide, women are grossly underrepresented in political decision-making. Men still hold around 80% of the world’s political power. Despite concerted efforts to drive up the percentages, which have doubled in the last decade, women still account for less than 22% of all parliamentarians and fewer than 5% of mayors.

This heavily male-dominated global political climate does nothing to help women facing sexual violence and assault in cities and urban spaces around the world.

For example in Cambodia, an examination of the political factors at play highlights how hard it is to tackle the root causes of sexual violence facing women in its cities. Almost total dominance by the main political party (CPP) is underpinned by a widespread culture of corruption, demonstrated by a failure to properly pay government workers, no accountability, a lack of an effective judiciary and a patriarchal system of patronage. All of this feeds major drivers of increasing sexual violence against women in public spaces – unregulated urban planning and land appropriation, neglected public services, a lack of police presence in dangerous areas and immunity for those who attack and harass women. The number of women in senior government positions – at both national and community level – and in the judiciary, both as judges and prosecutors, is still extremely low.

In Kenya, a study by NGO Accord concluded that the Kenyan criminal justice system was riddled with irregularities and that survivors of sexual and gender-based violence were considered ‘alien’ to the system. Investigating agencies often don’t consider survivors’ testimonies, gender desks at police stations are insensitive to the women they are there to help and officers ridicule, intimidate and scare away survivors. It also said that most sexual and gender-based violence cases are still heard in open court and that this has grossly inhibited reporting of crimes by women scared of having to give evidence in public.

In Liberia, women’s access to justice is also severely curtailed by inadequate law enforcement, a justice system crushed by its caseloads and the negative and judgemental attitudes of law enforcers. Women have only had the right to vote since the 1940s, and basic infrastructure and services have been built without taking their needs into account.

Many survivors of sexual violence in cities are unable to find medical assistance or report the assault. Almost total impunity for perpetrators has contributed to the idea that it is useless to report attacks. In 2008 the Liberian government created a Sexual Offences Court to fast track cases of rape, sexual assault and intimidation, but the court only covers the capital Monrovia and evaluations indicate that the court had only convicted five rapists out of hundreds of rape cases being reported to the police every year.

This de-prioritisation of women at state level is often reflected in budget allocations. For example
Examples of policy gaps in national legislation:

**Bangladesh:** according to police headquarter statistics, incidents of rape, killing, abduction and sexual harassment in Bangladesh are steadily rising, reaching 12,904 cases in 2009 and 16,212 in 2010. Yet, the Bangladesh National Policy for Women’s Advancement of 2011 has no specific section on women’s safety and security in public places.

**Ethiopia:** women account for 60% of informal vendors in Addis Ababa and face robbery, theft and sexual assault in their daily life. Yet, the three major policies that focus on women’s economic empowerment – Addis Ababa Women’s Development and Change Package, the Growth and Transformation Plan and Ethiopian Women’s Development and Change Package – do not specifically address the safety and security concerns of women.

**Liberia:** violence against women in urban spaces is a widespread phenomenon. However, Liberia is yet to domesticate the Convention to Eliminate all forms of Violence against Women (CEDAW) and lacks any domestic violence legislation. There is also no explicit legislation to address sexual exploitation and abuse in schools, and no punitive system in place for perpetrators except for the Rape Law.

Yet there is increasing proof that when women are given the space to take collective action to get their voices heard, they are incredibly effective at driving change. An Oxfam analysis of policies on violence against women in 70 countries from 1975-2005 revealed that feminist activism played a more effective role in driving policy change than anything else, including numbers of women legislators or national wealth.
In all cities there is a different story to be told about how women's economic and social prospects are stifled and their rights violated by sexual violence and the threat of being attacked, raped and harassed in urban public spaces. Urban life is one that can be wrought with fear for a woman. Although ActionAid's work in this area is still in many ways in its initial stages, our policy and programme analysis has led us to the following conclusions:

1. Rapid urbanisation and large female migration into the city has increased women's vulnerability to sexual violence in public spaces.

