"Making Cities Safe for Women and Children"

by

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Preface

As a woman, as a person who heads an organisation committed to the central participation of women in all developmental issues and as a person who believes strongly that women play a very pivotal role in habitat issues, I am often requested to make presentations at meetings and seminars and write papers for publication on the "women and this angle or " women and that angle". It is often an institutional response to the demands made by women to ensure participation which is smoothly relegated to a niche on the sideline, where one woman talks about that particular topic as it affects women while everyone else discusses the more momentous issues of finance, execution of the strategy and other issues.

In this paper I am once again being asked to write on a subject which is very important : the issues related to making women and children feel safe in cities. I would like to challenge myself and those who read this paper to explore the strong linkages between true safety in cities and its real test lying in whether cities are safe for women and children. As a person working in the areas of urban poverty, habitat and seeking collective solutions to problems cities face, I see this opportunity as one which can change the usual paradigm of making all things related to women and children peripheral. The issue of violence brings them into the centre. The focus of this presentation is to explore a very simple phase*…." **What works for women and children works for society."** If women and children cutting across class and religion feel safe in cities, then those cities are safe. This is like a litmus test. And this is an invaluable foundation because unless there is safety and a feeling of being secure, there can be no growth and development that is worthwhile. Safe cities provide for strong growth and prosperity… and unless there is internal equity and social justice in cities, there can be no real safety.

I take another major liberty. I will not write a research paper which quotes other people's papers and seeks to inform the reader of what others have to say. Instead I will seek to reflect the beliefs, desires aspirations of men, women and children with whom I work in this paper.

Introduction:

Reading newspapers or watching television in India gives one the impression that the role of urban crime and violence is on the increase. Reports speak of rising statistics of crimes under the Indian Penal Code and commentators ascribe these growing trends to the rootlessness of urban migrants, to the nexus between politics and crime, to the influence of television with its emphasis upon sex and violence. Undoubtedly, all these factors play important roles in changing the landscape of safety in Indian cities. Yet, some areas remain undiscussed or receive little attention: the violence perpetrated by the state itself, inequalities of urban society and the miserable conditions that the poor live in and the impact of the market and globalization. One way of approaching these questions is by looking at the roles of the state, market and civil society.

Urbanisation often goes hand in hand with a rise in urban violence and crime. What constitutes safety? Are cities that are safe for women and children unsafe for others? In exploring a definition of safety, it is essential to first of all explore this basic word. The response is "protected against harm" . Who protects whom from harm? Individuals, do, families do, communities do, neighbourhoods do and cities do. How is the protection offered? ? And what is its resilience? We will try to look at some of these questions in this paper..

Yet, greater, urbanisation has meant more crime and violence. Recently in the last decade, growth in cities through the opening up of markets is often signalled by an increasing incidence of prostitution, gang wars and thefts of goods, extortion and breakdown of law and order. Its almost as though it is a pain which has to be undergone before good times come! But the distribution of wealth and resources is inevitably skewed. UNDP who monitor equity and economic progress observe that the disparity between those who have money and those who don't is rising at an alarming rate.

As more and more countries open up their markets and cities become the frontiers of growth, there is increasing violence and crime in cities. Essentially, the status quo of power in the city begins to change and these changes begin to change equations not only between different groups in the city… between section of civil society and also between the community and the State.

Often, the onset of such trends is ignored by the State and the city because in its initial stage they themselves are part of that process of violence and because what they do themselves is not seen as acts of violence. The gradual increase in the use of violence to clear the road for economic development soon creates the basis of extortion: such acts create a parallel law and order machinery in the city. This cancer, which begins with extortion and crime, becomes something that spreads through the city and more and more people, who "want" something, begin to believe it is their right to get it… especially if they have the muscle power and weapons to get it.

Violence is a clear breakdown of the inherent laws of society …. And once it begins, it is like a juggernaut, very hard to draw back and curb or contain. It vitiates all that comes in its way and affects the weak, the vulnerable and bystanders since the acts of violence are often not focused but general. How does this affect women and children? It affects them in a wide variety of ways. ***Often, children and women are seen as soft spots***… they become victims of violence. One kidnapping in the city is enough, one rape is enough and the feeling of insecurity is spread like wild fire among the women and children of those areas. This is in the more traditional form of violence… It not only frightens them, it controls every act they consider doing then onwards. Rather than just pursue the issue of violence I would like to explore briefly what safety means.

