

The Challenge of Becoming Invisible

Understanding Women's Security in Kabul



This paper is based on *The Challenge of Becoming Invisible: Understanding Women's Security in Kabul* a 2012 report that presents the findings of a Women's Safety Audit conducted in Kabul gathering input from more than 500 women. Commissioned by Heinrich Böll Stiftung – Afghanistan, the report was researched and written by Samuel Hall Consulting. It can be accessed at:

www.boell-afghanistan.org

Commissioned by Heinrich Böll Stiftung – Afghanistan
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Although the overthrow of the Taliban opened up new opportunities for women, it did not give rise to the “women’s liberation” many were expecting. Currently, there are growing concerns about an “apparent backlash against the empowerment of women and their participation in public life.”¹ The current situation in Afghanistan demonstrates that while conflict and its aftermath can shake up gender roles, rapid social change can also provoke “a retreat to conservative notions of masculinity and femininity.”²

Efforts to empower women are increasingly perceived as Western interference, as interventions are largely implemented through top-down strategies that overlook the agency of Afghan women. These women are often depicted as helpless victims by the very people that wish to help them. This perception denies the capacity of Afghan women to be agents of change and often excludes them from the very decision-making processes designed to help them, reinforcing the perception that the impetus for initiatives targeting women is exogenous.

One area of palpable backslide is women’s mobility in public. Afghan society clearly delineates the public sphere as a male-dominated space. This division is rooted in the belief that women are the “keepers of the family honor”³ and should therefore be kept at home. Many threats to women’s safety in public spaces, notably verbal and physical harassment, are condoned by society, as they reinforce norms about women and their use of space. Consequently, *all* public space is threatening to Afghan women. “Space which causes fear restricts movement and thus the community’s use of space,” which can lead to social exclusion.⁴

Women’s Safety & Security Perceptions

Kabul women have two main fears when moving through public spaces: suicide bombers and harassment. Both have an impact on how women use (or avoid using) public space. When asked about their biggest fear when out on the streets, 68% of women responded with “suicide bomb.” It is not unusual for people to be more afraid of “spectacular violence,” such as acts of terror, as opposed to “everyday violence,” such as harassment or assault,⁵ although the risk of the former is smaller than that of the latter.

Although the risks associated with harassment are less severe than those of a suicide attack, the everyday threat of harassment creates considerable anxiety amongst women. As part of the safety audit, women were asked how they would feel when confronted with various situations when walking down the street (Figure 1.1). The question revealed that teenage boys solicited as much fear as unknown armed men or a barking dog, with 91% of women saying they felt fear when confronted with a group of teenage boys in the street. In comparison, the presence of foreign troops generated fear for 55% of the respondents, and the presence of Afghan police made 11% fearful and 51% feel assurance. While this does not mean that woman would feel comfortable seeking assistance from the police, it does demonstrate a growing level of confidence in the capacity of police to maintain order.

¹ OHCHR/UNAMA (2009), “Silence is Violence: End the Abuse of Women in Afghanistan.”

² Abirafeh, Lina (2009), *Gender and International Aid in Afghanistan: The Politics and Effects of Intervention*, McFarland & Company, Inc. Jefferson, p. 16.

