

# MAPPING A SAFER CITY FOR WOMEN

Tara Lee

Last month, paralegals and trainees of international development agency ActionAid swept the streets of Hlaingthaya Township to map safer routes for women to travel. Women participants surveyed sections of streets for the possibility of sexual harassment – a rising problem in rundown urban areas.

A preliminary activity to the Safe Cities Campaign due to launch in October in Myanmar, these safety walk exercises have been collecting data from its 240 community members and staff around the larger Yangon region for a complete map of the metropolitan area.

ActionAid is arranging a Hackathon this month. Programmers will be invited to develop the map into a mobile app, building on the findings of the baseline survey by ActionAid conducted in 2015. In the survey, most women reported mobile phones as their primary tool for feeling safe during late night commutes. Women would call a family member during their walk back, or use the camera flash as a torchlight. The app will be accessible for all female smartphone users to use as an advisory tool.

The Safe Cities for Women Campaign started in July 2014 in 20 countries in order to reduce abuse towards women and the ensuing constant fear they experience. The Myanmar campaign will comprise of a series of events aimed at raising awareness. Street theatre will take place on the circle line train and the ferry to Dala Township. ActionAid will host the South Asia Women's Network forum from 21 to 24 of October. The organisation also plans to compose a 'Safe City Song' along with having a photo exhibition.

The campaign will take place throughout the larger Yangon area, involving multiple stakeholders from both public and private sectors. The

seven target areas of the campaign are Hlaingthaya, Mingladon, Dagon Seikkan, Insein, Dala, Dawbon and Thaketa - areas with either a large population of migrant workers or high prevalence of gang violence. Yangon Regional Government has confirmed cooperation and the Department of Social Welfare is awaiting the signing of Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). Additionally, involved parties are International NGOs, local NGOs, UN agencies, garment brands, manufacturers, Yangon City Development Committee (YCDC), and Department of Electricity.

In regards to the scale and diversity of stakeholders, advisor to women's rights in Action Aid Melanie Hilton said, "Our mission is not to point fingers. Our mission is to say, 'Creating a safe city and access to safe public space is everyone's responsibility. It is the government's responsibility as it is your responsibility and my responsibility.'"

Since 2008, the world's population has become predominantly urban, with more than half of the world living in urban areas for the first time in history. There are now 480 million people living in 80 cities around the world, with an estimate of 60% of all people expected to live in urban areas by 2030. Up to 95 percent of the growth is attributed to developing, while one of every three urban residents are poverty-stricken, living in slums and illegal settlements.

Combined with existing inequalities, urban living for women has become harsh, dangerous and demeaning. According to UN Women, a woman is assaulted every fifteen seconds in Sao Paulo, Brazil. In a survey from Cambodia, 8 percent of all men reported they had raped a woman or a girl who was not their partner, and 5 percent said that they had participated in a gang rape. A



survey funded by the Department of International Development, UK, revealed an array of abuses experienced by women in Nairobi, Kenya: verbal abuse, threats to life, being touched without permission, erections pressed against women's bodies, mugging, forced stripping of clothes and trafficking. This is reported to happen on an hour-by-hour basis in public areas such as roadsides, railways and marketplaces.

The staggering prevalence of sexual violence against women is left unaddressed by the authorities, who might ridicule or blame the victim. They are sometimes perpetrators themselves. In locations with a high level of corruption, police have been reported to extort or solicit sexual acts in compensation for dropping charges of prostitution or minor transgressions. In Bangladesh, over 60% of women interviewed by ActionAid said they would not advise female friends to go to the police if



Volunteers gather for a preliminary activity prior to the Safe Cities Campaign in October. Photo: Tara Lee/Mizzima



attacked.

Stigma attached to women who have experienced sexual violence hinders them from coming forward. Families of rape survivors often decide not to report the crime in fear of having a tarnished reputation or due to a lack of faith in the justice system. Offenders remain unpunished, the resulting impunity allowing them and potential assailants to continue perpetuating the crime.

The burden of protection hence falls on women, who will avoid going out alone or being in certain public places entirely. Avoidance is not always an option, however, due to the necessity of public places in daily life. Women who work or study need to use public transport to travel and those with a household to look after will need to visit marketplaces and any woman may need to visit parks and public washrooms. Women are spatially restricted, barred from enjoying public and urban spaces, and when in a public place, in danger of harassment or in fear of such abuses.

Hlaingthaya is an archetypal breeding ground for gender-based violence. Also called Hlaingthaya Industrial Zone, the township is one of the largest industrial parks in the country, consisting mostly of garment and light factories. It is the most developed, and also the most congested, of Yangon's new satellite towns that sprang up as foreign investors rushed to take advantage of cheap human labour when Myanmar opened up. The overwhelming majority of factory workers – up to 90 percent of respondents in a survey by Oxfam – are females between the age of 16 and 25.

The woes of Myanmar factory workers' lives have been widely publicised, as demonstrated by the study "Under Pressure." The qualitative and quantitative data analysed by Action Labor Rights revealed multiple human rights cases of abuse, including negligence of health and fire safety regulations, failure to pay overtime hours and use of intimidation by management. Women often report corporal punishment used by managers and supervisors who may be displeased about anything from not producing enough, not working fast enough, or talking to colleagues.

