

Nowhere to go

How a lack of safe toilets threatens to increase violence against women in slums

Introduction

“A woman would not feel safe walking to the toilet. Men rape women there at night.”¹

Access to a toilet is a basic human right²; however, millions of women and girls living in the world’s slums have nowhere safe to go. Without toilets in their home, or adequate communal toilet blocks to use, many women living in urban slums are forced to use public spaces to openly defecate and manage their menstrual needs. In addition to the impact on their health and dignity, one issue that has been highlighted by women in communities is an increased threat of sexual harassment, rape and other forms of violence, affecting them both physically and psychologically.

This exploratory paper highlights some of the experiences of women living without adequate sanitation in slums in Bhopal and Delhi in India, and Kampala in Uganda. The women were interviewed by graduate students from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) and programme staff in order to collect initial findings about how they feel about their safety in regards to the sanitation facilities available to them.

Using the women’s own words, this collection of personal stories aims to draw attention to an under-reported³ and under-researched issue. This is not an exhaustive study or a finalised report. It is intended to instigate discussion about how women’s rights to both sanitation and safety are being violated on a daily basis, and offer suggestions for enabling empowered women to demand their rights.

Defining violence against women

According to the United Nations, violence against women and girls includes physical, sexual and emotional or psychological abuse, occurring in the family, community or condoned by the state⁴.



Photo: Keren Massey, MSc

Life in the slum

Almost a billion people worldwide live in slums. These are characterised by inadequate housing and living conditions, a lack of basic services such as toilets, and are subject to overcrowding. By their nature, slums are unplanned, and many people live in basic rented accommodation with few, if any, legal rights. In many countries, women do not have the legal right to own property, so even the few legal rights provided to slum-dwellers may be inaccessible to female-headed households. In slums, where there are high levels of poverty and a lack of law-enforcement, going out at night in search of a place to go to the toilet can be risky for both men and women; however, women face the additional threat of sexual violence.

No safe toilets

“I see that what brings all these problems here in the slums are the toilets.”

The human right to sanitation requires services to be **available, safe, acceptable, accessible** and **affordable**. However, in slums, the facilities that do exist often fail to meet some or all of these criteria. For example, toilets can be poorly located, badly lit and lacking doors or locks, threatening women’s safety by exposing them to the risk of rape, attack and harassment.

In **Bhopal**, public toilets were available in just four out of 30 slums, and only 2% of people used them due to their distance from households, poor maintenance (two of the four toilets were not functional at the time of the study) and a lack of water for hygiene practices. There was also a charge to use the toilets that many women could not afford. The remaining 98% resorted to defecating in the open, usually in the early hours of the morning when it was dark and there were fewer men around. More than 20% reported walking a kilometre or more to defecate.

Some women took measures to control the urge to relieve themselves. Many ate and drank less, resulting in indigestion and stomach aches, a loss of appetite and risks to their health. One of our respondents told of her husband telling her to eat less at night to avoid getting the urge to go to the toilet.

In **Kampala**, women reported that the few toilets that were available were poorly maintained, leading to them becoming full and unhygienic, and therefore unusable.

“We are all using the same toilet and it gets filled up very fast. Everyone finds it disgusting because it is dirty and many people use it.”

“The toilets are almost full. Maggots come out and crawl up your feet.”

There were no facilities for managing menstruation, such as bins and water for washing. Women felt that inadequate sanitation put a greater burden on them than on men.

“The toilets are far from our homes... A man can just go anywhere to pass urine, but a woman has to walk all the way to the toilets.”

“It is more dangerous for a woman than a man because an attacker can take money from you and rape you... but a man will only be robbed of money.”

Public toilets were often locked at night, forcing women to use a bucket or plastic bag at home and dispose of it the next day. Additionally, even if they wanted to use them, many women could not afford to use these toilets because of their limited funds after buying essentials such as water and food. In some cases, as they did not control their household resources, women had to ask male family members for money to pay fees or buy supplies, and could be refused.

“A mother cannot pay 1,000 [Ugandan] shillings a day per person when she has four children with diarrhoea and they go to the toilet ten times a day. That is 5,000 [Ugandan] shillings per day only for the toilet when she does not have money and has to buy food, pay fees and pay rent.”

