

**Special Session
Human Rights Paper Session**

**Ensuring Women's Safety for
an Inclusive Hanoi:
Voices of Female University Students**

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INTRODUCTION

Inclusive cities are the cornerstone of a progressive and equitable society, where all individuals can flourish without fear of discrimination or violence. However, achieving such cities requires prioritizing women's safety as a fundamental principle.

In 2021, Vietnam ranked 87 out of 156 countries in progress on gender equality (UN Women, 2022, p.2). Hanoi is one of the first five cities to pilot the "Safe and Friendly City for Women and Girls" program since 2012, aiming to create a safer and more women- and girl-friendly public space (Vinh, 2022). However, this campaign mainly targets domestic violence and serious crimes such as rapes. Perception of public safety also raises serious concerns: 50% of women did not feel safe on crowded buses or at bus stops (ActionAid, 2017), and 49% of adolescent girls said they did not feel safe in public settings (Plan International, 2017).

Women's safety is not just a women's issue but a human rights issue that affects society as a whole. This paper addresses the pressing issue of women's safety in Hanoi, Vietnam, with a specific focus on the experiences of female university students.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research methodology, harnessing the insights and experiences of 17 diverse female university students in Hanoi via group discussion. These participants were selected to ensure a broad representation of backgrounds and perspectives. The discussions held as part of this study were structured and in-depth, delving into the multifaceted issues that women encounter in urban environments. The primary objective of these discussions was to unearth the most pressing concerns and challenges faced by women in the city and to solicit their input for formulating comprehensive solutions to foster an inclusive and safe urban environment in Vietnam.

FINDINGS

Women Safety in Hanoi: Experience and Perception

Diverse Views on Safety: Among respondents, there is a spectrum of feelings regarding safety in Hanoi. While some have shared a general sense of security, others

have voiced apprehensions about scams, thefts, and illicit activities such as reckless racing. These disparities underscore the intricate and diverse landscape of safety perceptions among women in the city. These variations may be partly attributed to differences in socioeconomic backgrounds and residential locations. To gain a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to these differences in perceptions and experiences, it is important to conduct more extensive and thorough research.

Experiences of Cat-Calling and Verbal Harassment: A recurring theme in the responses is the experience of cat-calling and verbal sexual harassment. Many women, from childhood to adulthood, have faced unwanted attention and derogatory comments when out in public. This behavior has led to feelings of reluctance and insecurity among them, as one participant expressed:

“My friends and I have faced catcalling a lot of time, for me its ever since i was a child which made me reluctant everytime I wanted to go out and play. Now whenever us girls go out we have to care about how we dress because there are men looking at us very weirdly, making us feel insecure.”

Inadequate Street Lighting and surveillance: Another common issue affecting women's safety is the inadequate street lighting and absence of surveillance in certain areas of Hanoi. This lack of proper lighting makes it challenging to drive on the roads and walk around neighborhoods, particularly in alleys. The darkness contributes to a sense of insecurity.

Instances of Disturbing Behavior: Several respondents recounted disturbing encounters with individuals engaging in indecent exposure and lewd behavior in public spaces. These experiences have been distressing and unsettling, affecting the well-being and comfort of women in the city.

Perceived Safety in Groups and Secure Environments: Respondents mentioned feeling safer when accompanied by others, such as a boyfriend or friends. Additionally, living in secure environments, like large apartment blocks or university campuses, was seen as a factor contributing to a higher sense of safety.

Limited Discussion of Safety Issues: Interestingly, some respondents noted that discussions about safety concerns in Hanoi are not prevalent among their peers. Instead, they mentioned discussing such issues more in the context of other places or when facing insecure situations outside Hanoi.

In summary, women's safety in Hanoi is a complex and nuanced issue. The varying experiences and perceptions underscore the importance of addressing safety concerns comprehensively to create a more inclusive and secure urban environment for all residents.

Impacts

Women in Hanoi grapple with the profound and often enduring impacts of safety concerns in their daily lives. The pervasive fear of harassment and assault can significantly affect their mental health and overall well-being. Several respondents provided insights into how these concerns affect them personally:

Impact on Mental Health: The fear of harassment and assault, particularly through experiences like cat-calling and indecent exposure, can lead to severe mental health issues. As one respondent aptly put it, "It would lead to mental diseases, especially in girls." The constant worry about personal safety can contribute to anxiety, stress, and even trauma, affecting a woman's overall quality of life.

Limiting Social Activities: The fear of safety concerns can lead to cautious choices regarding social activities. Respondents expressed reluctance to go out alone and a preference for staying at home. This cautiousness can limit opportunities for personal growth, social interaction, and engagement in community life.

Discomfort in Public: Some respondents shared that they feel uncomfortable when alone with men, even in public places. This discomfort arises from concerns about personal safety and the fear of harassment or assault. Such feelings of unease can impact women's ability to move freely in public spaces.

Impact on Education and Work: Safety concerns can influence career and educational decisions. For example, one respondent, who majors in hotel

management and often comes home late, expressed the fear she experiences when returning home late at night. These safety concerns can affect women's choices regarding work hours, transportation options, and even career paths.

Heightened Alertness: The fear of safety concerns can lead to heightened vigilance in public spaces. Respondents mentioned feeling startled when approached by strangers or when they catch someone looking at them. This state of alertness, while a coping mechanism for personal safety, can be mentally exhausting and impact everyday interactions.

