

Safer Cities, Gender Mainstreaming, and Human Rights

Carolyn Whitzman. Lecturer in Urban Planning, Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning, University of Melbourne, Australia

Let me begin by telling a story that was told to me, about a community safety worker in a small Canadian town. The local government was hearing persistent concerns about groups of young people hanging out in a bus station, engaging in vandalism and accused of being intimidating to other citizens using the area. As part of the process of responding to these concerns, community organizations organized a series of recreational events in a nearby park, during which they asked young people what was going on from their perspective. They tried to attract young women as well as young men to the events. In the course of a conversation with a young aboriginal woman, the worker discovered that this young woman's daily trip to town was fraught with incidents of harassment and threats of racist and gender-based violence (this story is repeated in National Crime Prevention Strategy 2004).

Most of what is written about crime prevention and community safety still focuses on the 'presenting problem': the stories about problematic people like the one that the local government was hearing, as well as the usual response to the stories, which is to attempt to control those people. Don Mitchell, in his recent book *The Right to the City*, cites Mike Davis in arguing that "the universal consequence of this crusade to secure the city is the destruction of any truly democratic space" (Mitchell 2003: preface, citing Davis 1992: 226). In other words, community safety and crime prevention is theorized as a zero sum game, whereby rights of one group (young people looking for public space to gather together) must be lost in order to satisfy the safety concerns of another, presumably more powerful, group (adults complaining about rowdy youth). Relatively hidden safety concerns like those expressed by that young Aboriginal woman rarely get heard within this discourse. Remarkably little has been written about how this young woman's daily commute might be made safer, a question that has little to do with the 'problem' of young people loitering in public space, and much more to do with broader societal change. There is the need to turn more attention to initiatives that seek to create safer space which might also be democratic and inclusive (Bondi and Rose 2003).

From the 1970s onwards, feminist initiatives to make violence a public issue, and to make both public and private spaces safer, have included:

- Public education campaigns, ranging from Take Back the Night Marches to campaigns on wife assault;
- New services by and for women, including refuges, rape crisis centres, and self-defense courses;
- Advocacy at all levels of government and internationally, especially in the wake of fourth United Nations World Conference in Beijing in 1995, which called on governments to develop *gender mainstreaming* – the incorporation of gender considerations in all areas of public policy (Smaoun 2000, Shaw 2002).

In Canada, an organization called *Femmes et Villes* (Women and the City) International – FVI - developed out of four local projects working in the late 1990s: the Women's Action Coalition on Urban Safety in Montreal, the Women's Action Centre Against Violence in Ottawa, the Safe City Committee in Toronto, and the Cowichan Safer Futures Programme in rural British Columbia. These four organizations were soon joined by the International Centre for the Prevention of Crime, the UN Safer Cities Programme, and the Huairou Commission on Women, Homes, and Community. With assistance from Canadian and international funders, FVI organized the first International Seminar on Women's Safety, which took place in Montreal in May 2002. In 2004, FVI organized the Women's Safety Awards, an attempt to identify and disseminate good practices. Over 100 gender-conscious and locally-based violence prevention initiatives applied to the Awards process, and 12 Canadian and 10 international good practices were identified by a jury made up of political, research, and community representatives. The Canadian good practices were showcased at the annual national meeting of local politicians, and the international good practices will be highlighted at both the World Urban Forum in Barcelona in September 2004, and the Second International Seminar on Safety for Women and Girls, to take place in Bogota in November 2004.

Why do these initiatives focus on gender? Simply because the right to a safe city must recognize that:

- In 48 population-based surveys around the world, between 10 and 69 per cent of women reported being physically assaulted by an intimate male partner at some point in their lives (World Health Organization 2002). A recent study in the state of Victoria, Australia, has calculated that intimate partner violence is the leading contributor to death, disability, and illness in women aged 15 to 44, being responsible for more of the disease burden than many well-known risk factors such as high blood pressure, smoking and obesity (VicHealth 2004);

- Sexual violence, ranging from rape within marriage or dating relationships; to rape by strangers; systemic rape during armed conflict; harassment and threats of sexual violence; sexual abuse of children, mentally or physically disabled people; forced marriage; denial of the right to use contraception; forced abortion; and forced prostitution and trafficking of people for the purpose of sexual exploitation, is endemic in many societies, and prevalent throughout all societies (World Health Organization 2002);

- This violence, taking place within both the public and the private realms, has a huge although often hidden impact on use of urban space, resources, and services (Smaoun 2000).

The World Health Organization has developed a useful typology of violence (2002: 7). Violence can be physical, sexual, psychological, or based in deprivation or neglect. It can be self-directed (suicidal or self-destructive behavior), interpersonal (both within families/relationships and within communities), and collective (social, economic, and political violence). Recognizing that there are strong correlations between these forms of violence, for instance that people who are abused and neglected as children often grow up to be abusive or self-destructive as well, is a good first step. But there is also scope for a wide range of locally based activities that can combat violence, in cities and smaller communities, and thus create safer space, by focusing on the needs and ideas of those who are most vulnerable.

A parallel typology for the process of creating safer, more democratic and inclusive spaces is suggested through some of the good practices identified through the Women's Safety Awards:

The first, and most obvious in terms of local government powers, is **promoting safety through the improvement of public space and services**. The international adoption of the Women's Safety Audit, developed in Toronto in the late 1980s, is an interesting case in point. In Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, where a victimization survey indicated that 71% of women had been physically abused, 45% of women sexually abused, and 79% economically abused (ie., had their money regularly stolen by partners or strangers), the Safer Cities Program organized women to identify abandoned buildings and streets blocked with detritus to municipal authorities. The women also suggested ways that women might be employed to work on waste collection, which is presently a source of infectious disease (Mtani 2002). In a similar project in Durban, South Africa, the Kwa Zulu Natal Network on Violence Against Women envisioned safety audits as a wedge to open up dialogue with local government on other issues of concern, including hiring women to carry out infrastructural improvements. An equivalent process took place in Bristol, London, and Manchester, where the Women's Design Service, working with local governments, women's advocacy groups, and redevelopment organizations in those three British cities, focused on organizing Black and minority ethnic, disabled, and older women to identify unsafe places and how they could be improved through local initiatives. In Petrozavodsk, Russia, as part of the Building a Safe City Together program, neighbourhood committees to repair housing and improve public spaces have led to the development of a helpline and shelter for battered women.