What does safety mean ?

Feeling safe is to feel protected. It is a feeling of well-being which can envelop a family, a community, a neighbourhood and a city. Its composition is hard to decipher, but it is an all - encompassing feeling of calm which is often as invisible as clean unpolluted air and, inversely, when fear and anxiety take its place, that feeling is as palpable as though it was a physical reality.

A feeling of safety encourages greater travel, exploration and encouragesf greater mobility both within and outside the neighbourhood and city. Inversely, when a neighbourhood is gripped with fear, the streets are empty and women and children stay away from public

places. The causal factors for feeling either insecure or secure are based on perceptions of individuals, families and communities about potential harm that they will bear as a consequence of venturing out of their homes. It reflects in the stances of city dwellers: do people look at each other or do they greet each other or if anyone is unwell or seeking help on the street, do people help them? If someone teases a woman, what is her reaction to that? What is the reaction the others to that act? Do children travel by themselves in the city? Do their parents perceive it as safe? Will there be any problems or will children face sexual harassment or will they be assisted if they lose their way? These questions can go on. What is important to understand is that peace and tranquillity in cities is never appreciated until it has vanished. There is a perception that cities, which are presently safe, will continue to be safe, and that some invisible factor maintains that equilibrium. This is a myth, and the gradual increase in crime, violence and destruction of cities in India and all around the world bears testimony to the present fragile calm. In this paper, I will use the term safety in an expanded sense to include safety for people's houses for their health and for their incomes. Especially as these aspects of safety have greater impact upon women and children.

In this last decade, increasing visual evidence of how cities operate at national and world wide level is now accessible through Television, through increased travel and international and regional debate on the issues of violence and safety in cities. Cities can no longer separate the "law and order" situation of the city from municipal functions. The greater decentralisation of city management and the expanding roles of cities in national politics and economic activities bring cities centre-stage. It demands states-person like responses from politicians who have to respond to opposite demands of different factions of society and ensure justice… something which most city level politicians must accept as their challenge in the coming millennium if they want to be the guardians of their cities.

Unfortunately, it is not the harm that violence and crime do to people that moves developmental intervention, but flight of capital and loss of economic productivity. It is a paradox of modern times that human beings especially those seen as not contributing to productivity, are no longer thought of as important.

The State and the urban poor

Those who seek cities as safe refuges soon face violence in them:

This safety from harm has often been the main reason why migrants have flocked to cities. Traditionally, cities have inflicted less harm on people than their traditional habitat. Cities in India today are full of migrants who have fled from caste violence, natural calamities and lack of employment and opportunity that their life in the village represented to them.

By and large, there was and continues to be a belief especially among poor migrants that cities can take care of them better than their traditional habitat in villages. Fortunately for India, our urbanisation is still around 25%. But should it increase, and it will do so soon, cities will face many more aspirants who will come to seek refuge in them.

Migrants, especially poor migrants coming into the cities are unable to afford the price of shelter in the open market and end up living on the pavements or in slums. Commonly, they lack of basic services of water, sanitation, drainage, electricity and the like. Municipal and State governments rarely treat these slum dwellers like other citizens and have complicated policies to prevent regularization of these dwellings. Demolitions of slum and pavement houses take place with regularity in different Indian cities. Is this not a form of State violence against the poor? Recently, in a major North Indian town, the Minister for Urban Development ordered demolition of some slums in his constituency which were on the road between his home and the Secretariat. The land so freed is to house some shops and a commercial complex.

In fact, this story is powerful both because of the suffering caused as also because of the interest involved. Whose interests does the city work for? Who has access to economic and political power? In a major metropolis in eastern India, hawkers and informal businesses were evicted to make the city beautiful and attractive to foreign investors. Some of those whose house and shops were demolished committed suicide. The State receives its signals from commercial interests and global capital: the city's poor are simply removed if they stand in the way.

