In the aftermath of the brutal gang-rape case in Delhi on 16th December 2012, there has been widespread public discussion on the factors behind the rising incidences of violent crimes against girls and women in India’s growing urban areas. A round table discussion on “Collective Actions to Counter Violence Against Women in Urbanising India” was held at PRIA and jointly hosted by PRIA and The Asia Foundation on 25th February 2013. With an intention of sharing experiences and thoughts on emerging trends of violence against women in urban areas, the discussions were based on the three central ideas of 1) Identifying the underlying causes of growing harassment of girls and women in various public spaces—schools, colleges, offices, streets, malls, buses; 2) Identifying ways in which this phenomenon can be addressed systematically, not just in Delhi, but around hundreds of towns and cities in the country; and 3) what can be done collectively to address this phenomenon over the next couple of years.

The event was chaired by Dr. Rajesh Tandon, President, PRIA, Ms. Martha Farrell, Director, PRIA; Mr. Nick Langton, Country Director, The Asia Foundation and Mr. David Arnold, President, The Asia Foundation.

Dr. Rajesh Tandon laid down the context for the discussions. With rapid economic growth and urbanization over the past two decades, a considerably larger number of women and girls are now migrating to urban cities in search of various alternatives for employment and upgradation of skills and further education. Apart from being faced with other issues peculiar to urban living, what has been one of the most direct and serious outcomes of this has been the significantly high increase in the number of reported cases of sexual harassment and other forms of violence against women and girls in schools, colleges, offices, factories, on the streets and in other public spaces such as malls, car parks, parks and markets etc.

The lack of basic services, lack of adequate urban housing, public spaces, employment opportunities, and inequality between the have-s and have-nots has resulted in disenchantment and frustration, which contributes to the problem. This combination of factors has raised an increasing concern for the physical safety of girls and women. Violence against girls and women has been a part of India’s patriarchal culture and society for centuries. Despite the existence of progressive laws to protect women’s rights and security, Indian girls and women are widely vulnerable to domestic violence, sexual harassment, rape, and other forms of sexual abuse. As civil society organizations with an interest in combating gender-based violence, who are contemplating ways of collectively addressing this issue, it is found that programs and interventions are very often rural-based rather than focused on the growing impact of urbanization on lower and middle class youth.
‘Who will own this problem?’ was the fundamental question that was raised by Mr. Nick Langton. Once the reactionary movements on the incidences are over; the focus of the public is also known to shift, therefore there is a need to find ways in which Violence Against Women (VAW) is projected as an issue that is not only a women’s issue but rather a societal issue. Ms. Martha Farrell agreed and said that the primary thrust must be on finding ways in which this cycle of violence can be broken. Two other questions were put forth to the group by Mr. Nick Langton: i) what could be the appropriate role of the government, civil societies, and various institutions to address this issue and ii) how can international foundations effectively partner with India?

Mr. David Arnold commented that gender inequality is the deep rooted cause of gender based violence and issues of women’s safety and security or domestic violence requires a long term and holistic approach to address it effectively. Incidences of violence cannot be seen as isolated cases but as manifestations of inter linked causes was the view put forth by Suneetha Eluri from ILO. She explained that institution of caste, marriage and property, undivided labour between men and women and a mismatch between the cultural sphere and value based systems within the homes are all inter linked and are some of the causes of violence against women. The family therefore can be defined as a central point where violence begins and even though family members do figure in the articulation, the focus is not always the family during intervention. She stressed upon the fact that the focal point for addressing VAW must be to democratisate the family in order to address the issue of VAW. Dr. Peter Evans from DFID agreed but added that different ways of intervening in the homes can be learnt from the experiences of other countries who have measured and reduced the incidences of VAW and use this as evidence to further work in the area in India.

Having sensitive institutions was considered important and while it was felt that having a gender sensitive police and judiciary system is a pre requisite and critical for women who seek justice; Keerty from the O.P. Jindal law college felt that the first port of call for many women who have faced violence is hospitals, therefore a lot of efforts have to go into institutionalizing gender sensitivity in the medical services. Ashuman from PRIA however felt otherwise. According to him, the police station is always the first port of call a woman will approach to seek justice after an incidence of violence and the police stations are inadequately equipped to handle such cases. There are not enough women police officers and sub inspectors are found counseling women to resolve cases of domestic violence. There was therefore a strong recommendation by Seema Misra from AALI to sensitise the police personnel and delink the medical support from the registration of FIR, whether for rape or for acid attacks.

