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FEARLESS

Women's rights organisations key to ending violence against women and girls in our rapidly urbanising world

A third of all women and girls experience violence in their lifetime – often on the streets of cities and towns. Every day women and girls face violence, intimidation and sexual harassment on their way to school, work or hospital. Women living in developing countries are even at risk when accessing vital public services, such as communal toilets, water points or public transport.

New research by ActionAid shows how widespread violence is for women and girls in urban communities.¹

The vast majority of women across the globe have experienced violence on the streets of their cities with 89% of women in Brazil, 86% in Thailand and 79% in India reporting harassment and abuse.²

As well as being a rights violation in itself, the constant threat or experience of violence prevents women and girls from moving freely about their cities. This can mean sacrificing educational and work opportunities, as well as leisure and community activities, including participating in decision-making about their urban environment.³ In this way, women and girls are prevented from enjoying their full range of human rights, including their 'right to the city'.⁴

Women from poor communities are at greater risk, often facing additional discrimination based on their caste, age, occupation, migrant status or sexual orientation.



ActionAid Somaliland and its partner WAAPO join together to demand safe cities for women.

Photo: ActionAid

One third of the developing world's urban population live in informal settlements⁵

Over half the global population now lives in urban areas. This figure is expected to rise to 66% by 2050, with nearly 90% of this growth in Asia and Africa. People are drawn to cities in search of better work and educational opportunities.⁶ Others are forced to move from rural areas due to lack of healthcare, access to land and other natural resources, or to escape conflict.

Urbanisation is happening fastest in many developing countries, leading to the rapid growth of informal settlements. These are typically characterised by cramped housing, dimly lit streets, lack of water and sanitation, poor transport links, and inadequate policing.

People living in these settlements have little, if any, voice in decision-making about the cities in which they live, with women particularly excluded. These huge gaps in public services and government accountability leave women and girls at increased risk of violence.

ActionAid Safe Cities programmes and campaigns

ActionAid is part of a global movement calling for safe cities for women and girls.

We have Safe Cities programmes and campaigns in 17 countries around the world, working with women's rights organisations and movements to empower women and girls and their communities to demand an end to violence in public spaces.

The 17 countries are: Brazil, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Ethiopia, Senegal, Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Liberia, Vietnam, Nepal, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Sweden, UK, Australia and Ireland.

- In São Paulo, a woman is assaulted in a public space every 15 seconds. To feel safer women and girls reported changing the way they dressed, their behaviour and their movements. For instance, 97% of women reported always or sometimes changing their route to avoid harassment and violence.⁷
- In South Africa, only 12% of women and girls interviewed by ActionAid felt safe from verbal and physical abuse in their neighbourhoods and 80% of women had experienced some form of abuse in the past year.⁸
- Some 77% of women in Cambodia experienced verbal abuse or sexual remarks, and 25% reported experiencing physical abuse.⁹
- In Zimbabwe, 43% of women reported physical abuse and 22% sexual harassment in their communities.¹⁰
- In Bangladesh, 87% of women said they face harassment in bus terminals and train stations, 80% by the roadside, and 69% outside their schools and colleges.
- In London, two thirds of women have reported being sexually harassed in public places, including the streets and the transport system, and around 40% have experienced unwanted sexual contact.¹¹

Cultures of impunity prevail

Around the world, violence against women and girls is normalised and women and girls are often blamed for the violence perpetrated against them.

Much violence goes unreported because of such stigma, as well as a lack of confidence in the police and criminal justice system.

For example:

- In Nepal, 90% of women and girls ActionAid interviewed had experienced sexual harassment in a public space, yet only 11% had ever reported it to the police.¹²
- In Brazil, 84% of women interviewed reported having been sexually harassed by the police.

Laws and policies are often poorly implemented or inadequate. For instance, World Bank data shows that only 18 out of 173 countries have specific legislation addressing sexual harassment in public places. All of this fuels a culture of impunity for perpetrators.¹³

Women's rights organisations are the key to ending violence

Research shows that women's rights organisations are the single most important factor in ending violence against women and girls in terms of ensuring governments implement progressive policies.¹⁴ They also help to hold governments to account for their commitments and serve to increase women's voices in decision-making. This includes demanding gender-responsive public services¹⁵ – whether public transport, water and sanitation, or policing – that address the needs and rights of all women and girls.

Women's rights organisations provide important frontline services to survivors of violence, including life-saving shelters and legal support. By standing up for survivors of gender-based violence, women's rights organisations challenge the discriminatory attitudes which underpin violence against women.

Yet women's rights organisations are chronically underfunded, receiving just less than 1% of total UK aid for gender equality.¹⁶

On international Safe Cities for Women Day, ActionAid is calling on the UK government to provide urgent funding for women's rights organisations, so that no woman need face violence in the streets of her city.

1. Includes research from May 2016 polling survey and experiences of over 3,000 women and girls living in urban communities in Brazil, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Liberia, Nepal, South Africa and Zimbabwe collected in 2014.
2. In a YouGov poll carried out May 2016 ActionAid surveyed 2,500 women aged 16 and over in major cities across Brazil, India, Thailand and the UK.
3. ActionAid (2015) Women and the City III: a summary of baseline data on women's experience of violence in seven countries. Pp. 24.
4. ActionAid (2013) Women in the City II: combating violence against women and girls in urban public spaces – the role of public services. Pp 5.
5. UN Habitat 2014,2.
6. UN ESA (2014) World Urbanisation Prospects, [2014 revision] Pp.1.
7. ActionAid (2013) Women in the City II: combating violence against women and girls in urban public spaces – the role of public services. Pp .12.
8. Interviewed carried out in 2014. Full details available in: ActionAid (2013) Women in the City II: Combating violence against women and girls in urban public spaces – the role of public services. Pp.8.
9. ActionAid (2015) Women and the City III: a summary of baseline data on women's

- experience of violence in seven countries. Pp. 17.
10. ActionAid (2015) Women and the City III: a summary of baseline data on women's experience of violence in seven countries. Pp. 17.
11. End Violence Against Women Coalition and Imkaan (2016) Ending violence against women and girls in London: questions for candidates, London elections 5th May 2016
12. ActionAid (2015) Women and the City III: a summary of baseline data on women's experience of violence in seven countries. Pp. 20.
13. World Bank (2016) Women, Business and the Law 2016. Pp.29.
14. Htun, M & Laurel Weldon, S (2012) The civic origins of progressive policy change: combating violence against women in global perspective, 1975-2005. American Political Science Review, 106. Pp 548-569.
15. Gender responsive public services are public services that take into account and address practical and strategic needs of men and women.
16. New data from the OECD (released 8.3.16) shows that UK has committed a total of US\$31 million on average per year in direct support to women's equality organisations and institutions. This is just less than 1% of its gender focused budget, but a substantial increase from the last year (2012-2013).

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 May 2016



**Safe
Cities
For
Women**

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