2. Inadequate provision of public services in urban areas has created an environment where sexual violence against women can thrive. Wide scale impunity for violence against women further fuels and drives this violence. While this affects poor women worst, as they are most likely to live in poorly serviced areas, it ultimately affects all women in the city.

3. Women's safety, needs and requirements are rarely reflected in urban planning. In general urban planning is a sphere dominated by men, and there is little recognition of the gravity of sexual violence and the role that gender-sensitive urban planning might play in creating safe cities for women.

4. Women's lives would be made safer by reliable and regulated public transport, universal and accessible water supplies, safe public toilets and adequately lit streets in poor urban areas. However it is important to note that even the safest and most gender-responsive public services would not be enough to stop sexual violence against women in public and urban spaces.

5. Inadequate public services help to perpetuate impunity for those who sexually attack and harass women. Poor policing and justice services, combined with inadequate laws and policies to protect women, means that women are not supported if they experience abuse – in fact, impunity creates the conditions for more violence.

6. A culture of impunity for men responsible for sexual violence deters women from reporting crimes when they happen. The lack of reporting – which also occurs because those women who do report are treated casually, blamed or criticised – and follow up sends a message that sexual violence is both normal and accepted. There is impunity as policing and justice services are inadequate, and their institutions act in sexist ways without recognising their contribution to the problem.

7. There is a lack of legal instruments to deal with sexual violence. This is partly due to political will: national development plans related to women and girls' rights exist, but they are not implemented.

8. Many women have a low level of awareness about their equal rights to urban and public spaces, and may not be aware of legal provisions or services they are entitled to if their rights are violated by sexual violence. Some women are also not aware of the potential contribution they might make to decision-making on urban planning or, due to prevailing attitudes to women's participation, may not feel able to contribute. This again is a result of society's persistent discrimination against women and girls.

9. Fundamentally, urban environments and societies are driven by a belief that men and their opinions and lives are more important than that of women. These sexist attitudes, prevalent in every aspect of culture, means that many men do not see violence against women as an abuse of rights.

10. The media plays a role in perpetuating the acceptance of women's inequality to men. Whilst there is often shock and outrage in
reporting, the root causes of violence and role that institutions play to perpetuate the myth that women are unequal is not explored. The media needs to be an ally of women in addressing sexual violence, and can have great impact if it challenges the root causes of violence and seeks to ensure that policy and behaviour change takes place that not only ensures women are able to access gender responsive public services, but can also have a say in how these services are run.

11. The state is accountable for upholding their international commitments to eliminate discrimination and violence against women such as the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, the Beijing platform and the UN Declaration on Human Rights. Accountability lies with all those in positions of power, from municipal/city authorities to national leaders. Because of sexist attitudes towards women, gender ministries within countries are ignored and marginalised. The responsibility to take sexual violence in urban spaces seriously must be driven from the top.

Recommendations

End sexual violence against women in public spaces

- Governments and parliaments need to legislate for violence against women and girls in public spaces. Offences such as sexual harassment, unwanted touching, eve teasing, stalking, etc. in public spaces should be recognised in national legislation.
- City governments, city corporations and municipal authorities must lead public education and behaviour change campaigns to challenge sexist attitudes towards women and encourage women to report incidents of sexual abuse they witness or experience.
- Government authorities must act against sexist and discriminatory attitudes and practices against women within government institutions and agencies, especially the police.
- Governments and inter-governmental institutions must systematically collect data on sexual violence against women in public spaces to inform analysis, problem-solving, policy-making and actions.
- Deep-set cultures of victim blaming and cultural stereotyping must be acknowledged and challenged. Media standards for reporting on rape, gang rape and similar crimes must be implemented to ensure that survivors are not blamed.
- Global corporations and domestic businesses must make sure women employees in their supply chains are never harassed, can safely report incidences of abuse and violence when they occur, and receive justice. They must have clear anti-sexual harassment rules and procedures in their workplaces and work with unions or other worker associations to ensure these rules and procedures are followed.
- Public transport providers must put in place training for drivers and conductors and information for passengers on zero tolerance for sexual offences inside buses, trains and mass transport vehicles.

