

## **Empowerment Strategies for Women: The Safety Audit: What's Next?**

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### **Summary**

The impact of safety audits go far beyond changes to the physical environment. They build awareness and are a community development tool and form of participatory research. The audit's fundamental belief is that women are experts on their own experiences. After participating in the audit process, women generally feel more confident and able to make change; marginalized women are able to push boundaries and feel that they have a valuable role in their community. The image of "women as victims" is challenged when women feel a greater sense of their individual and collective power in the physical and social environment.

However, although many cities have sponsored audits, their success and institutionalization is ironically threatening their own effectiveness. At an institutional level, audits tend to become gender-neutral and lose focus on women's needs and concerns. They become "professionalized" and conducted by so-called safety or planning experts rather than by women from the particular community. They become simplified and too narrowly focused on the physical environment rather than on the complex interaction of attitudes, behaviours, policies, and practices in the physical environment.

We cannot let the safety audit become another rigid institutionalized process. Women's safety must take account of all women's diversity since our sense of safety is affected by our different races, cultures, abilities, sexualities, geographies, and economies. To be truly empowering in a sustainable way, we must continually revise our processes and further push boundaries to involve increasingly diverse women in the process.

### **Safety audits: meaning and process**

The focus of this discussion is the women's safety audit process as an empowerment strategy. The term *safety audit* has typically caused people to turn their heads, wrinkle their foreheads, and squint their eyes in an attempt to get a clear understanding of what it means. An *audit*, of course, usually refers to matters of financial accounting. People think that when *safety*, is connected to *audit*, it must have something to do with evaluating hazards in the workplace. In my experience, when *women* are added to *safety audit* – as is in *women safety audit*, there has been confusion, consternation, and even resistance.

Throughout the 1990s, I managed safety initiatives for the Toronto organization that pioneered the women's safety audit process – the Metropolitan Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children (METRAC). METRAC was established in 1984 by the then Metro government in response to a large number of assaults and murders of women in public places in Toronto. METRAC was (and is) largely funded by the municipal government, but is separate. One of the organization's founding mandates is to be “a catalyst for change”.

The safety audit process was developed in response to stories by hundreds of women who told of their concerns for their personal safety in public places in the city. Women described where they were afraid to go, the characteristics of those areas, and when they were afraid to go there. They talked about what they did to protect themselves, and what they didn't do for fear for their safety. Most significantly, some talked about not going out at all for fear for their safety. (This was so profound, since we know that most violence in women's lives happens most often in the home, by someone known to her.)

The safety audit typically works like this: 5-6 women get together, identify the geographic area they want to 'audit', and do so based on a series of questions on a checklist. The checklist is based on factors that affect safety. METRAC's original checklist in 1989 included design factors in the physical environment such as lighting, signage, isolation, sightlines, movement predictors and the quality of maintenance.

But the checklist has grown and developed over the last 10 years in response to women's (and other marginalized peoples') scope of concerns. The physical environment and its layout and design is only one part of what affects our sense of safety. The checklist now addresses issues of attitudes and behaviours (including racist, sexist and homophobic comments) and policies and practices – what the rules and procedures are, and how effective they are in reality and everyday practice.

## **The value of audits for women**

The fundamental belief of the audit process is that women are the experts of their own experiences. What we learned from doing the audits with first dozens, and then hundreds, of

women in community groups is that the process and impact of participating in an audit is indeed, empowering.

During an audit, women have the opportunity to identify concerns in their own language, gestures, rhythms, and through symbols such as mapping risks and resources. They develop recommendations and strategies for change and then approach the appropriate decision-makers to take action.

There is a significant body of anecdotal data about how empowering audits have been for women individually and for communities. For example:

- 1) The children who took their neighbourhood and school audit results to the mayor of Toronto and were so excited because they felt that “she listened” and they felt that they, indeed, could “make a difference” to their community.
- 2) The school that used audits successfully to familiarize and integrate newcomer families to the school community.
- 3) The young mother who gained confidence in her writing skills by writing her community's safety audit recommendations.
- 4) The residents of a community overrun by drug dealers who “reclaimed” the park.
- 5) The women in communities in Bolivia who used the safety audit process as a lens through which other issues (such as access to health care, transportation and safe drinking water) were raised.

## **The impact of audits**

The results and impact of audits go far beyond changes in the physical environment. They facilitate greater community awareness. They are a community development tool, a form of participatory research and knowledge creation. After participating in the audit process, women generally feel better about themselves as being able to make change; women who have felt ‘on the margins’ are able to push the boundaries – they take up more space. Women feel a greater sense of their individual and collective power in the physical and social environment. And, women who participate in audits challenge the image of ‘women as victim’.

The safety audit process has clearly been successfully used at a personal and local community neighbourhood level. The success of audits, however, at municipal and institutional levels is less positive. Canadian cities such as Toronto, Montréal, Calgary, Vancouver, Winnipeg and Halifax all have sponsored safety audits. In fact, the term *safety audit* is now part of our Canadian urban vocabulary. Ironically, though, the success of audits is also its challenge. At an institutional level, audits tend to be diluted. They become gender neutral; the focus on women's needs and concerns is lost. They become 'professionalized' – conducted by so-called experts in the safety or planning field. They are simplified in that they become focused on factors in the physical environment rather than on the complex interaction of attitudes, behaviours, policies, practices, and the physical environment. And they are, therefore, less effective in their impact.

In a world where women's safety concerns have been minimized and pushed again into the margins (since Sept. 11, 2001), the challenge for us becomes how we continue to encourage the consciousness and commitment of our municipal governments and institutional structures to put significant resources into addressing violence against women and women's safety.

Women's safety must be understood in all women's multiplicity of locations – in all our diversity. Our fear and our sense of safety are clearly affected by our race, culture, abilities, sexualities, geographies and economies. We cannot be complacent in our assumptions that we know what fear is and feels like, or what safety is and feels like for all women. We cannot let the safety audit itself become another institutionalized process that is static and unchanging. To be truly empowering in a sustainable way, we must revise our processes continually. For example, a safety audit process might be designed by young women and girls, and another audit might be developed for assessing relationships and private spaces. To be continually empowering, the next steps for the safety audit are to push boundaries further and to involve many more women in the process.