When we think of the safety of women and children in cities, the stories of demolitions are ample evidence of the lack of safety. What could be a better or worse example of violence

than having your home demolished and belongings taken away? And it is the women and children who suffer most for the men are away at work.

The implications of such situations are compounded when addressing issues of poverty like lack of opportunities for education, employment and mobility. Cities will remain places to migrate to in an environment of continued economic change. The main point here is that cities have always had large poor migrant populations seeking opportunities. The city in turn is willing to use their labour but neither its city development plan, nor its law and order machinery even attempt to devise policies to accommodate these migrants in a timely and proactive way. Policies framed today should have been in place over a decade ago in large towns and cities, and must include smaller towns that are growing rapidly and facing new waves of migrants. The major myth that dominates is that everyone comes to cities to become a film star, but for every one person who migrates to Mumbai there are thousands more who have moved from their village to a district or small town.

The crisis in small towns

We are often rightly accused of seeing urbanisation only in the context of a Delhi or a Mumbai or a Calcutta… as though major mega cities represent urbanisation. But, in fact, the real growth centres are the smaller and medium towns. These places continue to have all the problems that these larger cities have and through neglect, they have stultified without having the resources and political attention to bring about change. And it is in these smaller towns that women suffer wantonly.

ARTICLE FOR HABITAT DEBATE: Written by Kalpana Sharma, Assistant Editor of the HINDU 1998.

* Three years ago, in Jalgaon, Maharashtra -- a small town in one of India's most urbanised states -- scores of young women were reported to have been raped and blackmailed. The story came to light when
video tapes showing these women in compromising positions were found. * Earlier this year, the unexplained suicide of a young girl in Kendrapara, Orissa -- a state in eastern India -- exposed a similar racket of sexual blackmail. * In the western state of Rajasthan, similar sporadic reports have surfaced about young girls, often from middle class families, who are lured and trapped into the sex trade, usually after being brutally raped. What is common about these three incidents is not just the new modern twist given to the ancient practice of raping women, but the fact that the locations of these actions are the growing number of smaller towns in India.

India now has more than 300 towns with populations exceeding 100,000 people. This number includes metropolitan cities and older colonial cantonment towns. It also includes some urban settlements that are growing at a runaway rate, over 500 per cent in the last decennial in one settlement outside Mumbai. Apart from the larger Class I towns, the areas that represent the greatest change in the last decade are the nearly 1,000 Class III towns, that is urban areas with populations of between 20,000 and 50,000. These are settlements that really ought not be called "urban" at all. They bear a superficial resemblance to an urban area but in terms of social organisation, attitudes, affiliations, they still bear the hallmark of traditional rural systems. But because spatially they are "towns" and not villages, where a token individualism finds expression in the presence of nuclear families, they are deemed urban. In fact, they are neither one nor the other. As one political scientist rightly called them, these are "highway villages".

Outwardly, they look like towns. The mud structures of the village have been replaced by ugly concrete structures, lacking in aesthetics and comfort. Satellite dishes, linking individual homes to a remote world outside, are prominent as are liquor shops and bars. But that is it.

The outer structures of urbanisation have grown. But there is no urban organisation. The police, if present at all, is unable to exercise its writ. Law and order is controlled by those with money power -- and the concomitant political power. Urban services such as water and sanitation are virtually non-existent. Power supply is erratic. And the roads -- barring the highway -- are unpaved and dirty.

These no-man's lands are the sites of new forms of urban violence. The target is women -- all women. The urban facade lures women out of private spaces into the public sphere. They work in factories -- export processing zones, for instance -- or in the offices of small businesses. Yet, the people who inhabit that public sphere, the men, continue to believe that women must remain inside. If they step out, they must suffer the consequences.

And this is precisely what happens. In the last five years, some of the worst incidents of rape and sexual blackmail, of young women being forced into prostitution have come from these smaller towns. The most recent of such reports, from Kendrapara in Orissa, is almost a carbon copy of similar incidents in earlier years in other towns. Why is this happening?

