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MELBOURNE

Published on *Up Close* (<http://www.upclose.unimelb.edu.au>)

Episode 129: Female-friendly cities: Planning for inclusivity in our urban spaces

Female-friendly cities: Planning for inclusivity in our urban spaces

VOICEOVER

Welcome to Up Close, the research, opinion and analysis podcast from the University of Melbourne, Australia.

JENNIFER COOK

I'm Jennifer Cook. Thanks for joining us. How do you make a city safe? What can urban planners do to alleviate the fear that so many women feel when they have to navigate the streets at night or catch public transport? Can such a thing be done and even if it can, how do you measure one's sense of wellbeing? In today's episode of Up Close we are speaking to two women who have been instrumental in setting up programs to create cities that are inclusive and respect the rights of all people, including women, to live, work and move around without fear or difficulty.

Dr Carolyn Whitzman is an associate professor in urban planning at the University of Melbourne, Australia and she was instrumental in establishing the Gender Inclusive Cities Project that is now running in India, Russia, Tanzania and Argentina. She's joined from Delhi via Skype by researcher and activist Dr Kalpana Viswanath.

Kalpana is director of the UN funded Gender Inclusive Cities Project. I'd like to thank you both for joining us today.

CAROLYN WHITZMAN

Hello Jennifer.

KALPANA VISWANATH

Hi Jennifer.

JENNIFER COOK

Carolyn, could I begin by asking, to even tackle something like that, as a woman knowing sort of public transport and the fears you can have in different cities, just tell us how you got that mindset?

CAROLYN WHITZMAN

Well I knew from my work as a practitioner, I was a planning practitioner for 10 years before I got my PhD and I worked for the city of Toronto. We had a safe city initiative in Toronto and it made changes, it made differences in women's lives. We got improved design of public transport train stations and the buses would stop at night between stops to let women off. We got a new grants program called Breaking the Cycle of Violence and we had people coming back after a couple of years in the Breaking the Cycle of Violence grants from community organisations saying this is how we saved women's lives.

JENNIFER COOK

What kind of violence do women experience in cities? Let's be really clear about it. Where does it happen, is it more likely at certain times of the day or night? Kalpana, could I get you to talk to us a little bit about that?

KALPANA VISWANATH

Yes certainly. This is really the focus of the first part of the Gender Inclusive Cities Project which is taking place in four countries. The aim was really to understand the nature of violence that women face in cities and how they dealt with it. We found across the four cities, of course there were some differences but some of the main issues that came up really was the issue of lighting. So women did feel certainly that after dark a city was much more hostile for them to move around in safely. The other issue was of course public transport which came across in all of the cities that women felt safe both while riding different forms of public transport and waiting for public transport on the roadside.

CAROLYN WHITZMAN

But Kalpana, in terms of the actual issues of violence I think some of the statistics that came out of those baseline surveys were extraordinary. There's sexual assault, there's rape of course but one of the things that came out in really all of the cities that are doing this work is absolutely endemic and every day experiences of sexual harassment. Kalpana, do you want to talk a little bit about some of that?

KALPANA VISWANATH

Yes. We did a survey across the four cities. In each city there were at least 500 women who were surveyed for their experience of sexual harassment and violence on streets and other public spaces and across the cities it was interesting because over 75 per cent of women said that just being a woman, just their gender caused them to feel unsafe in cities. Across the cities over 70 per cent of the women did say they had faced some form of harassment or violence while using public spaces and this was less in some cities. The only city where we got less reporting was in Russia, partly because there is a reluctance to speak about sexual harassment in Russia but in the three other cities we did find very high levels of violence.

The other interesting finding was really that women said they faced harassment both in the daytime and after dark so while women certainly do feel more unsafe after dark it's not as if the daytime made streets completely safe for women to use. The spaces that they said they faced most harassment was on the road while walking, at

market places, in parks and waiting for public transport. So the range of public spaces that are available, that are there in cities, women said across all of them they did face harassment at different times of the day and different forms of harassment as Carolyn said.