End impunity by punishing perpetrators of violence against women

- Law enforcement agencies must implement existing laws on crimes such as rape and sexual harassment and must allocate adequate resources to investigate and prosecute perpetrators.
• Mechanisms such as police helplines must be put in place, available and easily accessible for women to report incidents. These must also be safe to encourage women or men to report incidences they experience or witness.
• Community and other local leaders must set up systems and procedures to actively support women who want to bring perpetrators of violence against them to justice.
• Schools and universities must have clear rules, procedures, guidelines and systems for dealing with teachers and other people in authority who commit sexual violence against female students; and must have safe and accessible mechanisms for women and girls to report these crimes.
• Investigating agencies, police, courts and other parts of the criminal justice system must be trained and required to handle survivors of sexual violence with sensitivity – without blaming, intimidating or ridiculing them – to address one of the biggest barriers to women reporting sexual violence incidences they experience.
• Sexual and gender-based violence cases should be heard in special courts that enable adequate protection for survivors and witnesses.

Provide safe and gender-responsive public services

• Governments must commit to and budget for accessible, affordable and gender-sensitive public services including access to safe drinking water, safe public sanitation, street lighting, sensitive policing, public transport, housing, education and health.
• Services to prevent and redress violence against women in private and public spaces should be recognised as essential public services.
• Policing should be sensitive, efficient and recognise the levels of sexual violence facing women and girls in public and urban spaces.

Build a vision of a safe city for women

• Women’s groups, trade unions, non-government organisations, community groups, student and media associations must actively create opportunities for women, especially those living in poverty, to express their own visions of a safe city where they can live, work, learn, be mobile and thrive without fear of violence.
• City authorities must commit to and enter into constructive dialogue with women’s groups and advocates for safe cities for women to establish common visions of a city that is safe for women.
• Women’s groups, community groups, student groups and workers’ associations must be supported to undertake safety audits, safety walks and other participatory action research methods to generate data on specific areas of the city considered unsafe by women.
1. Where quotes are not specifically referenced, they are from ActionAid’s audience insight data, undertaken by The Most Jam in 2013.


5. For the purposes of this report we are looking at all forms of violence against women in urban public spaces, which is often sexual violence. The multifaceted definition of gender-based violence (GBV) was articulated in the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women adopted by the General Assembly in 1993 as any act “that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.” Sexual violence includes sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. It refers to any act, attempt, or threat of a sexual nature that results, or is likely to result in, physical, psychological and emotional harm. Sexual violence is a form of gender-based violence.

6. Sexual violence and harassment of women in public spaces is the focus for this report, but sexual violence often goes hand-in-hand with other forms of violence including physical, emotional, verbal and psychological abuse.

7. Cities where ActionAid does programme work are: Monrovia (Liberia), Phnom Phen (Cambodia), Pernambuco, São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Rio Grande do Norte (Brazil).


9. For its baseline survey, ActionAid Bangladesh conducted interviews with 50 women in areas in and around Narayanganj city, Bangladesh at locations including bus stops, bus terminals and train stations and two urban slums.

10. For example a five-year study in the United States (2008-2012) observed that 60% of assaults are not reported. See: https://www.rainn.org/get-information/statistics/reporting-rates

11. http://www.unwomen.org/~/media/Headquarters/Media/Publications/UNIFEM/EVAWkit_02_VAWandMDGs_en.pdf

12. One definition of patriarchy by the Oxford Dictionary is, “A system of society or government in which men hold the power and women are largely excluded from it.”


23. The right to the city is an idea and a slogan that was first proposed by Henri Lefebvre in his 1968 book Le Droit à la ville. Lefebvre summarises the idea as a “d’emand... [for] a transformed and renewed access to urban life”. David Harvey described it as follows: “The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights.” Harvey, D. Social Justice and the city. University of Georgia Press, Athens and London, 2009. http://bit.ly/WaGlKP. The concept has been taken up by other academics. See Harvey, D (2012) From Right to the City to the Urban Revolution, as well as social movements – for example, there is now a Right to the City charter. See: http://www.urbanreinventors.net/3/wsf.pdf and proposals for a women’s charter. See: http://www.ncr.net/articles.php?pid=1685. There have been some changes in law. For example, in 2001, Brazil’s City Statute wrote the Right to the City into federal law. ActionAid defines what the right to the city might mean in ActionAid (2013) Women and the City II.


