

Sharing ways to women-friendly urban environments

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PLEASE smooth your skirt behind you.”

Sage advice, if it is from your grandmother; from your city council, perhaps not so much.

The reminder was splashed around subway stations in Seoul to warn women against Peeping Toms who use their smartphones to film up women's skirts as they go up the escalators.

Aimed at protecting women from sexual violence, the public service announcement, however, does more harm than good as it perpetuates gender stereotype, says Seoul Foundation of Women and Family (SFWF) manager Kihyun Mun.

“It implies that the victims themselves are the cause of sexual assault and abuse. It implies that the way victims dress, behave, and respond instigates sex-related crimes.”

Unfortunately, that PSA is just one of many in Seoul where gender stereotype and sexual discrimination is rife.

It prompted SFWF, with the support of the Seoul Metropolitan Government, to start assessing all published materials for the public through gender lens.

The SFWF has highlighted up to 2,200 examples of gender stereotypes in public relation materials and advertisements around the

city in its effort to push the Seoul municipal government to reinforce more positive representations of women in the public sphere, says Mun.

Since Seoul embarked on its Women-Friendly City Project in 2007, various projects have been initiated to address women's concerns and improve their everyday situations, from safety and transport facilities to public toilets and the workplace, Mun says.

But there is still a lack of respect and consideration for women there, while prevalent gender-based prejudices are blocking the progress of gender equality.

The gender impact analysis of PR materials and advertisements is an initiative to change the deep-set prejudices and reduce the discrimination women face in Seoul.

This issue is prevalent in many cities around the world, says Mun, “and we believe our initiative to address it is also easily transferable worldwide”.

To share their women-friendly city initiatives, SFWF has partnered with Women Transforming Cities International Society (WTC) from Vancouver and Huairou Commission, based in New York, to build an online resource of wise practices.

Launched at the recent World Urban Forum (WUF 9) in Kuala Lumpur, the Women-Friendly Cities Challenge virtual library project aims to provide a platform for

women to share knowledge and inspire innovative practices to address gender complexities.

“Wise practices here are locally-appropriate actions, tools, principles or decisions that contribute to the development of women-friendly cities.

By collecting these wise practices we also hope to improve networking and collaboration – and challenge ourselves to make cities more equitable, inclusive and sustainable,” says WTC board member Celene Fung, who co-developed the online library.

A women-friendly city has been described as one where women's perspectives are central to the design process, and where women can safely access services such as healthcare, public transport, social services, and education with the same ease and opportunity as men.

“Women have historically been excluded from city building and, despite progress in many areas, there are still significant gender gaps and inequalities,” Fung notes.

“Making a women-friendly city is not to exclude others but to make the city more inclusive.

“Using a gendered-intersectional lens can eliminate the gaps and ensure that all, including young children and other vulnerable groups like the disabled and migrant community, are able to fully participate in the life and economy of the city.”

Derived from international

agreements such as the New Urban Agenda, the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the wise practices are divided into 16 categories including Governance/Leadership, Safety, Housing/Land Rights, Health, Transportation, Environment/Resilience, Indigenous Peoples, Arts/Media/Culture and Economic Security.

“The living library can also be used as an evaluation tool for cities with information on measurement of outcomes and lessons learned.

“We hope to get submissions of wise practices from different sectors such as governments, NGOs, academia, corporations and grassroot organisations,” says Dr Joy Masuhara, also a WTC board member.

Sri H. Sofjan, senior programme administrator and strategist with Huairou Commission, a coalition of global women's grassroots organisations, says cities have a lot to learn from grassroot communities, even those from rural areas.

“Women in many villages keep a seed library to ensure food security during the drought season.

“In Quezon City, Philippines, a group called Damayan ng Maralitang has a tool library where they keep tools so that women can do their own repairs at home.

“They are small things but go a long way to give women independ-

ence and security.”

Dr Masuhara tells of a collective of women architects and urban planners in Barcelona called Col. lectiu Punt 6 that has developed a manual to equip women with the skills to get involved in city design and planning.

Malaysia also has many wise practices that can be shared, she adds.

One is the women-only coaches on commuter trains introduced by KTM Berhad in 2010 after it received complaints on sexual harassment during peak hours.

Last week, KTMB and the Land Public Transport Commission launched extra patrol operations and awareness campaigns following complaints from women about harassment from male passengers who refuse to move out of the women coaches.

A regional organisation championing sexual and reproductive health rights based in Malaysia, Asian-Pacific Resources and Research Centre for Women, is developing a digital knowledge and sharing centre to reach a wider group of women in the region.

“There are countless wise practices around the world to make their cities women-friendly and many can be adopted and adapted to fit your city.

“If a city is female-friendly, it is friendly for everybody. And when women are happy, everyone is happy,” Mun notes.