On the one hand, images on the mass media -- and the veneer of urbanisation -- suggests that the mixing of the sexes is permissible and that even sexual encounters are not sinful outside marriage. But on the other hand, society still does not accept this and continues to lay the blame on women if they fall into such a trap. Girls from middle class or lower middle class households thus get easily trapped. They can be blackmailed into continuing on the road on which they have stepped tentatively because the consequences of the exposure of their deeds would be much worse. In many instances, these girls prefer to kill themselves than to tell the truth as in Kendrapara.

Last November, a similar story came to light in Jaipur, the capital of Rajasthan. Although Jaipur is not a small town, it has pockets which represent a small town mentality, particularly in the attitude towards women.

Thus, the gang-rape of a young woman in the middle of the day in a university hostel by eight male students brutally exposed the trauma that many young girls were silently tolerating. In this case, the girl had the courage to report the rape to the police. The horror of the incident galvanised the whole city. There was a spontaneous "bandh" (general strike) and thousands of people came out on the streets demanding that the rapists be caught and punished.

But the rape was only one part of the story. The girl was encouraged by her family to publicly reveal how for years she had been forced into sexual encounters because of an early relationship with a young
student which she had been ashamed to admit to her family. This girl was lucky that she had her family's support. In the majority of case, girls are afraid to admit the truth, even after being raped. They bear their burden in silence for as long as is possible and often, in despair, end their lives.

This perverted form of violence against women, in some ways, represents a silent emergency. Little attention is paid to some of these smaller towns. The mainstream metropolitan media only notices their existence when a scandal is exposed. And then they are forgotten. But for every one Kendrapara, or Jalgaon, there must be literally hundreds such incidents taking place as they are the inevitable consequence of unplanned economic changes that are not supported by changes in social structures and attitudes.

Enquity and the urban poor

If demolition represent the worst face of State violence against the poor, the denial of equity in different ways constitutes systematic neglect of people's basic needs. There are innumerable examples to illustrate the plight of the urban poor in relation to the provision of basic services. Consider water slum and pavement women spend hours collecting water or spend money to buy it. Sanitation, if available, is likely to be of the pay - and - use variety: such facilities - convenient and useful at public thoroughfares and concourses - are not affordable to the poor on a daily basis. Electricity is often purchased through touts who charge exorbitant rates to them while the public utility gets nothing. The main victims of the failure of public systems are women and children. The health of both suffer with poor water and sanitation while the lack of electricity or its high cost affects those children who study. The ghettoization of the poor into enclaves unserved or ill-served by public amenities is the geographical symbolization of the inequalities that permeate society. These inequalities, if persistent, are surely good grounds for the extinction of hope and the birth of violence against what is seen as an unresponsive State.

There is a strong case, based upon equity, to provide urban basic services to all. Today, more often than not, the provision of those services is linked to whether the slum is 'regularised' or not. By making the provision of services difficult, the city administration hurts itself. If an epidemic - like the plague in Surat for example - breaks out, it does not remain confined to slum areas: the rest of all population is affected as well. Self-interest of the better - off sections of the population should work in favour of providing status of the slum. Another argument - in an era of globalization and the search for cities in which to invest capital - stringent indicators of safety, availability of universal infrastructure, a educated and healthy workforce and welcoming "natives" are applied. Tales of epidemics, violence, frighten away foreign investors and sully the image of the city, the State and the Nation. Such assurances cannot be given in words, they have to occur and to remain safe and secure before investment comes. So cities cannot suddenly become safe or have a well educated workforce or have good infrastructure. These are decadal transformations and have to be areas for constant investment and interest to the city fathers and mothers.

The market and the urban poor

The market is being offered as the panacea for all ills. Certainly, liberalisation and deregulation are important steps in ending the license - permit Raj. As the economist Amartya Sen has argued, it is clear that the Indian State must do much less in some areas - like running hotels or commercial enterprises, for example - but must do more in other areas like education, health services and the like. Unfortunately, the theology of the market delgitimizes even those functions of the State which should clearly be in its domain. What we will argue is that the State must take it upon itself to provide equity, even if the methods it adopts for doing so must change.

