



The fear for women coming home in the dark from a late-night factory work shift is niggling and always present. Poorly-lit streets, potholes on the pavements, people lurking in the dark - and that ever-present worry of being propositioned or worse attacked.

Yangon has proved a magnet for people seeking work since the country began opening up in 2011. Factories, offices and work places offer jobs. But if there is a downside, it's the question of safety for women.

The situation in Yangon is not unique. Attacks against women and girls are a bitter feature of life in the urban areas of neighbouring countries where the anonymity and crowding pose problems.

Migration and insecurity

Thousands of men and women have flocked to Myanmar's commercial capital in search of work, many forced to live in slums or poor neighbourhoods.

Migration, a process of moving from one place to another for a better life has been part of the cycle of human history since time immemorial. Urbanization is an inevitable process, and sometimes unfair and inequitable when urban dwellers and rural newcomers compete in a big city. Rural, less educated and more exposed groups often occupy the lower social strata, with little or no power, living in more exposed circumstances.

When it comes to this informal hierarchy in Myanmar, women's safety and rights tend to rank bottom.

Urbanization in Myanmar during the first decade of the century lagged behind that of its neighbours, likely as a result of economic isolation, which continued until 2010. In 2015, a World Bank report stressed some of the challenges the country is facing with its growing urbanization, centred around Yangon and Mandalay.

The push and pull factors

The push factors for rural people to leave their rural areas are the difficulty in generating a livelihood, primitive farming systems, lack of adequate land, unequal land distribution, droughts, floods, clean water shortages and conflicts. Pull factors are employment opportunities, higher incomes, as well as access to better health care and education.

Consequently changes have been occurring in terms of urban management such as buildings, roads and recreational sites among others, which demands management of ensuing social issues such as traffic, congestion, waste disposal, water supply and pollution, and policing. On an individual level, people often find themselves in the cities without family, housing, resource networks or any legal means of subsistence, typically leading to the deterioration of quality of life.

The lower level of development in the slums and run-down areas of cities tends to lead to more delinquency and crime. And women tend to be more vulnerable to violence.

Not just Myanmar

While violence against women and children is particularly alarming, cities around the world are reported to have homicide rates that tend to exceed Myanmar's rates. Surveys on victimization indicate that inhabitants of urban areas in Africa and Latin America are more likely to be victims, mainly of violent crimes. Even so-called developed countries such as the United States and the UK have high crime rates in the run-down areas of cities.

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Myanmar's Ministry of Construction calculates that Yangon Region



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Travelling to and from work can pose a safety problem. Photo: Mizzima

needs about 100,000 new residential rooms every year. Department of Urban and Housing Development provided more than 50,000 units of low-cost and rental rooms between 2010 and 2015. Housing shortages still remain. June 2016, Union Minister for Construction U Win Khaing recently shared plans to

build 180,000 affordable housing units throughout Myanmar.

In the area of transportation, major thoroughfares are receiving attention from the government and some safety improvements are being made. Nevertheless many roads are unpaved, not illuminated, and hazardous for driving.

And lack of lighting at night can be difficult, particularly for women who work shifts and who have no choice but to go to or from work in the dark.

Yet, such issues are coming to the fore and city administrations and planners seek to improve the comfort and safety of its inhabitants.