The second activity is **creating spaces of refuge, healing, and empowerment**. These involve not only shelters and other emergency services for survivors of violence, but also meeting more long-term health, human rights, employment, and mental/spiritual needs. Examples include the RESPECT Project in Northern Ontario, Canada, where a coalition of groups, including Aboriginal, Metis, francophone, police, women's, agencies serving people with disabilities, community centres, are working to create new services for especially at-risk women and girls. Mother-daughter retreats emphasize the central ethical and spiritual roles for Aboriginal women, while the legal information workshops include large print, simple language information in easy to photocopy form, along with speakers' notes to allow front line agencies to deliver workshops. The City of La Paz, Bolivia, has a project called Defense, Safety, and Women's Right to Citizenship, which works with local indigenous and farming communities to provide women with information on legal rights on domestic violence and

citizenship, improving literacy, and empowering women to get involved in local governance. In Tamil Nadu, India, the EKTA Training and Resource Centre for Women and Youth provides a regional set of safety-promoting resources, including public education on violence against women, leadership development, self-help, advocacy, public education on gender mainstreaming of issues at the local government level, and individual counselling. In Fredericton, Canada, the local Sexual Assault Centre developed a self-defence and assertiveness training kit, aimed at women living in shelters for battered women, sexual assault centres, and centres for women who have been in conflict with the law. The kit emphasizes physical self-defence only as a last resort, and instead focuses on increasing awareness, encouraging assertiveness, and helping girls and young women recognize that they are worth the effort to defend themselves and resist violence. The Return to Roots Foundation runs similar courses for women and men in Johannesburg, South Africa, at workplaces, in schools, and at urban and rural squatter camps. Women are educated in awareness, assertiveness, and the right to say no, while men and boys are taught to respect women and teach their sons the same.

The third type of process is **developing spaces of discursive freedom**. Although all of the examples cited above work to make hidden injustices more visible, these initiatives focus on individual and community empowerment through speaking out. In Toronto, where half of the residents were born outside Canada, over 80 volunteers working with the Working Women's Community Centre distribute information on women abuse in a dozen languages, at access points that include doctor's offices, hair salons, and laundromats. In Montreal, Canada's second largest city, a women's group called *Écho des femmes de la Petite Patrie* got local businesses to display posters showing unsafe spaces in a neighbourhood, along with ideas for improvement and municipal phone numbers. In Kampala, Uganda, the Raising Voices project works with police, courts, local government, religious leaders (both Muslim and Christian), health care providers and media to provide learning materials, training, advocacy, public education and community development around violence against women. Their Learning Centre is presently training leaders from other African cities. The Ministry of Women and Children Affairs in the Volta Region of Ghana is using a variety of innovative approaches, including working through female elders called Queen Mothers, drumming in rural markets, and public art to develop community education around violence prevention.

Although these initiatives are diverse in terms of their emphasis, approach and leadership, they share a commitment to the right to a safe city. By incorporating a gender analysis, they recognize that women and men often have very different definitions of 'the problem' and 'what can be done about the problem'. By empowering women in a variety of ways, they seek to secure parts of the city, while increasing the amount and quality of democratic space for everyone. Their contribution to good urban governance (Beall 2001) and better cities deserves to be better recognized and understood.

References

Information on the good practices cited above will be available on the FVI website (www.femmesetvilles.org) by the end of 2004. Status of Women Canada funded the Women's Safety Awards.

Beall, Jo. 2001. *Local Governments Working for Gender Equality: a collection of cases*. The Hague, Netherlands: International Union of Local Authorities (IULA).

Bondi, Liz and Damaris Rose. 2003. *Constructing Gender, Constructing the Urban: a review of Anglo-American feminist urban geography*, Gender, Place and Culture 10(3), 229-242.

Davis, Mike. 1992. *City of Quartz: excavating the future in Los Angeles*. New York: Vintage Books.

Mitchell, Don. 2003. *The Right to the City: social justice and the fight for public space*. New York: Guilford Press.

Mtani, Anna. 2002. *Safety Planning and Design from 'the women's perspective': the case of Manzese, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania*. Paper presented to 1st International Seminar on Women's Safety- Making the Links. Can be downloaded from www.femmesetvilles.org

National Crime Prevention Strategy. 2004. *Crime Prevention and Gender Mainstreaming: a tool for engendering comprehensive community safety initiatives*. Ottawa, Canada: Department of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness.

Shaw, Margaret. 2002. *Gender and Crime Prevention*. Montreal: International Centre for the Prevention of Crime. Can be downloaded from www.crime-prevention-intl.org

Smaoun, Soraya. 2000. *Violence Against Women in Urban Areas: an analysis of the problem from a gender perspective*. Nairobi: UNCHS Urban Management Programme working paper series 17.

VicHealth (Victorian Health Promotion Foundation). 2004. *The Health Costs of Violence: measuring the burden of disease caused by intimate partner violence*. Melbourne: Department of Human Services. Can be downloaded from www.vichealth.vic.gov.au

World Health Organization. 2002. *World Report on Violence and Health*. Geneva: WHO.