In urban area, for example, poor people cannot purchase land in the open market and hence the growth of slums. Here surely, the State must play a pro-active role in ensuring an affordable supply of land to the poor. More particularly, for historical reasons, in India large areas of land are owned by the State or its agencies like Municipal Councils, Railways, Port Trusts, Housing Boards and the like. When we come to urban basic services, if they are left to the operation of market forces entirely, water, sanitation and so on will not be affordable for larger sections of society. It is paradoxical that subsidies end up serving the better off. It is another matter altogether that today in most cities public agencies or utilities charged with the provision of these services do not perform well: it does not follow from this that they should be divested of these responsibilities. Rather, they need to be reformed in ways that free them from bureaucratisation and over - regulation while, at the same time, sensitizing them to the needs of the poor.

Let us take a concrete example of housing. We would argue that the grant and subsidy-oriented government controlled public housing project approach leads to corruption, inefficiency and a mismatch between what is offered and what is impact. Yet, the alternative need not be throwing the poor into the competition of the market place where, it is apparent, they will be the losers. A third option is for the State to provide what communities cannot access on their own: land and infrastructure. The rest, including housing construction, should be left to people's organization, NGOs and other zonal groupings, In this way, subsidies are cut down, government machinery made leaner and people's creative energies tapped. A

recent example of a public - private partnership is to be found in Mumbai, where the Government has provided land to rehabilitate 900 families living on railway lands, the Railways money for infrastructure and an NGO has taken up the responsibility of voluntary rehabilitation.

To take a reverse example: in many cities, Housing Boards and Development Authorities take up high-income group housing. Why cannot such activity be left to the construction barons of the real estate would? Why should the State get involved in an area which has nothing to do with equity? In this analysis, there are clear - cut- roles and responsibilities for the State, the market and civil society.

Land Tenure Housing Finance and Income-Generation

From our perspective, regular housing and infrastructure for the urban poor is the principal means of affording safety to women and children. Undoubtedly, there are other issues to be addressed as well: for example, credit for crises, credit for income-generation and credit for housing finance. Today, the slum dweller/pavement dweller depends upon the money-lender who charges exorbitant rates of interest. State agencies need to urgently address these questions. The Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (RMK), an independent body set up by government to lend money for income-generation to poor women through NGOs and CBOs, has shown us a direction In which there is potential. HUDCO has come out with a scheme to lend money for housing through NGOs and CBOs. Here again, more work needs to be done because most housing finance agencies do not lend money to poor people for the want to mortgageable title. Once again, we come up against the problem of land tenure. As regards credit at the time of crises, some thought needs to be given as to how funds can be used for this purpose thorough savings and credit groups of the urban poor.

When we look at the self-employment schemes for the urban poor, we find that they have limited success and reach. Municipal bureaucracies process applications on an individual basis and political recommendations play an important role in deciding who can be helped. The schemes get straight - jacketed in bureaucratic regulation, political interference and corruption. Is it not possible to work these through community organizations.

Safety and Poor People's Incomes

Consider another meaning of safety. How can poor people's incomes be made safe? How can they be protected against inflation? Banks are reluctant to take poor people's savings because the amounts are small, the number of accounts large and so also the transaction costs. Even where the banks permit savings accounts to be opened, the rate of interest is such that inflation erodes the value of this money or, at best, keeps it barely intact. In Mumbai, we have recently taken up, on a pilot basis, with Unit Trust of India (UTI) a scheme designed for poor people's savings. Our joint analysis suggested that the scheme should permit small sums to be invested, there should be a high degree of liquidity and the risks should be an a minimum. The UTI designed such a scheme and today about Rs.18 lakhs from a few hundred small savers have been invested. If the scheme expands and succeeds, it will be an illustration of how the poor can join the mainstream of society and participate in the working of institutions that have so far been out of their reach. And their money will be protected both from inflation and the fly-by-night operations that dupe the poor.

The Law and Order machinery and the Urban Poor

The experiences of poor people with the security apparatus of the State has been, by and large, negative. The identification of police personnel with caste, religious and political formations works to the detriment of those on the wrong side of the fence. Professionalization of the police forces and more sophisticated equipment. Sensitisation to the plight of the poor has not been on the agenda. Links between mafia-like dons operating in the real estate and film businesses, contractors and the political elite have suborned vast sections of the demolish houses of the poor and clear lands for big business or multinational investment. The pursuit of global capital legitimises the nexus between state policing structures and institutions of the market. At the same time, better-off sections of society live in enclaves where private security protects homes and persons.