In **Delhi**, women raised similar concerns about a lack of toilets and the poor design and maintenance of the limited facilities.

“Some [toilet] cleaners pay some money to their supervisors and do not come to work.”

These women said that despite repeated applications to the local authorities, no new toilets were planned. They were disgusted by the poor sanitary conditions in the slums.

“The sewage comes up to my door. We feel so disgusted that we cannot even eat food. We cannot leave our homes.”

Violence and fear

“It is very common over here to be physically assaulted and raped.”

With nowhere adequate to go to the toilet, women are forced to use unsafe facilities or go outdoors, increasing their vulnerability to violence.

Many of the women interviewed experienced violence and harassment on a daily basis⁵. They feared violence by men in a variety of places, including public toilets, open defecation sites and the routes leading to both. Women looking for a place to defecate were exposed not only to rude remarks but also brick-throwing, stabbing and rape. Going out during both day and night was seen to be dangerous for women and young girls.

Rapes were often unreported as women and their families received death threats from perpetrators to prevent them from going to the police, who themselves are often disinclined to respond to reports of violence. When women did report rape, they were often blamed for the incident rather than the perpetrator.

Women living in slums in **Delhi** reported that it is common to be physically assaulted and raped on their way to use a public toilet. They told of specific incidents of girls under ten being raped. They also said there were incidences of men hiding in the latrines at night, waiting to rape those who entered.

94% of the women and girls interviewed in **Bhopal** said that they faced violence or harassment in some form when going out to defecate, and more than a third had been physically assaulted. More than half the women defected alone in the open, with most feeling unsafe while doing so. More

than 80% related this to fear of men. They faced rape and other forms of sexual violence, and were subjected to explicit sexual remarks and propositions or being watched by men who sometimes indecently exposed themselves or masturbated. One 50 year old woman described how a group of three or four men grabbed her and tried to sexually assault her when she went alone to defecate in a nearby field.

In **Kampala** women felt that they were at risk of physical violence when travelling to a toilet after dark, due to what they perceived to be a high probability of attack and rape.

“There are two main difficulties for women when it comes to toilets in our community. The first one is money, and the second is that at night men can easily rape and murder us.”

This real threat of violence and harassment means that women live in constant fear of being attacked. The fear and threat in the minds of the women we talked to was strong enough to discourage them from leaving their homes to go to the toilet at night.

“A woman would not feel safe walking to the toilet. Men rape women there at night. The most dangerous time is the night.”

One woman in **Bhopal** said that the moment she feels the urge to go to the toilet she imagines men and snakes attacking her.

This fear was shared by women in **Delhi**.

“During the night we are in constant fear.”

Mothers feared for the safety of their daughters and their ability to ‘keep their honour’ before marriage, identifying 12 to 18 year olds as most at risk of violence.

“We have had one-on-one fights with thugs in order to save our daughters from getting raped. It then becomes a fight that either you kill me to get to my daughter or you back off.”

Mothers told how they often accompany their daughters when they go to defecate.

“I have three young daughters. I cannot let them go alone... I go with them every time one of them has to go for defecation. I have to make many trips during the day. But I have no other choice.”

This fear was seen to contribute to families allowing girls to marry at a younger age.

Shame and discrimination

“You do not want to demoralise yourself by using such a toilet.”

Without access to a toilet, women are vulnerable not only to physical, sexual and psychological or emotional violence, but also to social discrimination and economic exclusion, putting them at further risk.

The women interviewed reported timing their trips to the toilet around when they were least likely to face threats from men, but were ashamed of going to the toilet in broad daylight when everyone could see them defecating. They were forced to weigh up the threat of violent attack at night against the humiliation of going to the toilet in public during the day.

Women in Bhopal and Kampala felt that defecation should be kept private and felt ashamed to be seen even on the way to a toilet.

“Normally in our culture, older people are supposed to go to the toilet secretly... as you are going there you may find your friend and you may be ashamed that you are going to defecate.”

They also found it difficult to manage menstruation safely and hygienically. They reported a lack of privacy when changing pads or cloths.

“It’s a secret and shameful for others to know that you are having your period.”

