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Editorial

Dear Readers,

The Gender Team in PRIA wishes all of you a Very Happy New Year! In this edition of *Gender News and Views*, we will discuss the aspects of 'safety' and 'security', one of the most crucial issues in the present time. The cities where we reside are expanding at a very fast pace in terms of infrastructure, human resource, capital and consumer goods. Despite so much development, the 'stereotypical mindset' continues to persist, where the 'strong' suppresses the 'weak' or where 'powerful' harasses the 'powerless'. This especially holds true in the context of men as the powerful and suppressors and women as the powerless and oppressed. Women being more vulnerable are subject to a greater degree of violence, with huge psychological impact on their lives. With so many cases of harassment against women and rising crime rates, awareness on the issue needs to be developed. It is important to be alert and cautious in public places and at the workplace, and even within homes where safety and security is often not considered seriously. In this edition, we have also included some interesting *Safety Tips*, which were discussed during the CGAMP workshop held in December.

Best Regards,

Gender Team

Lead Story

How Safe Are We: Some Inward Thinking

Sonali Mukherjee

The moment the word safety is cited, the immediate question is whose safety are we asking for? Is it the human or the animal or the nature's safety we are worried of? Whichever is the case, all of us would agree with the definition of safety given in the Wikipedia that "safety is the state of being 'safe', the condition of being protected against physical, social, financial, political, emotional, occupational, psychological, or other types or consequences of failure, damage, [error](#), [accidents](#), harm or any other event which could be considered non-desirable".

Having broadly dealt with the definitional aspect, let us look at the safety of our own beings. Broadly speaking, there are primarily two domains, the public and the private, where safety needs to be measured. I would refer to the physical space outside home as the public sphere and the space inside home as the private.

The term 'safety' in both the private and the public spheres has different connotations for men and women, and these gendered connotations cannot be ignored. The physical safety for women is of bigger concern than men, so much so that it is ingrained in the psyche of women. It invariably becomes the primary concern whenever she is in a

new surrounding or even in a situation with new people. Although men are not immune to the growing aggression in the world, this article would be devoted to some of the safety issues involving women.

I would quote a few incidents from the public sphere, which have shaken the nation in recent times. Ruchika Girhotra, a budding tennis player, was molested in 1990 by S.P.S. Rathore, a former Haryana DGP. Rathore started harassing her family, even kept her brother Ashu in wrongful confinement. Due to the harassment and mental stress, Ruchika committed suicide in 1993. Another supercop, K.P.S. Gill was accused of outraging the modesty of Indian Administrative Service officer Rupan Deol Bajaj in July 1988. If senior police officials can violate the modesty of women and they are not safe from their legal "protectors", then where are the safeguards to protect women?

No city in the world is safe for any individual at night and this is doubly true in the case of women. The gruesome murder of Soumya, a female journalist, in Delhi in the late hours of the night was shocking. Yet we cannot argue by saying that it was too 'adventurous' on her part to be out so late at night, as did the Chief Minister of Delhi, thereby releasing herself from the responsibility of the protection of the citizens of the capital city of the country. Would she have made a similar statement, if the victim were male? Probably not!

Why should women not have the same freedom as men in their choice of job profiles, working hours and compensation packages? Why are women forced to look at jobs where she cannot use her abilities and capabilities to the best?

We quite often read about a certain city being unsafe and a certain city being more secure for women. Among the four major metropolises, Delhi has the dubious distinction of being the most unsafe, while Mumbai, Kolkata and Chennai are supposed to be more kind to their female citizens. But, when a mentally unsound woman is raped by policemen on their way to the remand home, then how much of an assurance of safety is there in Kolkata? If a girl is raped on a suburban train in Mumbai and five men are mere spectators to this heinous act or when a girl is molested in front of the public outside a cinema hall in Chennai, how different is it from the incident when a girl is kidnapped and raped in a moving vehicle in the Dhaula Kuan region of Delhi?

Why is safety of women one of the key factors in several of the choices that she has to make in life? We need to address the solution to the protection of the safety of women in a changing world. Girls are setting out to higher studies and as a consequence we find women joining the workforce in large numbers. While safety norms must be considered in terms of better street lighting, improved police patrolling and other related aspects, we cannot ignore the attitude and the mindsets of men, who are the major culprits in the discrimination and violence of women. It is not only in the public spheres that women are unsafe and violated, it starts right within their homes and indeed for many, it starts at their conception and they are not allowed to be born into this world.

