

Safety Audits and Beyond

Round Table

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Summary

The Safer Nairobi Project (Kenya) is a medium- and long-term crime prevention strategy involving partners from across government and society. The Nairobi's Pilot Urban Safety Assessment Walk was a first step in building residents' awareness of what they could do to improve safety as well as sensitizing City council, the Kenyan Government and police to women's important role and the usefulness of their input in community safety policy-making.

Victimization and violence against women surveys played a crucial role in revealing the overall incidence, types, and perceptions of crime in Nairobi. These community research findings guided the safety audit's recommendations for action. These surveys and the safety walk found that fear of crime was different for men and women and that there was a difference between their respective fear of crime and the actual risk of victimization. Unnecessarily high fear was often caused by an area's crime history or distorted media representation of crime.

Safety audits should be advocated in all city-planning strategies to enhance the concept of "inclusive cities" and serve as a tool to ensure women's active participation in urban development. However in countries where women are still marginalized and not accepted as equal partners in the development process, gender or cultural bias may greatly hinder a truly inclusive urban development process. Women's participation in democracy and development may be overshadowed by high poverty, especially in countries where their participation in urban design and planning may not be a priority when compared to meeting basic needs.

Discussion

Nairobi's first safety audit was conducted in May 2001 - we are still just at the beginning of a long-term strategy. Women's groups translated safety audit findings into concrete recommendations for action and presented them to local police, government, and business representatives. This pilot introduced women's urban planning concerns to officials and demonstrated the important role that women can play and the usefulness of their input in community safety policy-making.

There is no need to reinvent the wheel each time - links are being developed between cities in the South (ex., between Dar es Salaam and Nairobi in eastern Africa) so that they can learn from each other's experiences and will not repeat the same mistakes.

Thus far, most safety audits have only focussed on physical environment planning and modification. This is a good way to introduce people to safety issues in a way that does not accuse any particular social group. The challenge is to move beyond this first step and inform various social actors of how more sensitive social development issues such as economic domination, social inequality, and domestic problems also affect community safety. Sometimes it is useful to use different terminology so as not to frighten new partners - ex., referring to audits as for "communities" rather than exclusively for women.

A large challenge is posed by the influence of traditional police and political ways of dealing with community issues. Most police in the South have traditionally been opposed to women's presence and have based their actions on negative stereotypes and attitudes toward women.

Conclusions

- Studies on victimization and violence against women and safety audits that strategically involve diverse community members (women, decision-makers, police) can play a crucial role in increasing awareness of local gender and safety issues.
- Safety audits are relatively non-controversial and non-accusatory tools for improving public understanding of the relationship between the physical environment, urban development and planning, and women's safety. Discussion of safety audit findings can gradually move beyond mere modification of the physical environment to discussion of deeper social causes of insecurity.
- Efforts cannot just be lead by one institution or group. The earlier in the process that community members, urban planners, and government decision-makers are informed and involved in strategic safety planning partnerships, the greater the chance of successful implementation of strategies and practices.
- Media awareness of women's safety issues must be improved - safety audits are a good way to help journalists to understand women's issues.
- The transfer of practices from the North to the South - or even from urban centres to smaller communities in the same country - must be done carefully. "Safety" can be defined differently by women in different communities - not all cities have the same level of urban planning or housing and therefore do not necessarily all share the same concerns or priorities. Recommendations for action must realistically consider a community's actual available resources (human, financial, material).

Recommendations

- The concept of safety audits still needs to be popularized, especially in the South where it is very new.
- Safety audits need to be expanded and made accessible to women in all of their diversity - ex., those with special needs (illiterate, handicapped, marginalized...) who are also often victims of social exclusion and insecurity.
- Men must be involved not only because they are often perpetrators but because they are often community leaders and decision-makers who are in the best position to inspire real change to traditional opposition to women.
- Safety audit findings must be used to lobby governments to consider women's safety needs and recommendations in their decisions. In order to engage decision-makers, we have to think about how to communicate with them in productive, non-threatening ways that explain to them why and how it is in their self-interest to become involved - ex., by giving economic benefits that can result from implementing recommended changes.
- Women must educate and propose viable research-based solutions to male decision-makers and urban planners. Education and proposed solutions must consider and try to involve traditional leaders, ethnic groups, and power structures - this is especially important in the South.
- Safety audits should be advocated in all city-planning strategies to enhance the concept of "inclusive cities" and serve as a tool to encourage women's empowerment and active participation in urban development. Local government budgets must allocate resources for safety audits.

- While safety issues and challenges may be similar, other communities' strategies and practices cannot be directly replicated but instead must be adapted to the realistic social context and state of infrastructure, training opportunities, domestic violence and isolation in severely under-resourced or remote communities.
- Indicators need to be defined so that safety and security can be measured and safety audits evaluated. Ongoing progress monitoring and evaluation allow practices to be adjusted and improved while in progress.
- Local strategies, practices, challenges, and lessons learned should be compiled and made accessible for other communities to learn from - for example, on an internet site with safety audit information from around the world and an international guide of best practices. Time-limited, moderated internet discussion groups could help women around the world share their local safety expertise.