Mr. Nick Langton felt that sensitizing the police will have less impact because with them one is always working on the margins. And Soumya, independent women rights lawyer commented that the problem is exacerbated because not only is the impression of people about the police personnel poor but the morale among the police personnel is also very low. There are plenty of gender sensitisation trainings being commissioned and the being undertaken for police personnel especially after the unfortunate incident of December 16th, but there are no reports of its effectiveness. He therefore opined that gender sensitisation in schools will be a better option. Mr. Nick Langton and others in the group felt strongly about the introduction of a gender sensitisation programme in schools research has proven that early childhood education has the most influence on an individual’s behaviour later
on in life, it is natural that the focus should be on the introduction of value based education in schools.

Ashima, who is working in Jammu & Kashmir with youths, mentioned that convincing young boys to stop violence is very important. She emphasized on a more sensitive education system that is focused on helping young boys and girls to transcend gender identities and understand how gender based violence impacts the lives of women. Dr. Rajesh Tandon raised the fact that a larger number of boys and girls are now also interacting together in co-educational situations, but the space for speaking about values and gender sensitisation within these spaces is missing and no dialogues are seen to be taking place around this space in educational institutions. Urmila also felt that along with a sensitisation module, it was important for activists to unpack the issue and communicate to the young people what they can do to address the issue. Dr. Peter Evans of DFID, disagreed on the grounds that gender sensitisation in schools is a contested issue and we should not get carried away with what we can achieve by a brain washing module on sensitisation in schools as there is no means of being able to measure the change in the behaviour of these children and therefore measure its success. But sensitisation has to come with accountability and when it comes to women’s issues, accountability is seen to become much milder. There is a bureaucratic indifference to what gender issues are and possible ways of structurally incorporating those into the working of the department in terms of measuring gender empowerment within the functioning of the department as well as in the work across the nation is a necessity.

Many of the participants were of the opinion that the responses to VAW is reactionary in. Approach towards working on addressing the issue of VAW should be geared towards finding a preventive approach going beyond just being reactionary in nature, building a consensus and conscience on the reason for people coming together. Dr. Peter Evans agreed and shared that the focus should be on the economic empowerment of women as a first step towards the prevention of VAW. New laws and new funds have to take into account the fact that women are taking on non-traditional roles and recognise that people change. Dr. Tandon recommended that there is a need to now press for and demand for resources from Indian society for prevention of VAW, holding governments accountable and helping women to deal with it.

Eve teasing has been in the vocabulary for a number of years now and girls are often advised by well-meaning elders to not talk to ‘those’ boys, or to go out at certain times of the day or night. Infact harassment of women and girls in the public spaces has become so much a part of the everyday lives that it often ignored as a small misdemeanor and public authorities are also not encouraged to register it. Keerty felt that violence is so deeply rooted in history and is so much a part of the lives of women that part of the problem is that women do not even view it as a problem and as an integral part of their marriage. Dr. Tandon felt that as a culture, tolerating these misdemeanors has become common and therefore the lack of will in women to protest and speak out against it is low. Seema Misra from AALI in Lucknow agreed and pressed for an increase in the reporting of cases of violence against women. In today’s scenario in which there are many more women entering the workplace and more women are found asserting themselves, there is a back lash on the number of women in the workplace. She felt that there is a need to have more discussions and dialogues around the issue
within the workplace and beyond. Souma added that change will come only when people realise that violence is not acceptable.

But public apathy and lack of community taking action was also identified as a core area that needs to be looked into. Soumya, a women rights lawyer shared that he always travels by public transport and is accustomed to seeing drunk men and people using abusive language on women in public spaces and public transports is common. He never sees anyone protesting against such incidences. Nandita, from PRIA then raised a number of questions around the safety of women in urban spaces: what do women perceive as a safe spaces as an important piece of knowledge to have if one is to work around the issue of VAW in the urban space and the need to assess if women’s needs and women’s safety issues have been incorporated into the designing of urban spaces and urban transport in the city.

Mr. Nick Langton concluded the discussion by highlighting the fact that gender based violence is based on the way society views women. There is a need to recognise the fact that VAW is a complex issue that cannot be addressed from any one particular strategy but rather from a variety of angles which is multi sectoral, multifaceted and takes into account educators, parents, law enforcers working together on policy analysis and advocacy for gender equality, women’s empowerment. Violence Against women should be viewed not only a woman’s issue but also a man’s issue. People from all segments of society and sectors must be seen as engaging together to address this issue. Rashmi from Care, share that it is important that we constantly work together as women but until and unless there is a shift in those power relations that do not allow women to draw boundaries and women begin to negotiate their space, women will find it difficult to address the issue.