Most of it was what we would generally say is sexual harassment which is really staring, leering, touching but we also got a fairly high rate in some cities of stalking, especially of younger women who said they experienced stalking really near their places of study or work or near their homes.

JENNIFER COOK

Carolyn, I'd just like to make it clear which cities we're talking about.

CAROLYN WHITZMAN

Right, so there are four cities on four different continents. Delhi in India, Rosario in Argentina, Dar es Salaam in Tanzania and Petrozavodsk in Russia.

JENNIFER COOK

There was these commonalities across the four cities. Kalpana, you've said that this reflects deep rooted patriarchal attitudes that women are facing. Do you think that's the link here?

KALPANA VISWANATH

Well most certainly I think it is the issue of patriarchal attitudes which seems to come across in cities across the world because even other than these four cities if one reads research in other countries, certainly it's there. I mean there are special carriages for trains in Japan for instance which was a bit surprising to hear and there's even research to show in Singapore that women face sexual harassment in buses.

So I think somewhere the nature of patriarchy has some kind of commonality. Of course it manifests itself in different ways in different parts of the world but I think the most basic one of where women are really objectified so when they're using public spaces they are almost seen as fair game to be harassed or touched or felt up or whistled, stared at is something that at that level came through.

On the other hand we also did get - I mean though it was less because this was a street survey - we did get a fair amount of women saying they'd faced more violent forms of sexual assault also.

JENNIFER COOK

This is Up Close, I'm coming to you from the University of Melbourne, Australia. I'm Jennifer Cook and our guests today are Dr Kalpana Viswanath and Dr Carolyn Whitzman and we're talking about gender inclusive cities, making cities safer for women and everyone else too. Now Carolyn and Kalpana, we were just talking then about these attitudes of patriarchy, the sense that women are objectified and when they enter that public space that they're fair game. It's a sense of entitlement isn't? It's a sense of they're doing it because they can, they think they can. So how do you change that Carolyn with good design?

CAROLYN WHITZMAN

Well it's absolutely about the right to the city and it isn't just design, it's a combination of design interventions and social interventions and it's also the process as much as what gets built. So the main mechanism we've been using in the four cities of Gender Inclusive Cities but also in cities around the world there were 270 people at the Third International Conference on Women's Safety in Delhi in November 2010 from 40 different countries. So we're talking about a lot of different places that are talking about a lot of similar things.

It's all about building relationships between community organisations, especially women's organisations and local government. Because people sometimes think it's all about laws or it's all about services but when you're talking about prevention it's about relying on the expertise of people who are living in the neighbourhood who quite often can suggest very common sense ways to improve the lives of women in the neighbourhood. I'll give one example from Dar es Salaam.

There was a big issue with a lot of women who were under-employed and who were using their houses, well partly as sort of houses of prostitution; there was some informal prostitution going on but there was also a lot of illegal brewing of liquor going on. Well these women knew a lot about - and I know this is going to sound like a joke - they knew a lot about grain and they knew a lot about hospitality and there was a lot of work done in Dar about getting the women to collectivise and make luncheonettes.

Now this sounds like a joke but it worked and the fact is that the women involved there knew that they were involved in some unsafe and illegal activities and through working in a partnership they were able to get more legitimate livelihoods that were safer for them and safer for the whole community; just common sense stuff like that. So you can talk about lighting, you can talk about benches, you can talk about improved public service, public transport provision but really quite often it comes to that kind of thinking outside the box that can only happen when you've got local women engaging with their local government.

Another thing that came out of Dar is just doing a lot of work around basic public infrastructure because in low income countries it's about there aren't any toilets here, that means I have to go out and find a railway line at 4:00am or there aren't any lights here so I really can't see at night. There're no street numbers here so even if I were to call for help how could I get people there? So it's about working on some basic issues of basic level infrastructure.