Had the relationship between the police and the community been more positive, women and children could have acted as the eyes and ears of a responsive apparatus. Policing could have become an exercise in community linkages. Instead, in so many urban locales, the

police are identified with criminal elements and are looked upon with fear and suspicion by the people. The task is to build bridges between communities of the poor and local police personnel. For such a strategy to be successful, clear messages have to be sent by senior officers and the police insulated from the distorting influences of party politics and the partisan predilections of caste, ethnicity and religion. Hope for the future lies in the potential for women's groups, associations who try to build the confidence and capacity of "primary" groups - those who daily face a life of violence and injustice. Vital to designing solutions for safe cities is to draw those who figure as vulnerable and present or potential victims to participate in creating solutions whereby their vulnerability is reduced..

Civil Society and the Urban Poor

One of the main arguments in this paper has been that the urban poor are victims both of an unresponsive State and a market indifferent to their fate. The question is how to make the State responsive to the needs of the poor by forcing it to ensure equity in an environment where the dice are heavily loaded against such a notion. It is here that civil society can play an important role.

Inspite of the elastic nature of the concept of civil society - it can include Chambers of Commerce as well as people's organizations - our focus here is upon those organizations which act on behalf of the poor. Many people have argued that mainstream institutions like governments, political parties, legislatures and trade unions have lost interest in survival and dignity issues of the poor and have focused mainly upon the acquisition and maintenance of power. In these circumstances, representative democracy appears to have lost touch with grass-roots concerns.

People's organisations, made up of the poor themselves and supported by NGOs can play an important role in putting pressure upon the State and its agencies to work towards equity. We believe that access to land tenure is the central problem of the urban poor and in our context, it is only the State that can write the rules of the game in such a manner as to benefit the poor. After land tenure and infrastructure, housing finance and income-generation through making credit available are the key concerns for these sections of society. All of them have a direct

and undeniable impact on the safety of women and children, on their health and education and upon then mobility and incomes. In turn, they have an impact upon the city's future: its attractiveness as an investment centre, and its elasticity to allow space for diverse groups to co-exist in peace and tranquillity.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the safety of our cities and that of their most vulnerable sections - women and children amongst the poor - lies in a demonstrated commitment to equity, in a greater share of resources for those who are disadvantaged and a fuller share for them in governance. The stakes of the poor in mainstream institutions can be secured only if they gain from such institutions. In assisting that process, we strengthen the idea of a community, a city and a nation.

The capacities to absorb and digest violence is finite. In fact as populations grow, conspicuous consumption of material goods by the rich in the face of the poor become more prominent in cities which increase the distance between the rich and poor, where the state is unable to create spaces for people with differences to air grievances without physical battles on the streets, and where the law and order is not curbing riots and crimes, the time has come to treat safety in cities is the main concern not only of the city managers and politicians, its citizens, but of the whole nation which has begun to gradually acknowledge the phenomenon of urbanisation and the fact that its cities and their growth are the growth engines that will drive it into the next millennium.

The State and the Urban Poor

The perception of feeling secure operates at many levels*. It also promotes different behaviours among individuals groups neighbourhoods and communities. The broader the base commitment of the nation, the state and city towards safety the more confident the citizen to participate in that process. The absence of such a overt commitment by the state especially the law and order situation the greater the sense of insecurity.*

Women and children who truly occupy community spaces are the true guardians of safe havens should they be allowed to participate in such arrangements. There is nothing that happens in neighbourhoods that they do not know, that they will not hesitate to find out and which they will not act upon. Very often violence in neighbourhoods creates the basis to kill this initiative so that everyone is sitting with their eyes and ears closed, not wanting to see any acts of crime or violence because that makes them vulnerable to that act as well.