The northern, western and central regions of our country are dominated by a patriarchal mindset. Men are supposedly more aggressive here. Abusive language and physical violence is a part of a macho image. Suppressing women is a matter of pride and taken as a symbol of manliness. Sons are assets to the family and therefore daughters are either killed in infancy or not allowed to be born. The adversity in the sex ratio is a glaring proof of this mindset.

Incidents of a father or a brother raping his own daughter or a sister do take place, more often than they are spoken about. Uncle or a stepfather molesting a teenager is a common phenomenon. It is a well-known fact that in majority of rape cases, the perpetrator of the crime is a person who is well known to the victim. Dowry deaths, kidnapping, molestation, physical abuse, unlawful confinement, abetment to suicide and murder of women are ever increasing. The vulnerability of women is always taken advantage of. So, where are women safe?

Are there any safety issues, which we can ignore and not give priority to? Many a times our heads have hung in shame when our men have raped or molested foreign women. The advertisement by the Ministry of Tourism, where actor Aamir Khan comes to the rescue of a group of foreigners is a sight so familiar to most of us in our everyday lives. How many Aamir Khans are there amongst us? How many of us has the courage to defend ourselves, leave alone others? But through it all how many of us believe that it is not the women who are to be blamed? Do we believe that women have equal rights to their male counterparts to be out late at night, whether they are working on a night shift or enjoying a late night party? Do we label women having a drink in a bar as indecent and immoral – were all of us shocked at the Mangalore incident? Do we try and hush up or even ignore instances in our family when a relative has molested a female member? Do we opine that rape was justified because her dress was probably found inappropriate by her violator, and in doing so deny and suppress the fact that in our country many women wearing the saree and in the burqa have also been raped.

It is ultimately all about attitudes and mindsets. The entire socialisation process needs to be reoriented. Girls must be taught that it is not they or their actions, which are at fault, but it is the minds of men, who think that women are inferior, have no rights or freedom and are a threat to their dominant position. Right from their childhood, young children should be taught that both sexes are equal in all ways and have the same rights and the freedom to express the same.

Women have to be taught self-reliance and confidence in themselves that they are as capable as their male counterparts. And we as men and women must understand that no society can ever truly progress if one of its

sexes is oppressed, violated and subjugated. The onus to change this oppressive situation is not on women alone. Therefore, it is up to us, both men and women, to speak out against discrimination of women, against disrespect towards them, against violation of their rights and taking away of their freedom. It is only then that we will have a world where our friends, our colleagues, our daughters, our sisters, our wives and our mothers as well as each of us can hold our heads high and walk the world without the need of protection.

Side Story

Northeast Women's Safety and Security Concerns of Living in Cities and their Coping Strategies

Singmila Shimrah

The northeast of India comprises eight states.^[1] Each of these states have a rich and a diverse cultural tradition, which is reflected in the distinct language, costumes, food habits, literary interests and aesthetic tradition, which the region is gifted with. However, despite so much to offer, the northeast and its inhabitants have not completely been able to assimilate into the larger Indian culture. The location is a key factor that has resulted in the isolation of these states from rest of India.

As a community, the northeastern people have a strong resemblance with the East Asian community (the Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Nepalese). Their physical appearance and features are distinctly different from people in other parts of the country. In the society and culture in the northeast, there is more mingling between the sexes and it is common to see young boys and girls in open and friendly relationships. Women in the northeast also enjoy more respect and are treated with equality in their society, as compared to their counterparts in the rest of the country. Western wear is more prevalent among people of the northeast as opposed to their traditional clothes.

The strained relationship with the central government, the forceful military occupation of the northeast region and the inaccessibility of the region have led to a distancing of the people, their culture, lifestyle, traditions and values from other citizens of India and vice-versa. As a society, the northeast people want to maintain their unique identity and preserve their indigenous background, including following a community-oriented culture, which they uphold and deeply value. When they come to a new environment or a city, they try to adapt, while maintaining their culture and identity. However, migrants from the northeast, coming to large cities face many challenges and women are the most vulnerable.

