

## SAFE AND INCLUSIVE CITIES

# POVERTY, INEQUALITY AND VIOLENCE IN INDIAN CITIES: TOWARDS INCLUSIVE POLICIES AND PLANNING

Women's safety in cities has become an important issue, especially in the light of the massive mobilisation of public opinion seen after the unfortunate gangrape of a young woman in 2012 in Delhi. It is argued that a pervasive fear of sexual harassment/assault among women not only restricts their mobility, but it also places constraints on their ability to make choices related to residence, employment and leisure. Media reports and previous research corroborate that women are most susceptible to harassment while walking, cycling or using public/intermediate public transport. Other researchers have pointed out the enabling effects of access to transport in poverty alleviation through broadening of opportunities available to women as a result of increased accessibility. Women in Indian cities have been shown to be more dependent on non-private modes of transport when compared to men. The inefficiency and unreliability of public transport systems has led to the proliferation of Intermediate Public Transport (IPT) in Indian cities. Autorickshaws (that also work as shared auto-rickshaws), six-seaters, trekkers and other such vehicles form the bulk of the IPT. In many cities where the public transport system still operates to some degree, private contractors have been engaged by the state to operate the buses. The state's withdrawal from public transport erodes the confidence of women who also happen to be captive users of these modes. Also, given the inefficiency and inadequacy of the public transport system, women are forced to spend a lot of time waiting at the bus stops. Shared autorickshaws and other IPT modes are also highly unregulated and operate at will. Together, these factors increase women's exposure to conditions favourable for stalking, eve-teasing and other forms of harassment.

This study on women's safety in transport is based on Guwahati. Located on the banks of the River Brahmaputra and surrounded by hills, Guwahati is Assam's primate city. Major activities are concentrated in the core city where people travel to for employment opportunities. Therefore, as the Ministry of Urban Development's (MoUD's) 2008 study shows, average trip lengths are high (4.14 kilometres) and trip rates are low (0.98) when compared to other cities with a population above one-million. The same study rates Guwahati as a poor performer with regards to walkability (0.39) and safety index (0.03) owing to the absence of separate lanes for slow and fast moving vehicles. The city has four forms of public transport and IPT; city buses, trekkers, auto-rickshaws and tricycle rickshaws.