The police and the position that the state take in this is very crucial. Increasing advances in policing suggest that the police are not and should not be the only guardians of safety in cities. They should be doing this in partnership with local communities and neighbourhoods. Yet most neighbourhoods are fearful of their police station and almost everyone dreads the idea of visiting one. State policy on these issues seems fuzzy both in concept and practice. Those who are senior enough to explore this vision and have the potential of making some decisions are too busy fighting crimes, and those who meet the public from police stations are both inclined to maintain their power and cast terror on the communities, and have no training and skills to form alliances with local communities.

This process is further exacerbated by the fact that when police are perceived to have linkages with the communities, it is often seen as a nexus with crime rather than crime prevention. And by and large poorer communities only have both myths and experiences that are negative with the police.

Note for the October workshop in Delhi

Subject: Social Dimension on Urban Development - Women and Child.

If it is any consolation, the slums of the urban centres in India do not yet resemble Harlem, Watts or the other ghettoes of America with respect to, for example, the use of drugs or the spread of violence. That is probably because of the social cohesion of family, caste, community and religion. An exception to this generalization is the riots of Mumbai in the post - Ayodhya phase in the early 1990s. Since that was a unique set of events, which we hope will remain unique, we do not wish to dwell upon it in this paper.

The social stability resulting from strong kinship and other structures is, however, under threat from the familiar ills of unemployment, poverty and the absence of participation in governance. These ills impact doubly upon women who have little say in the management of family or community organizations. Some sections of the poor are weaned into political formations whose objectives have largely to do with the acquisition exercise and maintenance of political power. In general, it would not be untrue to say that citizens' participation in democracy - whether at national, state or municipal levels - is largely confined to voting during elections. Undoubtedly, this is an important exercise of citizens' rights but the question is whether democracy cannot be made more meaningful and whether there are not other means for people to participate more effectively and regularly in matters of governance.

The alliance of SPARC, NSDF, Mahila Milan *(Here, Sheela, something about our work 1 or 2 paras)*

Cities can be considered safe when their most vulnerable sections are safe: these are the poor as a whole, minorities amongst them and the sub-set of women and children. For the purpose of this paper, we will not look at communalism or the sexual harassment that all women are potentially victims of. Here, we will concentrate upon the poor as a class with specific focus upon women and children. How safe are the poor?

We must look at the issue of safety in the broadest possible sense. The term should not be used narrowly to denote only physical safety though certainly physical safety is an important component of it. Let us look at other aspects of safety in the cities as well. For the purpose of this paper, we would consider safety as protection from a variety of threats. But to turn to the question of physical safety in the first instance.

There are _____ thousand families living along the railway tracks in Mumbai. One physical threat to them is that of being run over by trains and anybody who reads the daily newspapers knows that being run over is not an uncommon occurrence. When the men of the families go away to work in factories or offices or to their menial jobs, they remain in dread till they return home in the evening wondering whether their families are intact. Children, particularly young children, cannot be kept confined to small spaces all day and the risk is great since these huts are within 2 or 3 feet from the railway tracks.

These slum families live along the railway tracks without amenities and at risk to their physical safety. Is it not possible to find a way out that benefits the city, its commuters and slum-dwellers themselves? When trains go slowly in sections where there are slums, commuters get late to work and their productivity decreases. We have been working with the Railways, the State Government and the municipality on a pilot project in Mumbai. 1500 families have to be shifted from slums along the railway tracks in order for the Railways to lay new lines. The State Government has provided land for 900 families, the Railways have provided money for infrastructure and the municipality will provide the infrastructure. The alliance of SPARC, NSDF/MM has organized these 1500 families, formed savings and credit groups of women and plans to link up with HUDCO to provide housing finance to these families. Already, a hundred families have been shifted to temporary transit accommodation and the land they occupied handed over to the Railways. Is this not an endeavour to offer physical safety to the poor, particularly women and children amongst them? Cannot this type of project be replicated in an effort to make the city safer for its last citizens?