JENNIFER COOK

Kalpna, could you talk us through some of these ground level changes and strategies that you use?

KALPANA VISWANATH

Certainly. I mean for example if I take Delhi, we've had some very interesting kinds of interventions at different levels. One of the ones which I think has been quite exciting for us has been in our surveys one of the areas that has really come out very strongly in Delhi as where women face a fair amount of sexual harassment and feel a lack of safety was in public transport. The bus system in Delhi is the largest form of public transport used by people so we actually got an opportunity to work with the

drivers and conductors who serve on these public buses and as Carolyn said the issue is really how do you get different stakeholders and authorities and service providers to take responsibility for the issue of women's safety?

I think this has been one of the key things to say that the onus of providing and creating a safer city does not lie on women's shoulders alone but really on the different authorities in the city. So we actually trained - JAGORI did a kind of gender sensitisation training come session kind of thing with almost 4000 drivers and conductors and this was then followed up by a review of this intervention where we got quite positive feedback from the drivers and conductors. The next step was do a training of trainers to then sort of mainstream this issue of women's safety and the responsibility and the role that drivers and conductors can play in ensuring a safer ride for women. So this has been one intervention I think which we can say has been quite positive for us.

JENNIFER COOK

This is Up Close, coming to you from the University of Melbourne, Australia. I'm Jennifer Cook and our guests today are Dr Carolyn Whitzman and Dr Kalpana Viswanath and we're talking about gender inclusive cities. Now Kalpana, you mentioned then taking that focus and the responsibility off the women and making it a community responsibility and it's a shifting of the burden isn't it from women being told they have to change their behaviour; they have to not go here or not go there?

KALPANA VISWANATH

Absolutely.

CAROLYN WHITZMAN

We talk about it as moving from dependence to autonomy. So the notion that women have to be protected by the police or protected by men in their lives and that sort of thing towards a situation where women can be involved in planning, they can be involved in management but more than that it becomes an issue of partnerships, an issue of governance and as you say, an issue of shared responsibility.

JENNIFER COOK

So how do we measure the change in a city's mindset? Is it even possible? I mean it sounds like trying to catch water in a net but you have specific tactics and methodology that makes this program work and make it measurable. Carolyn, could you explain that to us?

CAROLYN WHITZMAN

Well what we're trying to look at are both process outcomes and impact outcomes. So in terms of the process we're looking at new policies, possibly new laws or new bylaws, we're looking at new partnerships and new training sessions like Kalpana just talked about with the Delhi transit. In terms of impact we're doing work in particular neighbourhoods in these four cities and in those neighbourhoods we're hoping to see an increased sense of safety and comfort in public space and hopefully increased use and mobility in public space. That includes public transport and includes all those kinds of public spaces.

We have to be cautious because traditionally we've relied on police statistics which grossly underestimate the amount of sexual violence and harassment in public space. So we have been doing, as part of the baseline survey, these victimisation surveys that Kalpana was talking about and we will be doing follow up surveys in a couple of years so I want to be a bit cautious that this is a very big, very entrenched problem and it's a relatively small and inexpensive intervention so you can't expect miraculous results in a couple of years.

But we certainly have seen - the four cities that we're working in we're already starting to do a little bit of this partnership work and we've seen changed public spaces and improved policies and practices. We hope that when we come to the end of the project this year and next year that we'll be seeing some changes in women's use and comfort in public space and also of course that sense of empowerment in the sense that you can make a positive change in your experience of the city, your right to the city.

JENNIFER COOK

Kalpana, in the work that you've done with these programs, what stories and experiences have stood out to you? What shows you that this program is working? Whose story do you remember?