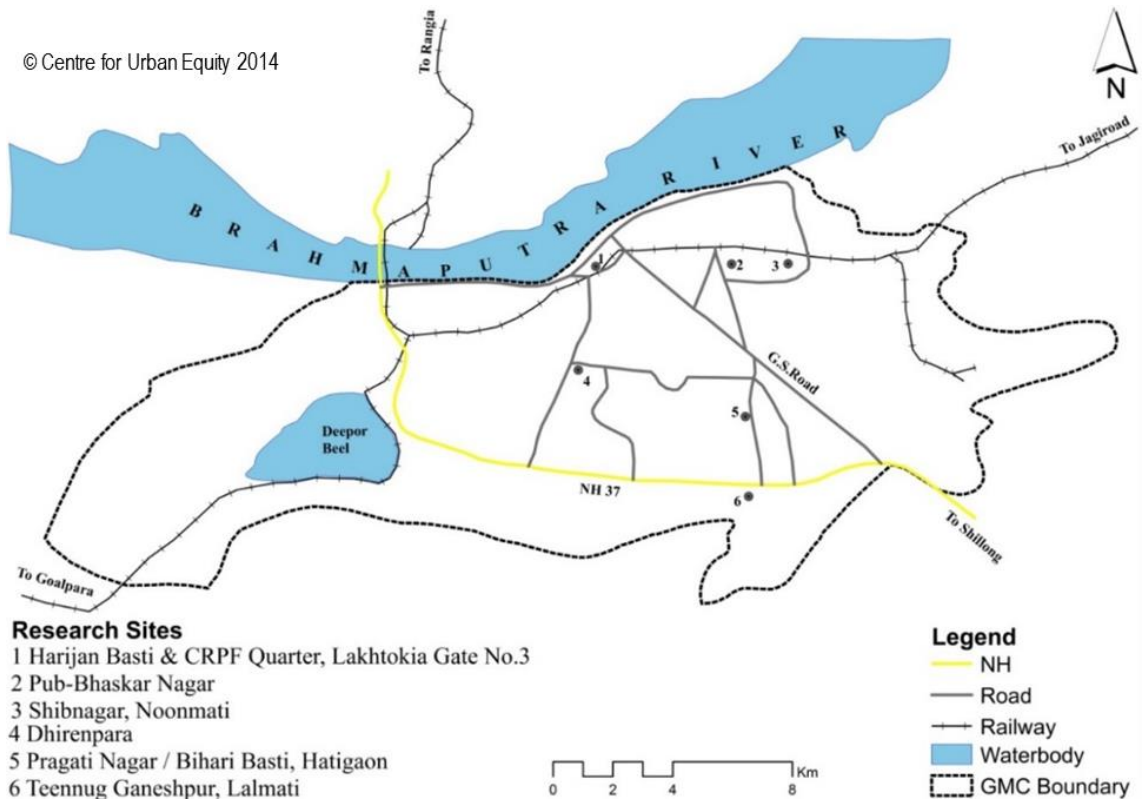
## GUWAHATI POLICY BRIEF 1

### WOMEN'S SAFETY AND TRANSPORT

The research project "Poverty, Inequality and Violence: Towards Inclusive Policies and Planning" undertaken by the Centre for Urban Equity (CUE), CEPT University, and Institute for Human Development (IHD) is one of 15 projects awarded a grant by International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada and Department of International Development (DFID), UK, under the global programme Safe and Inclusive Cities (SAIC) (2012-16). The project analyzes the pathways through which exclusionary urban planning and governance leads to different types of violence on the poor and by the poor in Indian cities. The research focuses on four cities: Ahmedabad and Guwahati by the Centre for Urban Equity and Patna and Delhi by the Institute for Human Development.

In Guwahati, the primate city of Assam state in north-east India, CUE's research focuses on deprivations arising out of state's variable and inadequate levels of governance in various sectors. Inconsistent governance of hill lands has left the original tribal inhabitants disenfranchised and unable to access basic services like water supply. The state's partial retreat from the governance of urban markets has led to the exploitation of street vendors by lessees and other non-state actors often resulting in conflicts. The large demand-supply gap in the provision of public transport services in combination with several infrastructure and behavioural issues has led to the compromising of women's safety while travelling. Not only does this lead to conflict but it also deprives them of opportunities, thereby challenging their right to the city.

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Map showing research sites in Guwahati

The modal share, as per MoUD's 2008 study is the following: two-wheelers (20%), car (18%), auto-rickshaw (12%), public transport (which includes trekkers) (8%), walk (21%) and cycle (21%) according to the report cited above. With regards to public transport, the city has around 1,450 buses, of which 1,200 are privately operated and 250 by the Assam State Transport Corporation (ASTC). Trekkers (which are IPT) with a seating capacity of 10-12, also provide transport facilities along major roads in the city. They ply on pre-decided numbered routes and act as a *de facto* public transport while supplementing the city-bus system. Their fares are higher than that of city buses but in the absence of a reliable public transport system, they are still popular among commuters. Shared auto-rickshaws are limited to a few routes. Auto-rickshaws and cycle-rickshaws are available from major locations and provide mobility around the city and between localities. The city has many settlements on hills, which are largely inaccessible by motorized vehicles. People must walk to access these settlements.

This research focussed on safety of low-income women and female students in the city of Guwahati and is an extension of prior work done by North-East Network (NEN) on gender safety in Guwahati. As the focus was on urban poor, mostly poverty pockets (except Central Reserve Police Force Quarter in Lakhtokia, adjacent to Harijan Basti) were selected for this research. For this purpose, large number of settlements were visited to understand their social and economic composition and mobility challenges faced by women.

After the localities were selected, land use, activities and infrastructure were mapped in detail to document their characteristics. This was followed by focussed group discussions in the localities which revealed the nature of women's mobility in Guwahati.