Let us look at other types of safety for slum - dwellers and pavement - dwellers: for example, protection from ill-health, disease and premature death. Consider the question of safe water and sanitation. It is widely recognized that the health of people is closely linked to the provision of clean water and sanitation. Why is it that the State and the city cannot provide these basic amenities to its citizens? Why is it that our policies prevent poor people from getting access to these services? In many Indian cities, only those slums which are regularized are allowed water and sanitation. Why cannot we say that everyone in the city is entitled to water and sanitation irrespective of the status of the slum? Will such an approach not give safety to women and children (and the men of these families of the poor) against the ravages of disease, against high mortality, rates? Will not the city also benefit from the health of its poorest in terms of the spread of epidemics as also in terms of productivity?

On the question of sanitation, let us look at public toilets built in slums. A study we did in Mumbai brought out the following: of _____ toilets constructed, _____ were dysfunctional. The design of public toilets is such that a space is left at the bottom of the door and since the line of women's toilets faces the street, passers-by can peek at women relieving themselves. Is it not possible to design these toilets such that there is privacy for this most basic of bodily functions and such that women can be protected from the prying eyes of prurient males? When women relieve themselves in the open, they are vulnerable to the sexual aggressiveness of some predatory males. The provision of public sanitation would give them a measure of safety.

Let us consider the question of amenities. It is widely known that the poor pay more for the amenities they use than the better - off. For instance, in the absence of public sanitation, poor people may use pay-and-use toilets which can mean spending upto five or ten ill-affordable rupees a day, depending on the size of the family and the state of their gastro-intestinal systems! In the case of water, women spend hours queuing up for it and collecting it and, in some cases, spend money to buy it. Electricity, if not made available by the public utility, is bought through touts, who either illegally tap the utility's lines or bring electricity from nearby buildings. In either case, poor people pay several multiples of what they would have paid to the electricity undertaking if they had had proper electricity connections. Where there is no

electricity, there is an adverse impact upon children's education. In Mumbai recently, we have worked with the Bombay Electric Supply and Transport Undertaking to pavement-dwellers through group connections and a few hundred families have got it. This way, people pay reasonable rates, the public utility gets an income and it is one more step towards equity.

If it is agreed that the provision of basic amenities in urban slums is a form of protection against illness, high mortality rates and so on, we find that the biggest stumbling block to the extension of such protection is the grant of land tenure to slum-dwellers. Inevitably, city administrators ask for the status of the slum and its dwellers: whether, according to current policy, the slum is 'regularized' or its residents are 'eligible' for these amenities. The choice then - if we wish to extend protection to all the urban poor - is either to agree that basic services would be available to all without conditions of 'regularization' or 'eligibility' or to grant land tenure to slum-dwellers. These are questions to be addressed urgently for otherwise, large sections of this population remain untouched by civic services.

Our work consists of building the capacities of people's organizations to deal with the state and its agencies on the one hand, and sharing knowledge and experience with other groups of the poor in different slums, different cities and different countries, on the other. We believe that strength comes from community organizations which shore up individuals and public agencies are more likely to respond when dealing with organizations of the poor rather than individuals. NGOs can act as intermediaries and inter-faces between poor people's organizations and the external of state agencies, local bodies, financial institutions and the like.

.Street children

Let us look at the problems of street children. We define such children as those who do not have a family in the city or a shelter to call their own. These children are usually run - aways from homes in rural areas or small towns, propelled towards this course of action by families which have become dysfunctional on account of poverty, alcoholism, step-parents are other

such reasons. Our experience with these children is that they are most vulnerable when ill and when they are picked up by the police.

Involved in a variety of occupations in the urban informal sector such as rag-picking, catering during festive occasions and seasons and so on, these children remain rootless and roofless. They become prey to urban predators operating in the vast underbelly of the city. Our approach has been to form groups of street children, assist them to find a shelter and help them access public health facilities. The provision of ration cards enables them to cook for themselves and have wholesome food at affordable prices. Training for vocations helps launch them into the adult world of self-employment into which they have been prematurely thrust. Linking federations of street children with networks of men and women slum and pavement dwellers gives them opportunities to develop ties of affection and provide role models in the absence of families. Safety for these children consists of shelter, group support, emotional succour and some preparation to join the adult world.

Managers and professionals in the field of urban development need to think of creative methods to support street children rather than open more children's homes. Our experience has been that state - run homes are prisons for street children with their fiercely independent spirit, their disdain for rules and routines and their search for a nest in the urban jungle.