Lack of Personal Experience: Some respondents noted that they had not personally faced safety challenges in Hanoi, but their peers had. This variation in experiences underscores the diverse and complex nature of safety concerns among women in the city. However, even those who have not faced such challenges remain aware of their potential impact on personal lives.

These impacts can be subtle and taken for granted. Intertwined with other social issues and personal struggles in daily life, these safety concerns can lead to a range of emotional and psychological responses, affecting daily life, education, work, and social interactions. Addressing these safety issues is crucial not only for creating a more inclusive and secure urban environment but also for promoting the overall well-being of women in the city.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the responses provided, the following recommendations can be synthesized to enhance women's safety in Hanoi:

Empowering Education

Implementing comprehensive, inclusive sex education programs can challenge prevailing gender norms, promote consent culture, and embolden young women to assert their rights and safety.

a. Comprehensive Sex Education Programs: Implement mandatory and comprehensive sex education programs in schools to dispel misconceptions about

sex and promote healthy attitudes and respect. These programs should go beyond biological aspects and address crucial topics such as consent, healthy relationships, gender equality, and bystander intervention. They should aim to foster a culture of respect and equality from a young age. As one respondent mentioned, "Education programs at such a young age should teach boys to respect girls instead of teaching girls to cover up their body parts."

b. Educational Initiatives on Harassment: Develop educational initiatives specifically designed to raise awareness about harassment, consent, and reporting mechanisms. These initiatives should be seamlessly integrated into school curricula and community programs. The focus should be on equipping students with the knowledge and skills to effectively identify and respond to harassment. Schools can open separate classes to teach children how to protect themselves from unwanted situations and treat people respectfully.

c. Empowering Women Through Education: Access to education is a fundamental human right. Ensuring that women have equal access to quality education not only empowers them economically but also helps them develop the skills and knowledge needed to navigate urban environments safely.

Legislative Measures & Public Awareness

a. Legal Frameworks: Hanoi must institute legal frameworks that shield women from gender-based violence. This encompasses stricter penalties for perpetrators and more comprehensive support services for survivors.

b. Government Policies: Encourage the government to develop policies that incentivize innovation in safety technology, public awareness campaigns, and community-driven initiatives. Explore the possibility of mandatory reporting of harassment cases and stricter penalties for perpetrators. These policies can facilitate innovation and improve safety on a broader scale.

c. Strengthening Law Enforcement: Enhance law enforcement's capacity to handle harassment and assault cases by providing specialized training for officers. Establish transparent reporting and support mechanisms for survivors, ensuring their cases are treated with sensitivity and urgency. Prioritize a survivor-centric approach to

investigations and prosecutions.

d. Awareness Campaigns: Launch extensive and culturally sensitive awareness campaigns across multiple media platforms, including television, social media, and community events. These campaigns should not only educate the public about harassment and assault issues but also challenge deep-rooted societal norms and stereotypes. Encourage creative approaches such as storytelling and personal testimonials to engage a broader audience. Short videos or advertisements can be effective tools for raising awareness, as exemplified by "Change the Angle" by LUX. These campaigns should focus on changing societal attitudes and behavior.

e. Community Engagement and Empowerment: Actively involve communities in co-creating and implementing safety initiatives. Foster dialogues and partnerships with local leaders, and grassroots organizations to ensure that safety measures align with the unique needs and challenges of different neighborhoods and populations.

Women-Friendly Urban Infrastructure

a. Lighting and Accessibility: In Hanoi, inadequate lighting in many areas creates environments where harassment and assault can easily occur. Improving lighting in public spaces not only enhances safety but also promotes a sense of security among women, encouraging them to be more active in the community.

b. Safe Transportation: Investing in a robust public transportation system can significantly enhance women's mobility and independence. Safe and reliable public transportation reduces the need for women to rely on potentially dangerous modes of transportation, such as walking alone at night or accepting rides from strangers.

c. Use of Technology for Safety: Advocate for and facilitate access to safety technology resources, including mobile apps, hotlines, and wearable devices. Collaborate with tech companies and organizations to develop and maintain these tools, ensuring they are user-friendly and widely accessible. These tools can help individuals feel safer and enable faster responses in emergency situations.

Engaging Men and Boys as Allies

a. Educating Men and Boys: Education programs for men and boys should focus on challenging harmful stereotypes, promoting healthy masculinity, and encouraging them to be active bystanders when they witness harassment or violence.

b. Fostering Solidarity: Promoting solidarity among men and women is essential for creating a safer city. Men can play a crucial role in supporting women's rights and safety by actively advocating for gender equality.

Ultimately, work towards creating a safe society where women can dress as they please and go about their lives without the constant fear of harassment or assault. This requires persistent efforts to transform cultural norms, challenge victim-blaming attitudes, and promote gender equality at all societal levels.

These recommendations emphasize the importance of education, awareness, community involvement, and government support in addressing the multifaceted issue of women's safety in urban environments. By taking a holistic approach and involving various stakeholders, Hanoi can progress toward becoming a safer and more inclusive city for all residents.

CONCLUSION

Creating a city where women can thrive without fear of violence enriches the lives of all its inhabitants. Implementing the proposed recommendations will demand a collective effort, but the rewards are immeasurable - a vibrant and inclusive city that stands as a testament to human rights and gender equality. By prioritizing women's safety, we pave the way for a more inclusive, equitable, and prosperous society where every individual, regardless of gender, can thrive.

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