Like all other women living in cities, women from the northeast also have to take precautions to ensure that they are safe. Stepping out of northeast and moving away from a safe, protected and friendly environment, women are confronted with the harsh realities of the outside world, where they feel unsafe, unprotected and insecure. Their issues of safety are addressed in the following categories:

a) Accommodation : The moment northeast women step into the city, they have to find a decent neighbourhood and safe accommodation. However, the high fees from brokers and the inability of being able to afford centrally located safer housing, they often end up in semi-rural or resettlement colonies. Surviving in such a community with other migrants, refugees, domestic workers, labourers and petty shopkeepers is difficult not because of their lower socio-economic status, but due to their patriarchal attitude of looking at single women, living on their own or in groups with suspicion. Even though they may pay a higher rent than others, the landlord/lady is not concerned with the issues of safety or security of the tenants. Women, therefore, prefer staying with relatives or friends wherever possible, rather than among strangers, with different value systems and cultural norms and standards. It is found that northeast families tend to stay together in those colonies, where people of their own community reside, giving them a sense of security. The recent murder of the 19-year-old Naga girl reflects that women are unsafe even within their homes.

b) Workplace: It is considered to be a space where women workers spend more than half of their day. Here women face verbal and sexual abuse from male co-workers and their friendly nature is misinterpreted as being promiscuous and 'available'. The patriarchal attitude of the country, especially in the states of the north, makes sexual harassment of these women one of the predominant threats that they face.

c) Travel Journey from home to workplace: Travelling in the city becomes a nightmare for young women, as they are used to be mistaken for foreigners and are either jeered at or face sexual advances from male passengers or even the driver and conductor.

d) Living as a stranger in the city: Living away from families in cities has never been easy for northeast women and they feel very alienated and lost. In a study conducted in 2007, a woman shared, '*to live in Delhi is a war for survival*'. The options of changing their residence is limited, and besides the root factor of their being unaccepted, given differential treatment and discriminated against remains the same.

The issues discussed above are important and hold true for all young women in India, who migrate from villages, smaller towns or cities to the metropolitan city. Focusing on safety and security, we may argue that for the northeastern community as a whole, adjusting or adapting to a new culture is not an easy process, and it creates insecurities and threats at various levels. Analysing the situation from a gender lens, we find that the northeast identity of women further compounds their vulnerability. There is an urgent need to address this issue.

Strategies and Tools Used by Northeast Women for Safe and Secure Living in Cities
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Most northeastern women stay in the same houses or colonies together to remain safe. · They also prefer to work in the same organisation. · Various associations like the students union, community unions and church groups are great sources of support, as they are platforms for the youth to interact with, get support, advice and protection from senior leaders and others in their community. These associations have a cell/unit in each colony, which meet at regular intervals providing solidarity and strength to the members. · Various forums and associations of each tribe or group keep a vigil on issues and concerns of the group. · The Northeast Helpline is very effective in crisis situations and immediate needs. · The traditional culture of community living is emphasised and supports all living away from home. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Most northeastern women are bold and are able to stand up for themselves and speak out against any form of injustice. · They usually travel or work together in various unorganised services sector to protect each other, when they could be in danger or in threat. · If they sense a threat to themselves they avoid developing ties with co-workers or neighbours. · Keeping alert all the time even in their homes serves as a key factor in their safety. · Collective prayer is used as a powerful tool by church leaders and missionary workers to overcome fears and create a protective blanket for the community in their life outside their homes.
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[1] Such as Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura and Sikkim.

Safety Tips

The Committee on Gender Awareness and Mainstreaming in PRIA (CGAMP) organised a sensitisation workshop for all staff in PRIA on 22 December 2009. The issues of safety within the home, public spaces and the workplace were discussed in the workshop. Below is a list of safety tips shared in the workshop.

Safety within the Home:

- Keep your house or apartment secure with good, strong locks.
- Make sure that all windows are locked and covered at night or when you are away from home.
- Be careful to who you give your keys to. Don't hide extra keys outside your house, as would be intruders are very skillful at finding them.
- Your telephone can be useful in many emergency situations. Be sure you have a list of important numbers, such as the police and fire department.
- Never let a stranger in your house, unless you are absolutely sure it is safe to do so - installing a peephole is a good way to screen unwanted visitor.
- If you come home and suspect someone has broken in, do not enter your house or apartment, because the intruder may still be inside.
- Sexual abuse takes place within the homes also. Hence, we need to pay attention to relatives, especially men, domestic help or any other suspicious person. This is important in the case of young children (boys and girls), who may be the victims of sexual abuse from relatives or a domestic help.
- Listen to your children when they complain of problems (abuse, bullying, sexual harassment), no matter where the problem happened-home, school, social events, family or friends' homes.

