Born To Be Free: A Regional Study of Interventions to Enhance Women and Girls' Safety and Mobility in Public Spaces

E Fulu (The Equality Institute), M Alvarado, O Rugkhla (UN Women)

CONTEXT AND PURPOSE

For the first time in history, more people live in cities than in rural areas. In public and private spaces, women and girls experience and fear various types of violence, ranging from harassment, to rape and femicide. Momentum is growing around the issue of women and girls' safety in urban, public spaces. However, given that this is a relatively new field of work, published evidence of the impacts of such interventions remain somewhat scattered and limited.

UN Women with KWDI conducted this study with Dr Fulu as the Lead Researcher to:

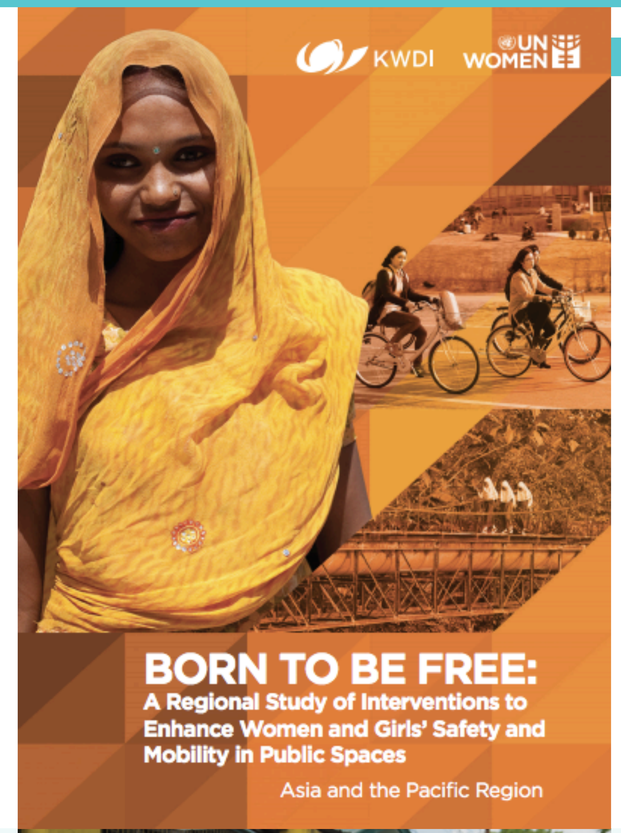
- Map the existing relevant interventions being implemented in the region;
- Assess available global evidence to determine the impact of existing measures on women and girls' safety, mobility and agency;
- Document key lessons learned and emerging promising practice among innovative initiatives; and
- Provide recommendations for future work in the region on women and girls' safety in public spaces and mobility.

METHODS

The study included a review of 55 evaluated interventions, a survey of over 118 stakeholders working on the issue globally, over 50 in-depth interviews and field visits to Jakarta, Indonesia; Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam; and Seoul, Republic of Korea.

CONCLUSIONS

Recommendations point to the need to address VAWG at every sectoral level and in a coordinated way, involving different actors and stakeholders, and the use of a gender-transformative lens that sees women as agents of their own destiny. To maximize effectiveness, interventions must also take an inclusive approach, targeting marginalized and vulnerable groups. In addition, there is an urgent need to address the paucity and low quality of evaluations. Lastly, interventions should target women's mobility and not just their safety. An excessive focus on safety is protectionist, narrow and moves away from the revolutionary conceptual framework set up by the safe cities movement. As one of the key informants stated, *"a heighted sense of danger is not helping their independence so we really need to be addressing the underlying causes of violence against women."*



SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

The evidence base on the effectiveness of interventions that address sexual harassment and other forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG) in public spaces is still limited, particularly from low- and middle-income countries.

There is an inconsistent understanding of the root causes of VAWG in public spaces. There is often a failure to see VAW in the urban public space as part of a larger continuum of VAWG. Some interventions do not take a rights-based or gender-transformative approach, and several policies and programs continue to use the problematic language of "protecting women" or victim-blaming.

Despite these challenges, there have been a number of promising practices:

- Participatory and explicitly feminist interventions show promise in their inclusion of women from the community to take up leadership roles in the safe cities movement.
- Comprehensive school-based interventions have shown some success in targeting harmful gender norms that are the root causes of sexual harassment and violence.
- Some interventions have been designed to train bystanders on how to intervene in situations of harassment, although the findings from such interventions are mixed.
- **Adopting a rights-based approach and programming informed by participatory research shows promise.**

SOME KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Build gender-transformative programs that challenge the status quo and critically engage men and women.
2. Address sexual harassment against women in public spaces as part of the continuum on VAWG, from private to public and across the life-cycle.
3. Use research to develop an evidence base that informs intervention design and implementation.
4. Have strong community engagement, including participatory monitoring and evaluation frameworks.
5. Invest time and financial resources in coordination and partnership building throughout the life of the program.

Photos: UN Women

The report is available online at http://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2016/09/born-to-be-free

For any questions relating to the research, please contact Dr Emma Fulu: emma@equalityinstitute.org

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