Many women found defecating in a bucket or a plastic bag to be particularly humiliating, and feared dirtying the house and exposing family members and neighbours to disease.

“When somebody knows that you defecate in the house, your household is hated and people do not want to visit because they cannot eat or drink anything.”

Even though it was common knowledge that home toilets were widely used, a facade of secrecy surrounding this behaviour was constructed and carefully maintained. This behaviour was isolating, preventing women from openly discussing the impacts of inadequate sanitation on their lives and communities.

No protection, no support

“We don’t have any support... Where will we go?”

In many slum areas and around the world, entrenched cultural norms that devalue women and deny them a voice allow communities and the authorities to turn a blind eye to sexual violence, and deny them their basic human rights, such as access to a safe toilet. Women are often viewed to have brought sexual attacks on themselves by acting inappropriately. This lack of support makes women wary of reporting incidents to the police, especially when the shame of experiencing violence is coupled with the indignity of the incident happening while going to the toilet.

In **Bhopal**, more than a third of women were resigned to violence and harassment as part of their daily lives. A staggering 97% of the women we spoke to had not gone to the police to file a complaint, due to feelings of shame and fear of bringing dishonour to their family. The women were angry at the men who victimised them and frustrated by the authorities and male family members who failed to protect them. Just 6% of women who had been assaulted while going to the toilet received assurance from family members that they would build a toilet in their household.

The situation was similar in **Kampala**.

“He can even rape you, but you do not talk due to fear of being shamed.”

The women felt that the police were unable and unwilling to protect them from violence and rape, and did not expect to be taken seriously. They felt powerless to reduce the risk of violence by addressing the lack of safe toilets.

“Women use a plastic bag or bucket, not because they want to, but because they cannot afford 200 [Ugandan] shillings to pay for the public latrine. They get ashamed, but it is the situation.”

The women interviewed felt unable to help each other when incidents of violence occurred. One woman described an incident when a girl was attacked in her neighbourhood.

“The girl really shouted, ‘Please help me! Please save me!’ But no one was coming out because you can come out and bump into trouble. That’s the kind of situation we are in.”

In **Delhi**, women were frustrated and angry at the lack of control over their own lives as well as the inadequate protection from the authorities. Police and local politicians were seen to be corrupt and unresponsive to reports of violence.

“Many men who do such things are not caught... We don’t have any support from law-makers, from the police, from the public, from our husbands and family members... Even the people who we voted for never visit this place.”

Somewhere to go

The experiences reported in this paper highlight **the urgent need to raise awareness of the role of toilets in reducing the risk of violence against women**. While governments claim that the mere existence of toilets constitutes ‘access to sanitation’, in practice these facilities are often inadequate and inaccessible to many. Women’s shame, fear and sense of hopelessness mean violence often goes unreported, particularly where the incidents take place when a woman is attending to her private bodily functions.

Those responsible for improving access to toilets in unplanned urban settlements need to be held to account and encouraged to recognise the needs of those who live there, emphasising adequacy, safety and cleanliness. Institutions responsible for the provision of toilets need to ensure these facilities are guaranteed without discrimination and that local communities are involved in decisions about the services they receive.

National governments, local implementing agencies (public and private), civil society and communities need to work together to meet the specific needs of women and girls. It is crucial that discussions on financing, affordability and subsidies should recognise the greater financial cost borne by women who need to pay for sanitation services, considering the disproportionate challenges in accessing resources, and their specific needs in terms of safety.

Women living in the world’s slums need support to demand their right to a safe toilet. They must be encouraged to speak out and hold to account the governments that have endorsed the human

right to sanitation but failed to realise it, with dangerous consequences. Crucially, women and girls must be meaningfully involved in the design, implementation and monitoring of sanitation programmes to ensure they meet their needs for both hygiene and safety.

Women should be at the forefront of gender equity programmes more broadly, including those designed to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls. Only then will they have somewhere to go – both to the toilet and to find support against violence.

Empowered women taking on toilets

Together with the problems outlined in the **Delhi** case study was the story of women who had taken action to escape the harassment and violence resulting from a lack of safe toilets. They had used loans from non-governmental organisations (NGOs), subsidies and their own savings to build toilets in their own homes. A local NGO collaborated with the women to monitor communal facilities in terms of cleanliness, availability of soap and water, and opening hours. The women also drew up a set of standards for use by private sanitation contractors, leading to improvements in the existing facilities.