KALPANA VISWANATH

Several stories. One is certainly the one that I told you which was the drivers and conductors. We have also been trying, as Carolyn said, to really work with communities to get them to use the methodology of the safety audit as really a community tool to help people and work with people in power to be able to assess their own safety needs and understand what causes them to feel unsafe. So in one of the neighbourhoods that we had worked with young men and women we had actually done a series of safety walks entirely done by the young women and men. They had mapped their neighbourhood. They had actually identified one of the main issues was the lack of space to play. So we worked with the authorities and the municipality and the parks division to actually create a small park for them, cleaned it up, got trees planted and stuff like that for them to begin playing. These young men and women we thought initially would begin to use this play for playing but within two weeks of this intervention sort of seeming to be a success we had the young women coming back to us saying the park is being used to play cricket by the boys and we don't actually get a place to play.

So we went back and we had sort of a group discussion with the boys and girls to see how we solve this problem. Do we sort of have different timings to use the park? Do we have ways of splitting up the park? So I think it was just fascinating even for the young boys, young men to recognise that their behaviour and their actions actually directly cause women to feel that they don't have equal access to public spaces. So this has actually been a very interesting experiment for us. It was just in a small community but really not just how women were able to articulate their needs but how young men were able to understand women's needs too in public spaces.

CAROLYN WHITZMAN

Yeah, so the ideas hopefully you can come up with public spaces that can be used

by all generations and both genders in that kind of inclusive public space. That's why it's called Gender Inclusive Cities.

JENNIFER COOK

You're listening to Up Close and we're coming to you from the University of Melbourne, Australia. I'm Jennifer Cook and we're talking about gender inclusive cities. How do we make public places safe for everyone? I'm talking with Dr Carolyn Whitzman and Dr Kalpana Viswanath. Now, I'd like to ask you both have you encountered opposition to these programs and if you have, where has it come from and in what form?

CAROLYN WHITZMAN

Yes of course there's always opposition and I guess the hardest thing is finding the place for women's safety. There is certainly a lot of work going on around the world around crime prevention and violence prevention. Sometimes it's hard to get gender inserted in more than a tokenistic way; more than 'add women' in one line and stir. I was actually dealing with a program document yesterday, an international UN program document where I felt that after 20 years of this work, 'Oh my God we still have women relegated to a footnote?.'

So there's that sort of macro level opposition and obviously at the local sites there's going to be a lot, a lot of discussion necessary. Kalpana was just talking about the discussion that happened with the group of young boys and young women but there's also discussions that happen with local governments that go oh that's not part of our responsibility or police who go that's not part of what we do, our core purpose is to catch the bad guys and lock them up kind of thing. So when you're engaging with the different partners there's always a moment where people go oh is that part of what I'm supposed to be doing and sometimes some resistance to that that has to be tackled again and again.

JENNIFER COOK

How do you tackle it, Kalpana?

KALPANA VISWANATH

You know, it depends where the resistance is coming from. If it's from the community and often it can be, for example, how you privilege certain issues, so for example if you work in a poor community. You also have to be careful how you posit the issue of gender exclusion because there's also exclusion based on class, race, based on income which needs to be seen as valid an issue also in some cases. So one of the things we do is - we did in this project in addition to really just doing a baseline was to really identify who in the communities or who among the women are further vulnerable.

In each city it was different. In some cities it was based on income, certainly that and in some others it was based on disability, sexual orientation, race or where you live?

CAROLYN WHITZMAN

Or age.

KALPANA VISWANATH
?or sometimes just age.

CAROLYN WHITZMAN
Yeah.

KALPANA VISWANATH
So I think for the community one needs to also distinguish different kinds of vulnerabilities because it's not as if all women actually experience a city in the same way. I think different women experience it differently depending on whether you have to use public transport, where you live, where you work, do you have to go out at night, et cetera. On the other hand if you have to work with the authorities, as Carolyn said, you get all kinds of responses which can come as obstacles because often women's safety is not really seen as very high up on the agenda. For example, we did find if you're talking about rape or domestic violence that's still something that has come on the agenda of a lot of governments today but when you talk about really the every day lack of safety and fear that women face by using the city it's still a bit intangible and there is a way in which it gets sidelined as an important issue. I would say what we've done is to use data. You use the voices of the most vulnerable to articulate their own needs. So I think that is important rather than us becoming the spokesperson of people's actual experiences and let the authorities and stakeholders listen in dialogue with the people actually facing the vulnerabilities while using different parts of the city.