LwinLwinHlaing, Women's Rights Coordinator at ActionAid, works with factory workers in Hlaingthaya, Insein and Mingala-

don. “The girls come to Yangon because perhaps they have a family or a relative here and they want to take up the new economic opportunities in the city. Maybe they heard from a friend there are jobs. But if you have no work experience in Yangon, you need to start from the bottom, which is at the factories.”

She described a typical factory workers’ day: “There can be up to 2000 girls in a factory. There is no air conditioning, just fans. The day shifts run from six or seven in the morning to four-thirty in the afternoon, but most work over time, until nine or ten.” They may have a lunch break, they may not. “Girls would stop drinking water during work hours because there are not enough bathrooms and there will be a long queue,” she said. In dire conditions, some work up to 70 hours a week, earning less than 100 USD a month.

In November 2015, the government enacted the minimum wage law which entitled workers to 3600 Kyats, or three USD, per day. Contrary to purpose, the law deteriorated the situation, as factories fired its workers to maintain its labour budget but required the remaining, fewer workers to complete the quota previously manufactured by the larger workforce. The combination of low take-home pay and required quotas made working overtime into late hours inevitable, which means a late night commute to reach home for the women.

Factories are required to provide transportation, but only once a day. The shuttles usually run around 7 pm, and so are not available to overtime workers. Options are a taxi, public transport or travel by foot, all of which compromise the safety of women. A community member recounted her experience, “We were returning from work and there was no electricity. It was dark. We were followed by two male strangers. They approached us, grabbed us and pushed us around. They tried to attack us.”

Another told of an incident that happened one rainy day: “I was holding my umbrella. At the time the shops were open and people were on the street. A motorbike passed by me, but I didn’t notice it as I walked at the edge of the street. Suddenly, I felt someone slap my behind. I was scared and my eyes welled up with

tears. The environment is highly unsafe for our Myanmar women. Our women are scared to go out at night. Even if we have important work, we have to think carefully about this.”

In Hlaingthaya, there is an average of seven “beer stations” for every kilometre, outside of which intoxicated group of men displayed a strong tendency to sexually harass the women on their way home. Alleyways and streets are poorly lit, if at all, and desolate in late hours. Some workers choose to sleep in the factory overnight out of desperation.

One of the participants during the safety walk exercise that took place in Hlaingthaya was PhooPwintPhyo, a 19 year old female living in ShwePyiTha Township. Incorporated into the city in 1986, the township is located north-west of Yangon and remains largely undeveloped with little municipal services. PhooPwintPhyo commutes daily to her work at a non-profit organisation via public transport. She said she often feels unsafe, and that she would not leave her home after ten o’clock in the evening. She suggested male members of the family accompany their daughters or sisters on their walks.

The leader of one of four teams during the exercise and staff member ThueLay Than, shared her experience: “The first year of moving to Yangon, a man pressed his erection against my back. I was standing on the bus and I felt something, I thought perhaps it’s an umbrella. Over time, I realised and became very insulted when I saw what he was doing. I was timid and did not dare to confront him. As a Myanmar woman, I felt overwhelmed with fear. I moved away from him.” She says if she encounters a similar situation in the future, she would take action.

Mo Ne MayatNoeWai is 19. After a similar encounter on a bus where a strange man repeatedly tried to press his body close to hers and tried to touch her, she feels that she has a responsibility to protect herself since there is no law enforced against such harassment. “We need to take care of the way we dress and to take measure against the harassment that occurs,” she said, “if we wear a short skirt, more people will pay attention. It’s like putting ourselves in danger.”

Another participant, NandarHtway is originally from Mon state

but has been a resident of Yangon for over ten years. She feels that the rural region where she came from is safer than her new urban home. “A number of my friends and I have experienced sexual harassment, especially on public transportation. But Myanmar women, we are shy in nature and when put into such circumstances, we do not know how to confront the assailant.”

She attributes the problem to lack of education, of both parties. “Women are not taught how to react to the situation or how to handle the people that harass us,” NandarHtway said. Subjects of a sexual nature are still largely taboo in Myanmar, people have only a superficial understanding of problems and not enough actionable knowledge. She continued, “Men, on the other hand, are not educated on how to respectfully address women in a way they don’t feel threatened.”

To educate people on women’s rights and promote activism, ActionAid works with its partner organisation Labor Rights Defenders and Promoters as well as Legal Clinic Myanmar. Men and women are recruited and trained to become community paralegals. The training equips them with knowledge about the legal entitlements, procedures and necessary steps that need to be taken for a victim to seek justice, such as making sure to keep the article of clothing that may have DNA trace of the assailant after an episode of sexual assault. The paralegals then return to their own communities and share their knowledge and assist other members of the community.

At the end of the safety walk exercise, one participant summarised her experience of the exercise as a reminder to the human cost of development: “There are so many women living here, working in these large industrial stations. It’s important that we remember them and take care of them, to not forget them. I think it’s easy to do that. One might think they are lucky because they got a job in the city, but we don’t think about the consequences.”

Mapping a safer city for women is the reclamation of the human right “to live with dignity and with freedom from want and from fear,” (UNFPA).