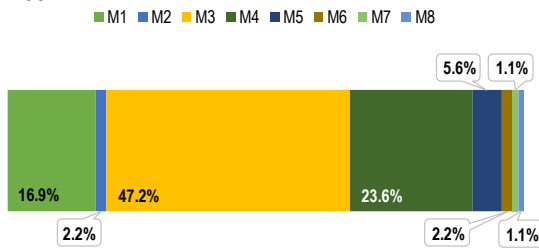


Trekkers operating in Guwahati

### WOMEN'S MOBILITY IN GUWAHATI:

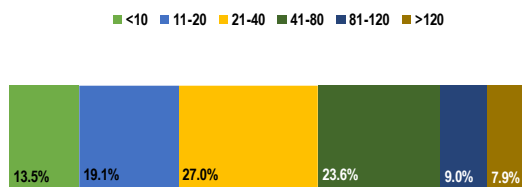
Three-fifths of women in our study stated work as the purpose of their trip, followed by one-fifth stating study as the purpose of the trip. Only 9% each reported shopping and accompanying children to and from school as trip purposes. Education up to elementary level was fulfilled by local public and private schools; school-going girls merely walked to their neighbourhood schools. The homemakers' trips were limited to shopping and accompanying their children to and from school. A majority (47.2%) of the participants were found to be walking to work.

They could not afford spending on commuting between the many houses they must visit in a day. Even if they were to spend INR 10 on travel daily, it would add up to INR 300 per month, a significant proportion of the INR 1,800 to INR 2,000 they managed to save every month. Women who did not walk for various reasons, tend to opt for a city-bus or trekker. Women preferred trekkers where frequencies of buses were low, such as on the NH-37 highway and other peripheral roads. Women in our study locations of Dhirenpara and Lalmati were frequent users of trekkers whereas those in Bhaskar Nagar, Shibnagar and Lakhtokia women often used city-bus service. Trekkers were less preferred owing to their charging higher fares than buses and women having to sit close to men commuters. Most women travelled long distances to work, often travelling more than 7 kms per day which is high when compared to the average trip length of 4.1 kilometres in Guwahati. A majority of them travelled between 21 to 80 kms per week.



M1: Walk + Bus M2: Walk + Bus + Cycle rickshaw M3: Walk  
M4: Walk + T rekker M5: Walk + Bus + T rekker M6: Walk + Shared autorickshaw  
M7: Walk + Bus + Trekker + Cycle Rickshaw M8: Walk + Cycle Rickshaw

Mode share of participants in the research



Distance travelled (km per week) by participants

### WOMEN'S SAFETY IN INTRA-CITY TRAVEL:

Crimes against women in Guwahati as reported by CID have increased manifold from 43 cases in 1980 to 484 in 2011. Our respondents reported that most incidents occurred when they walked on the streets. These included remarks on dressing style, body parts and soliciting for sexual favours. Family men were perceived to be the biggest threats. In the monsoon season, when the roads got slushy, women were forced to walk on footpaths (as against the carriageway) where they faced harassment especially in front of gendered spaces such as pan shops. School-going girls among the participants revealed that they faced teasing and whistling boys on their way to and from school on a daily basis.

However, women irrespective of age and marital status desisted from reporting these incidents at home as they feared that it would curtail their already limited mobility.

The common thread between the experiences narrated by the women - students, young and old Assamese women, immigrant daily wage labour - is that not only were they being subjected to physical harassment on a near daily basis, but the lasting impression of unhelpful bystanders and their inability to oppose/ report such incidents was pushing them to retreat from public spaces altogether.

*"The old lady seems to have been very beautiful in her youth. Had I met her earlier...would've picked her up."*

In a discussion at Bhaskar Nagar, women participants said that the fear of having to deal with misbehaving men on streets affected them more than several other problems like the lack of streetlights, floods and bad roads. The fear of retaliatory violence that prevented them from seeking recourse (legal/police/family) had started to affect their self-confidence. Over the course of several focus group discussions, the women reported issues which can be grouped under urban planning, infrastructure, transport based issues and behavioural issues.



Encroached footpaths in Fancy Bazar, Guwahati

### PLANNING ISSUES LEADING TO HARASSMENT:

Poor road condition and flash floods: During the rains, the roads became muddy and difficult to use owing to the lack of storm water drainage system. Shibnagar, Bihari Basti and Bhaskar Nagar experienced floods on an annual basis. Roads became muddy and slippery, making it difficult for women to step out of their homes. This had negative outcomes with regard to their work and education. Even on hills where no water logging occurs, it became very difficult to walk on *kutchra* roads having steep slope.





Guwahati experiences massive floods in the monsoons  
 Photo Courtesy: The Telegraph 25.07.2014

Irregular trips and conflicts over change: A very common problem reported by poor women was that conductors did not return the change promptly. Domestic workers and daily wage workers found themselves more vulnerable in situations like these; often facing abuse when they demanded their money. Participants reported that the nature of the conductor's response was often determined by the class the passenger appeared to belong to. Some trekkers misled passengers by claiming to go up to a certain point but abandoning the trip midway. This imposed economic and time costs on commuters.