JENNIFER COOK
This theme of making sure you're not only interacting with the communities but really listening and hearing what they're saying and responding to that is a very strong note throughout this program isn't it?

CAROLYN WHITZMAN
Yes, the process is in a way one of the outcomes that you actually have a kind of local governance system that listens to the needs of the people who are most vulnerable in the assumption, as you said earlier Jennifer, that a city that's safer for women will be safer for everyone. A city that's accessible for people with disabilities or children will be accessible for everyone.

JENNIFER COOK
You've articulated so beautifully how it goes far beyond just putting in a well designed bus stop or better lighting or trying to change attitudes by a few slogans. Let's talk now about what has been the reaction of these women? What have been these positive outcomes?

KALPANA VISWANATH
I think it's really been exciting to see the kinds of issues that have sort of risen across the different cities and just to give an example, I mean the Latin American countries, actually several of them, have been working on issues of women's safety and gender inclusion for the past couple of years and they have had really strong women's

collectives formed in many countries which are able to negotiate for their demands and rights and ways which I think are very empowering for others to learn from. On the other hand, say in Petrozavodsk in Russia, this Gender Inclusive Cities Project has been a catalyst for the issue. I mean in our survey we found that in Russia a large percentage of women were not really willing to even answer questions on sexual harassment so the challenge in some places is really to even establish that this is a valid issue and a problem that needs to be dealt with whereas in some other cities they've already moved towards very strong interventions. But really I think for us, for me personally as director of this project see across the four cities the kinds of interventions which are being planned which in all four cities it is really working with communities and working with the service providers, authorities and stakeholders. It's really hard work creating those partnerships and getting both sides to listen to each other. I think to me, as Carolyn said, it's the process. To measure impact and actual change in three years is a bit ambitious but if you can actually begin the process of raising that awareness, making it an issue, the fact that it's reported in the media across the four countries is to me very significant.

JENNIFER COOK

What do you see as the way forward for the program? What was the next step?

KALPANA VISWANATH

Well, this program, the Gender Inclusive Cities Project is a three year program in a manner of speaking. Of course a lot of the interventions that begin, we're hoping that they will become sustainable in some way through the partnerships that have been created. But it is also in a sense rolling over into the UN Women's Global Program for Safer Cities which is going to be launched in five cities this year of which one of the cities, New Delhi, is overlapping between the two programs. That program aims to actually create some kind of evidence base to evaluate impact in terms of programs, interventions and policies in each of these cities and this is envisioned as a five to seven year process; understanding the fact that bringing about social change takes time and cannot be seen as something that can be done in a couple of years.

JENNIFER COOK

So it's a program that's firmly grounded in a context with support and a way forward?

CAROLYN WHITZMAN

And it's just moving from strength to strength which is really exciting.

JENNIFER COOK

Thank you both so much for your time.

KALPANA VISWANATH

Thank you.

CAROLYN WHITZMAN

Thank you Jennifer.

JENNIFER COOK

You've been listening to Up Close and I've been speaking with Dr Kalpana Viswanath and Dr Carolyn Whitzman about the Gender Inclusive Cities Project: How we make cities safer for women. Relevant links, a full transcript and more info on this episode can be found at our website at upclose.unimelb.edu.au. Up Close is a production of the University of Melbourne, Australia. This episode was recorded on 2 February 2011 and our producers were Eric van Bommel and Kelvin Param. Audio engineering by Ben Loveridge. Up Close is created by Kelvin Param and Eric van Bommel. I'm Jennifer Cook. Until next time, goodbye.

VOICEOVER

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