- Teach your child to recognise behaviour that does not make sense or makes them feel uncomfortable.
- Teach your child assertiveness skills, to be independent and to trust their own feelings. It is OK to question authority, adults, teachers, etc. at times.
- Teach children to stay a safe distance (approximately three arm-lengths) away from strangers and strangers' cars, even if a stranger seems nice.
- Teach children to yell NO, to run to where there are safe adults, and to tell an adult if a stranger has approached them. Tell children that yelling and running are better safety ideas than trying to hide.
- Teach children to answer the door by asking, "Who is it?" Tell them to never say that they are alone and to never open the door when they are alone, unless it is someone their guardian told them to expect and let in. When they are alone, ask them to talk through the door and say, "My parents are busy now, I'll tell them you stopped by."

Safety within Public Spaces:

- Avoid walking alone at night. If you must walk alone at night stay on well-lighted streets, avoid alleys and deserted parking lots.
- Maintain a confident body language.
- Avoid walking near buildings and doorways where an attacker could be hiding.
- If you think you are being followed, seek help at a nearby store or restaurant, if possible or turn and walk in another direction.
- At night it will help to carry a sturdy flashlight to light up the dangerous areas; it can also be used as a weapon.
- If attacked run, fight and yell as loud as possible; call the police (if possible).
- Don't linger in stores, restaurants or other establishments that seem deserted.
- Never enter an elevator alone, or when a single male rider is aboard. Stand near the elevator buttons with your back to the wall; if threatened push all the buttons with your back.
- Keep the entire car doors locked and all the windows closed. If you need some ventilation, partially open the window on the driver's side
- If travelling alone at night, make sure there is enough gas/petrol in your car.
- Where possible, if travelling by taxi, take a Radio Taxi, or a taxi from a known taxi stand. It has GPRS and therefore can be tracked down.
- When travelling alone by taxi, immediately dial your home/friend and inform them about your time of boarding the vehicle.
- You can also message the number of the auto/taxi to a known person. Take a minute to note down the number of the vehicle. The number of the taxi is often etched into the windowpane of the driver seat. Put police number on speed dial/call 112.
- Do not have long conversations over the mobile phone. You must be alert of the surroundings to take action at the appropriate time.
- Wait before you enter your house after paying the auto/taxi driver. This is to ensure that he does not make a note of your house and return to state that you have forgotten some bag in the car, as a pretext to attack you.

Safety within the Workplace:

- Familiarise with your building's security system. Have the phone numbers of security right in your phone.
- Let someone know where you are and when you are expected to return home.

- If you feel uneasy about working after-hours, explain your feelings to your boss/co-workers.
- If you encounter someone who looks or behaves in a suspicious manner, do not hesitate to call security.
- Park your car near to the office.
- Inform the security in your office that you are in office and should be checked on periodically.
- If you must meet a client late in the evening, keep the door open.

Feedback Received on Previous Issue

In our previous issue of *Gender News and Views*, the lead story was titled *Religion, Rituals and Patriarchy*. We sought the opinion of PRIA staff, who shared with us that the article set them thinking and made them examine their religious rituals and culture further. Some also pointed out that within a single religion there are different schools of thought or different sects; thus, while analysing religion through the gender lens, we need to take this aspect into consideration. For instance, the Protestant and Catholics within Christianity may perceive the relation of women and men differently; the same may be true within Islam, where the Shias are more liberal towards women in comparison to the Sunnis. We have put forth all these opinions and reflections in this section.

All religions are reflections of the society that we live in. Thus interpretations of age-old doctrines and religious rules undergo changes with the change in our perspective over time. In Hinduism, patriarchy is evident in the many forms like in the Ramayana, Sita, the wife of Ram, has been challenged for her chastity a number of times; however, the chastity of Ram and Laxman has never been questioned, despite being exiled for fourteen years. In the Mahabharata, the episode when Dushasana tries to strip Draupadi off her sari (also known as the Draupadi *vastara haran*), she seeks protection from Krishna (a male god), who becomes her saviour.

There are some festivals in the states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal, where women observe fasts for the longevity of male members in their family, like the son, brother, son-in-law and husband. Male members, on the other hand, are never seen observing fast for their daughters, sisters or wives. During festivals like the Teej, even pregnant women fast for the longevity of their husbands.