This example shows how effective, sustainable improvements in both sanitation and safety can be achieved when women are supported to claim their basic human rights.

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Endnotes

¹ All of the quotes in this paper are from women living in slums in Bhopal and Delhi in India, and Kampala in Uganda.

² United Nations (2010) *The human right to water and sanitation*. Resolution 64/292. Available at: www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/64/292

³ Accurate data on sexual violence against women is scarce. Women frequently do not report violent incidents due to shame, or fear of retaliation. However, the scale of the problem is clear. UN Women estimates that 150 million girls under 18 suffered some form of sexual violence in 2002 alone (UN Women (2011) *Facts and figures on violence against women*. [online] Available at: www.unifem.org/gender_issues/violence_against_women/facts_figures.php). In India, a national demographic household survey in 2005-6 suggested more than 35% of women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence at some point in their life. This percentage was doubled to more than 70% in a similar survey in Uganda in 2006 (UN Women (2011) *Violence against women prevalence data: Surveys by country*. [online] Available at: www.unifem.org/attachments/gender_issues/violence_against_women/vaw-prevalence-matrix-2011.pdf). Worldwide, one in three women will experience physical, sexual or emotional violence in their lifetime (source TBC) and one in five will experience rape or attempted rape (United Nations (2008) *Unite to end violence against women*. Factsheet. Available at: www.un.org/en/women/endviolence/pdf/VAW.pdf), making violence against women one of the most critical public health and human rights crises in the world.

Although little has been published specifically on water- and sanitation-related violence against women, Amnesty International has produced two important reports focusing on slums in Nairobi, Kenya (Amnesty International (2010) *Risking rape to reach a toilet: Women's experiences in the slums of Nairobi, Kenya*.) and Honiara, Solomon Islands (Amnesty International (2011) *'Where is the dignity in that?' Women in Solomon Islands slums denied sanitation and safety*). Despite the distance between these two countries, the findings were strikingly similar. Women reported harassment, physical violence and rape as a result of lack of access to toilets. They were ashamed about defecating conspicuously and afraid of reporting violent incidents.

Amnesty's account of sexual violence in Haiti's displacement camps after the earthquake in 2010 (Amnesty International (2011) *Aftershocks: Women speak out against sexual violence in Haiti's camps*.) also lists a lack of access to toilets as contributing to the dangers faced by women and girls in the relief camps. According to a 2005 Médecins sans Frontières report, 82% of recorded rapes occurred when women were carrying out chores, including gathering water (Médecins sans Frontières (2005) *The crushing burden of rape; Sexual violence in Darfur*. Available at: www.doctorswithoutborders.org/publications/reports/2005/sudan03.pdf).

⁴ United Nations (2010) *Declaration on the elimination of violence against women*. Declaration 48/104. Available at: www.un.org/documents/ga/res/48/a48r104.htm

For a further definition of violence against women, see the General Recommendation of the CEDAW (Convention of Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) committee, specifically General Recommendation #19 at www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/recommendations/recomm.htm

⁵ Survey data from North East Delhi has shown that more than 66% of women have been subjected to verbal sexual harassment, while 22.5% have suffered violent physical attacks. More than 10% have suffered sexual assault. Other forms of harassment such as visual harassment and stalking are also highly common.

JAGORI and UN Women (2010) *Safe cities free of violence against women and girls initiative: New Delhi*. Quoted in Delhi case study.

⁷ WaterAid in India (2011 – unpublished) *Study on incidences of violence against women and girls due to lack of water and sanitation facilities in the slums of Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh*.

⁸ Lennon S and SHARE (2011) *Fear and anger: Perceptions of risks related to sexual violence against women linked to water and sanitation in Delhi, India*. Briefing note. Available at: www.wateraid.org/documents/fear_and_anger_india_final_low_res.pdf

⁹ Massey K and SHARE (2011) *Insecurity and shame: Exploration of the impact of the lack of sanitation on women in the slums of Kampala, Uganda*. Available at: www.wateraid.org/documents/insecurity_and_shame_uganda_final_low_res.pdf