28. ibid.


33. http://www.unwomen.org/~media/Headquarters/Newsroom/Publications/UNIFEM/EndVAW_02_VAWandMDGs_en.pdf


35. See http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/~media/44F28561B84545FE82E24E38EE825ABEA.ashx

36. ibid.

37. For its baseline survey, ActionAid Bangladesh conducted interviews with 50 women in areas in and around Narayanganj city, Bangladesh at locations including bus stops, bus terminals and train stations and two urban slums.


41. Ministry of Justice, Brazil. See: http://oglobo.globo.com/brasil/numero-de-casos-de-estupro-superou-de-homicidios-dolosos-no-pais-em-2012-10678523


43. For this baseline research, ActionAid Cambodia interviewed 385 women – 241 garment workers, 91 university students, 24 sex workers and 24 beer promoters – in Phnom Penh in 2014.

44. ActionAid Bangladesh baseline survey.

45. The End Violence Against Women coalition is a movement of NGOS, activists, survivors, individuals, service providers and organisations who are calling on the Government, public bodies and others to take concerted action to end violence against women. See: http://www.endviolenceagainstromen.org.uk/our-members

46. http://yougov.co.uk/news/2012/05/25/sexual-harassment-capital/

47. Tacoli, Cecilia (2012), Urbanisation, Gender and Urban Poverty: Paid Work and Unpaid Carework in the City. UNFPA & IIED.


50. ibid.


52. ibid.


54. ibid.


56. Sources for references in these country pages are within ActionAid policy analysis papers undertaken for each country as part of campaign planning.

57. World Bank data sets: www.worldbank.org


60. ibid.


62. Hossain, S, Dr. Shahidur Rahman, Dr. Shahadat & Mrs. Tania Haque, Safe City and Urban Space for Women and Girls: An explorative study to deepening understanding of the concept and indicators of a safe city.


77. ibid.


80. See: http://monroviacitycorporation.wordpress.com


82. ActionAid (2011) Women and the City I op cit

83. World Bank. See www.worldbank.org

84. http://www.indexmundi.com/cambodia/demographics_profile.html

85. Cambodia Development Review. April – June 2012. CDRI


88. ActionAid Cambodia baseline survey


93. Tacoli, Cecilia, op cit.
94. For example in Nepal and Cambodia, people living in cities are registered as living in the provinces making it difficult to hold government to account.
96. UN-Habitat. See http://unhabitat.org/urban-themes-2/safety/
98. McIlwaine, C, op cit
100. Chant, S & McIlwaine, C, op cit.
101. See: http://monroviacitycorporation.wordpress.com
102. ActionAid Brazil Safe City Policy Analysis.
103. ActionAid Brazil Safe City Policy Analysis.
130. ActionAid Cambodia case study.
132. ActionAid Bangladesh Baseline Survey.
134. Standing Firm Against Factory Floor Harassment; Preventing Violence Against Women Garment Workers in Bangladesh and India. Fair Wear Foundation (2013).
137. ActionAid Bangladesh Baseline Survey.
139. ActionAid Liberia policy scoping paper.
140. ActionAid Cambodia Baseline Survey.
142. Information from research commissioned by ActionAid from Onalytica, and carried out on English-language media and social media over 12 months throughout 2013.
143. Ibid.
146. ActionAid Cambodia Baseline Survey.
149. UNFPA (2010), Evaluation, Strengthening of Prosecution of SGBV Offences through support to the Sexual and Gender Based Violence Crimes Unit (SGBV CU) Monrovia.
ActionAid is a global movement of people working together to further human rights for all and defeat poverty.

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ActionAid International is incorporated in The Hague, The Netherlands. Registration number 2726419
Registration number 2004/007117/10