Within Christianity, it is believed that a woman is created from Adam's rib bone. She is thus anyways secondary, as Adam was the primary creation. If we compare the Catholic and the Protestant Churches, there is a marked difference in the way women characters have been perceived. For example, while the Catholic Church glorifies Virgin Mary as the mother of Jesus, the Protestant Church recognises Virgin Mary to be the mother of Jesus, but does not glorify her. Another aspect that needs to be critiqued is that if Mary Magdalene was the wife or a companion of Jesus, why did the Church castigate her and not the Jesus. Within Christianity, the number of women attending church or being a part of religious gatherings is more compared to their role as leaders or persons in decision-making roles.

Among the disciples of the Jesus, it was not only females (like Mary Magdalene) who were portrayed in negative light, but male characters also. In fact, Jesus walked and preached among the outlaws (diseased, sick, tax collectors, prostitutes), who were men as well as women.

Islam began as a reformist religion in the Middle East. While comparing pre- and post-Islamic Arabia, one might notice that Islam reformed the structure of Arab societies in terms of unifying the people, reforming and standardising gender roles throughout the region. Islam improved the status of women by instituting rights of property ownership, inheritance, education and divorce.

In Islam, there is no difference between men's and women's relationship to God; they receive identical rewards and punishments for their conduct. Also, according to Koran, both men and women are supposed to dress modestly; hijab is merely a headscarf that was used even before Prophet Mohammad, due to influences from Syria and Iran where hijab was a sign of social status. Later on, Koran mentions wearing of hijab in order for women to distinguish themselves and protect them from being harassed. In the present time, it has become more of a regional, cultural social custom rather than a religious belief, and many Muslim countries and sects within Islam like the Shias have a rather progressive approach and do not mandate these beliefs.

Within the Sunni community, the religious rituals practiced by the men and women differ to some extent. While the men offer the Namaz at fixed timings in the mosque everyday, women offer the Namaz at home. Women are not refrained from entering the mosque, but they are allowed to enter either before or after the time of Namaz. Another point to note is that men may offer prayers individually or in a group, and are often led by the Imam (a male) when they are praying in a group. Women have to pray on their own, and they are not led by an Imam during the prayer. Also, if a group of women visit the mosque, they have to worship individually. The same rules are applicable for

women when they visit the Jama Masjid (principal Mosque of the Islamic community in India). However, one rule that remains common for both men and women is that they have to be in a pure form during the time of Namaz.

The only exceptional case when women are permitted to pray together with the men is during the Hajj (the Holy pilgrimage to Mecca). All the men and women are together led by the Imam, who is a male.

Local and Global Snippets

1. **SC admits woman's plea to end life** (*The Times of India*, 17 Dec. 2009): The plight of a 61-year-old woman, who suffered a brutal sexual assault 36 years ago and has been lying in a vegetative state in a Mumbai Hospital ever since, has moved the Supreme Court to set aside its pro-life stance.
2. **Widows in India need basic respect and rights** (*The Statesman*, 11 Dec. 2009): The neglect of rights to property, land and other types of inheritances, bureaucratic harassment, limited freedom to remarry, social restrictions on living arrangements, restricted employment opportunities and lack of social support, makes widows in India vulnerable.
3. **Six abortions for a male child** (*The Times of India*, 9 Dec. 2009): In Ahmedabad, a woman was subjected to repeated abortions and physical abuse by her in-laws in their obsession for a male heir.
4. **Women are city's unequal half** (*The Hindustan Times*, Mumbai, 4 Nov. 2009): The Mumbai Human Development Report says gender ratio is unfavorable to city women. The gender ratio in Mumbai is declining. There are 809 women for every 1,000 men.
5. **Anjumans deprive Muslim women of micro credit** (*The Times of India*, New Delhi, 8 Nov. 2009): A massive drive to deny millions of Muslim women access to micro credit is done by the Muslim *anjumans* (community organisations) in Karnataka.
6. **Rural women often deprived of human rights** (*The Hindu*, Delhi, 17 Oct. 2009): Many rural women and girls are not in school, and they lack equitable access to decision-making processes, limited access to life-saving resources, said Ban Ki Moon, UN Secretary-General.
7. **Women in the recession** (*Political & Business Daily*, Delhi, 23 Oct. 2009): The rate of women's unemployment has increased to almost double as a result of recession.

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