Overcrowded buses owing to low frequency: Overcrowded buses and trekkers presented opportunities for some men to stand close to women and indulge in unnecessary pushing, shoving and rubbing (their private parts) against female bodies. Matters escalated when women protested and the perpetrator did not take responsibility, sometimes resulting in violence. In such cases, bus conductors would often ask the victims to disembark saying,

*"This is a public transport, if you have so many problems then you should travel by rickshaw or a private car."*

Absence of street lights: Since India has uniform time zone across the country despite the geographical spread, the sun sets early in this part of the country. In the absence of street lights, women preferred to not be in public after dark and returned home before dusk out of fear of harassment. In Bhaskar Nagar, participants revealed that men and boys drank in the dark corners of the street and harassed women.

Since there are no side doors in trekkers, there was the additional risk of falling down while travelling. As women avoided crowded buses, they were forced to wait for a long time. They also tried to start their journey early in the morning so that they could get into a less crowded bus. This significantly increased the length of their work day. Few participants claimed to have bought scooters to avoid having to face day-to-day problems while waiting for or travelling on buses/trekkers. This imposed additional economic costs on the women.

Reckless driving of buses and trekkers: Since crowded buses and trekkers ran at high speeds on ill-maintained roads, it was uncomfortable for women travelling on these modes. Many accidents involving pedestrians crossing the streets were also reported.

**BEHAVIOURAL ISSUES:**

Availability of alcohol and drugs: In almost every discussion, participants pointed out the presence of drunk men on the streets as a major threat. There were many illegal liquor dens on the way to Shibnagar, Lalmati, Dhirenpara and Bihari Basti. The large numbers of men congregating at these dens encouraged misbehaviour. In poor localities, men could be seen engaging in activities like consumption of dandruff, drugs and gambling besides drinking.



Ill-lit streets discourage women from being on streets

As a result, women preferred taking longer and time-consuming routes having streetlights to avoid areas frequented by drunkards. This contributed to their overall time-poverty. As women left for home early from work, they got less work done in a day which had an impact over their average earnings.



Overcrowding in buses puts women at risk of harassment

*“Since women are nowadays advancing so much in every field, even surpassing men in some, the men probably feel that the patriarchal system of the society needs to be maintained under any circumstances and hence to balance the power equation (or rather to assert their own power) they try to dominate women in every possible way, one of which is crime against women... scaring the women into restricting their mobility so that they stay put in their ‘traditional’ place in their homes and not in the world outside.”*

An aged interviewee reflecting on patriarchy as a probable reason behind the harassment faced by women using public transport.

Participants reported often coming across young men under the influence of drugs or alcohol getting involved in fistfights on the streets. This led to a heightened sense of insecurity among women.

Patriarchy attributes women’s behaviour such as their clothing or their making a trip by themselves at ‘unsafe times’ as causes of danger to their safety’ The lack of infrastructure and failures of public policy related to affordable and convenient transport are excused by putting the blame on women’s behaviour.

Strained ethno-social relations: A Bangladeshi immigrant who had been working as a daily-wage labourer claimed that people would often rudely interrupt and question her randomly about her identity and purpose of travel. She also claimed to have often experienced rude behaviour from co-passengers and bus conductors while using public transport in the city. Given the complex ethno-socio-political claims around resources in Guwahati, social relations have soured over time leading to conflict.

### Dispersed nature of settlements

- High Average Trip Length (4.14 km)

