

# OPINION

TECH-DRIVEN

## MAKING CITIES SAFE FOR WOMEN

Sustainable urban development will remain elusive without integrating women and girls' safety, comfort, convenience and affordability in urban transport, writes **MANIPADMA JENA**

WHEN Shiba Kurian alighted from Chennai's city train, the evening office-returning crowd was thick and jostling. Having booked a ride-hail cab, she walked out to the entrance. Instead of the cab for which she had to wait an hour, ribald comments and derisive laughter came her way from a group of roadside Romeos.

Kurian, a journalist, did not take it lying down. She went the next day to the train station and pinned it an unsafe place in her GPS-enabled mobile application called Safetipin. Henceforth, every time women using this smartphone application are around this station, it would ping them an alert.

"Safety is a social issue. A city becomes safe not so much by policing and closed-circuit television (CCTV), but by people especially women being able to use all public places without fear, which then empowers them by facilitating access to social and economic opportunities," Kalpana Viswanath, who co-founded the Safetipin application told IPS at the ninth session of the **World Urban Forum** that ended recently in Kuala Lumpur.

Cities face unprecedented demographic, environmental, economic, social and spatial challenges, with six out of every ten people in the world expected to reside in urban areas by 2030. According to UN-Habitat, more than 90 per cent of this growth will take place in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean. For the first time in history, more than half the world's population now lives in cities. Given this growth, urban areas are central to economic opportunities and growth and women cannot be left out of it.

But, today, women and girls across many countries find it challenging to move out safely in cities and realise their potential.

A participatory study by global NGO Plan International for its programme "Because I am a Girl" involving more than 1,000 adolescent girls from five cities across the world reveals that fear of sexual violence is creating "no-go areas" for girls.

The Safetipin mobile application, which is free, has been downloaded 85,000 times across 20 countries, most of it in Indian cities, Manila, Nairobi, Jakarta and Bogota.

Easy to use, it has a set of nine parameters that represents how safe a person feels after dark and helps users audit public spaces like Kurian did.

Parameters include how lighted or not a place is and how open or hemmed in and are objects and people clearly visible. The fourth parameter is a check on people being around or is it deserted; are other women using the space and if a security guard or police is around. The next parameter checks if public transport is readily available. But the most important of all is how the user feels about the place.

The application also directs users to the safest route evaluated on the basis of users' crowd-sourced data. It displays colour-coded alternate routes and once a route is chosen a Google map opens up. Pick-a-pic is another feature showing two images side by side for users to decide which to go with. If the users are in a new or unsafe place, an alert notification pops up on the screen.

Besides the crowd-sourced data from users, Safetipin integrates a second application that captures night photographs of a city, mounted on a vehicle. These real-time photographs, crowd-sourced data and Google's big data analysed together, present robust, confirmative technical data that is helping city governments to take remedial action for unsafe spots.



Mayors and activists at the World Urban Forum 9 placing their signature on a placard supporting safer cities for adolescent girls by 2030. PIC COURTESY OF IPS

In Delhi, the data and photographs identified 7,800 dark public places that the government had to take note of and fix street lights. In Bogota, Safetipin in partnership with the municipality mapped the 230km of bicycle road. Based on the findings, CCTV cameras, bicycle docks and lights were fixed on the track to improve women bikers' safety.

"Each month, five million people move to cities in developing countries. By 2030 nearly 1.5 billion adolescent girls will live in cities, but too often they are under-represented in urban safety policies," according to Plan International.

"Girls in cities contend with both increased risks and increased opportunities. They face sexual harassment, exploitation and insecurity, yet they are also more likely to be educated, politically active and less likely to be married at an early age," Alana Livesey, Plan's global manager for its "Safe Cities for Girls" programme told IPS at the **WUF9**.

Using innovative and participatory tools, Plan's programme has been able to increase girls' safety and inclusion in cities.

In Hanoi, a third of adolescent girls in the Plan International survey said they could not access emergency service, notably the police.

Lan and Linh (last names not

mentioned for protective reasons) two of the young leaders from Hanoi attending the Kuala Lumpur Forum said they undertook group walks at night in dark areas to map risks and raise community awareness about girls' right to safe public spaces.

"Nearly 10,000 girls use public buses every day in Hanoi," 13-year-old Lin told IPS.

They have distributed leaflets and comic books to more than 8,000 public transport drivers and ticketing staff to drive home the message that safety of girls is their responsibility too. The girls' campaign has succeeded in getting the government to fix cameras in buses and issue official guidelines against over-crowding.

While there is momentum in addressing women's safety in public transport in India (and other developing countries), "urban transport investments are largely gender blind, with a limited understanding of the interrelationships between gender and transport inequities," a policy brief by the New-York based Institute for Transportation and Development Policy said.

"Sustainable urban development will remain elusive without integrating women and girls' safety, comfort, convenience and affordability in urban transport," it cautions. **IPS**

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