### Low levels of vehicular ownership

- Dependence on public transport

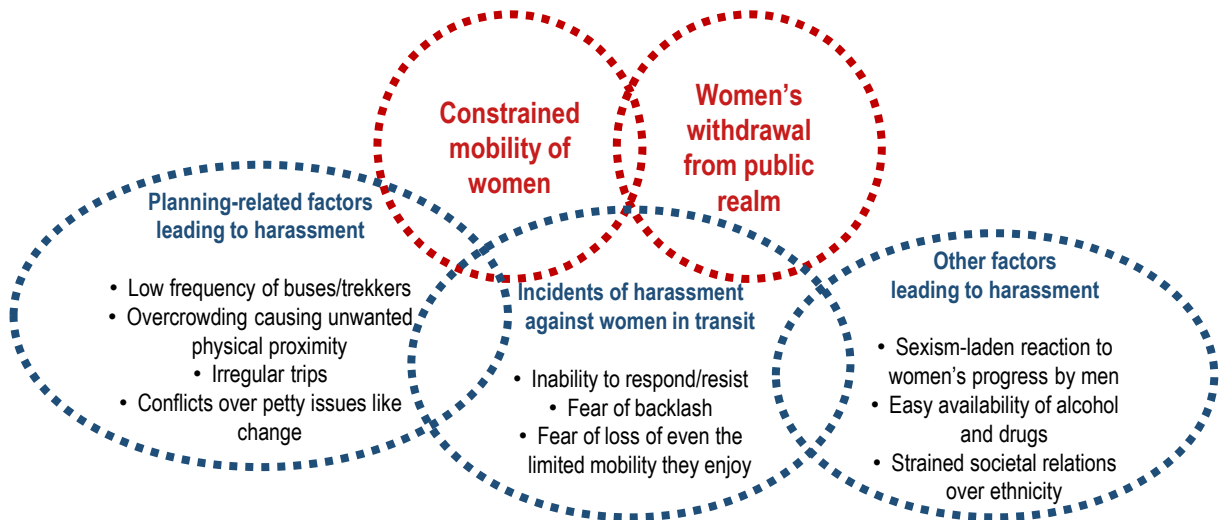


Diagram showing how various factors contribute to the withdrawal of women from the public realm



## WOMEN'S RESPONSE TO MISBEHAVIOUR:

Women's response to misbehaving men and unpleasant situations was passive avoidance and retreat when they were alone. One of the participants said,

*"I had to give up in many situations being a woman thinking of my family and siblings and behave as the typical women is supposed to behave."*

But if they were in a group, the participants said they would sometimes try and retaliate. They had started using safety pins to deal with rogue elements pawing or touching them inappropriately inside the bus. These instances though, were very few in number. Parents were unwilling to take any chances with their children's safety. So when they perceived a threat to their children, they responded by restricting their mobility or accompanying them when they go out. Another participant said,

*"Every day we keep hearing so many stories of harassment and rape. How can I leave my daughter alone?"*

The fear and insecurity that women face in accessing public spaces prevents them from being full citizens of the urban milieu. They are not seen as legitimate users of the space, except at certain times and for certain activities. Ultimately, harassment in public spaces accomplishes 'an informal ghettoization of women—a ghettoization to the probate sphere of hearth and home.' This not only restricts the physical and geographical mobility of women but also deprives her of liberty and security in public places.



The near invisibility of women in public spaces discourages other women from using them

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

# Given the high dependence of women on public transport (unlike men), policy makers must intervene to address deficiencies in their provision by increasing routes and frequency of buses.

# If IPT such as trekkers have to be used, these have to be regulated. There should be a gradual plan to transit to mini-buses that are considerably safer than trekkers.

# Mixed land use must be promoted as it reduces travel distances and provides activities on the street round the day while reducing areas with no activities during the night. Activities on the street that invite both men and women create safe spaces.

# Urban design and planning must ensure the creation of public spaces that prevent or at least present lesser opportunities for violence against women. Interventions such as well-designed, well-lit streets with wide footpaths protect women from both traffic and physical harassment.

# Another important urban design intervention is designing streets in a way that allows hawkers to use them for their business. Creation of special vending zones in areas where natural markets have developed ensures eyes on the streets. Promoting mixed land use, avoiding dark alleys, dead ends and ensuring 'eyes on the street' through design, bye laws and hawker-friendly policies can help discourage violence against women.

# Well-illuminated bus shelters must be provided at the stops where passengers can wait for buses without feeling threatened.

# Distance between consecutive bus-shelters on any road should not be more than 500m. Increased accessibility plays a major role in making public spaces appear safer.

# Policing must be stepped up, especially after dusk to provide a sense of security to women travelling back from work or elsewhere. If the number of women on streets increases, they will find strength in numbers and this will act as a deterrent to potential harassers.

# The education system must respond to the challenges posed by increasing instances of violence against women. Themes of gender equality, equal rights and women's right to respond proactively must form part of the curriculum for school-going children in their formative years.

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