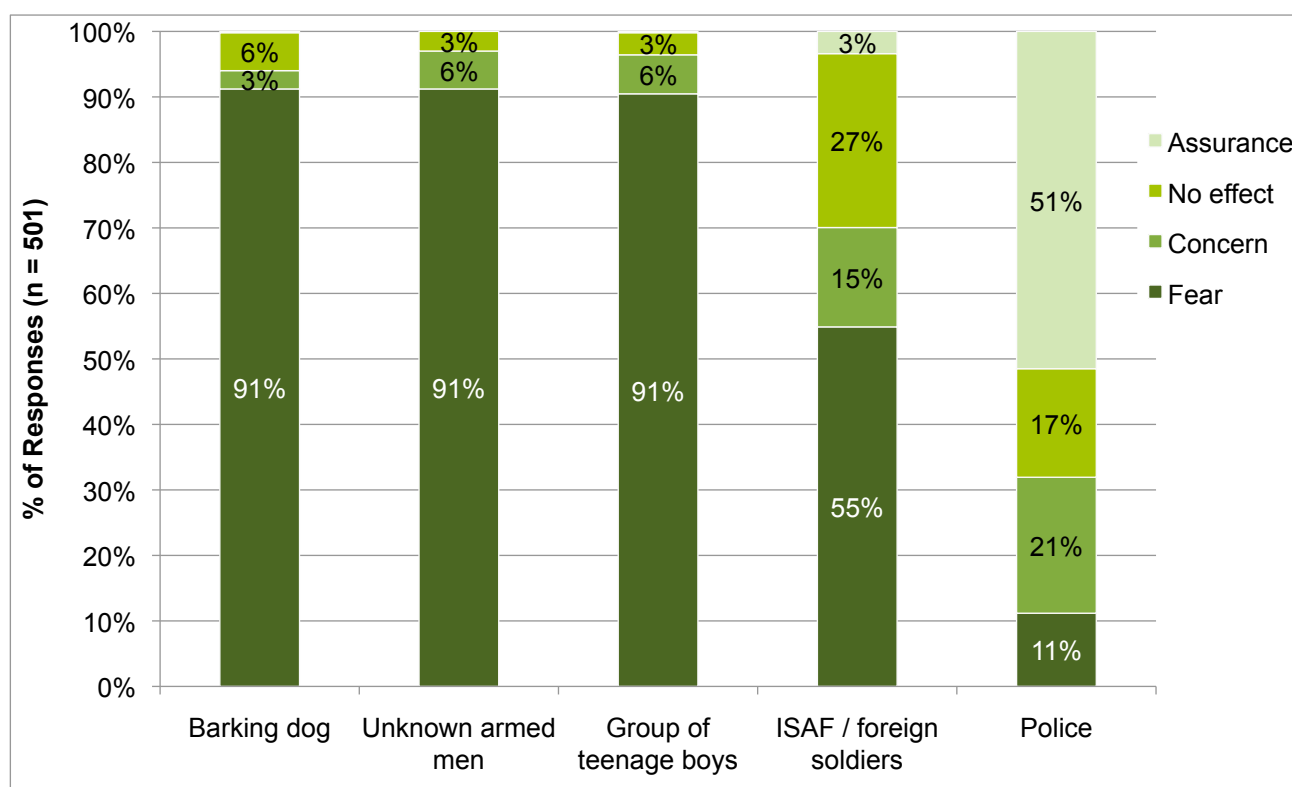
³ Abirafeh, 2009.

⁴ UN-HABITAT (2008), “The Global Assessment on Women’s Safety,” UN-HABITAT Safer Cities Programme, Nairobi.

⁵ Beall, Joe (2007), “Cities, Terrorism and Urban Wars of the 21st Century,” Working Paper no. 9, Crisis States Research Centre, DESTIN, LSE, London.

FIGURE 1.1. LEVEL OF CONCERN AMONGST WOMEN

When walking down a street in this area, how do you feel when confronted with the following?



Although women are extremely reticent to provide information about their own experiences with harassment, more abstract questions about harassment revealed startling findings regarding its prevalence (Figures 1.2-1.3). Ninety-eight percent of women surveyed felt a group of teenage boys would be very or somewhat likely to verbally harass women in the street, and 91% felt teenage boys were likely to physically harass women.

Adult men were perceived to be only slightly less likely to verbally or physically harass women (96% and 85% respectively). Physical assault was considered to be considerably less likely than harassment, but teenage boys and adult men were still perceived to be the main threat. These figures demonstrate that harassment is a real problem for women in Kabul.



FIGURE 1.2. PERCEIVED LIKELINESS OF VERBAL HARASSMENT

In this area, what is the likelihood of women being verbally harassed by the following?

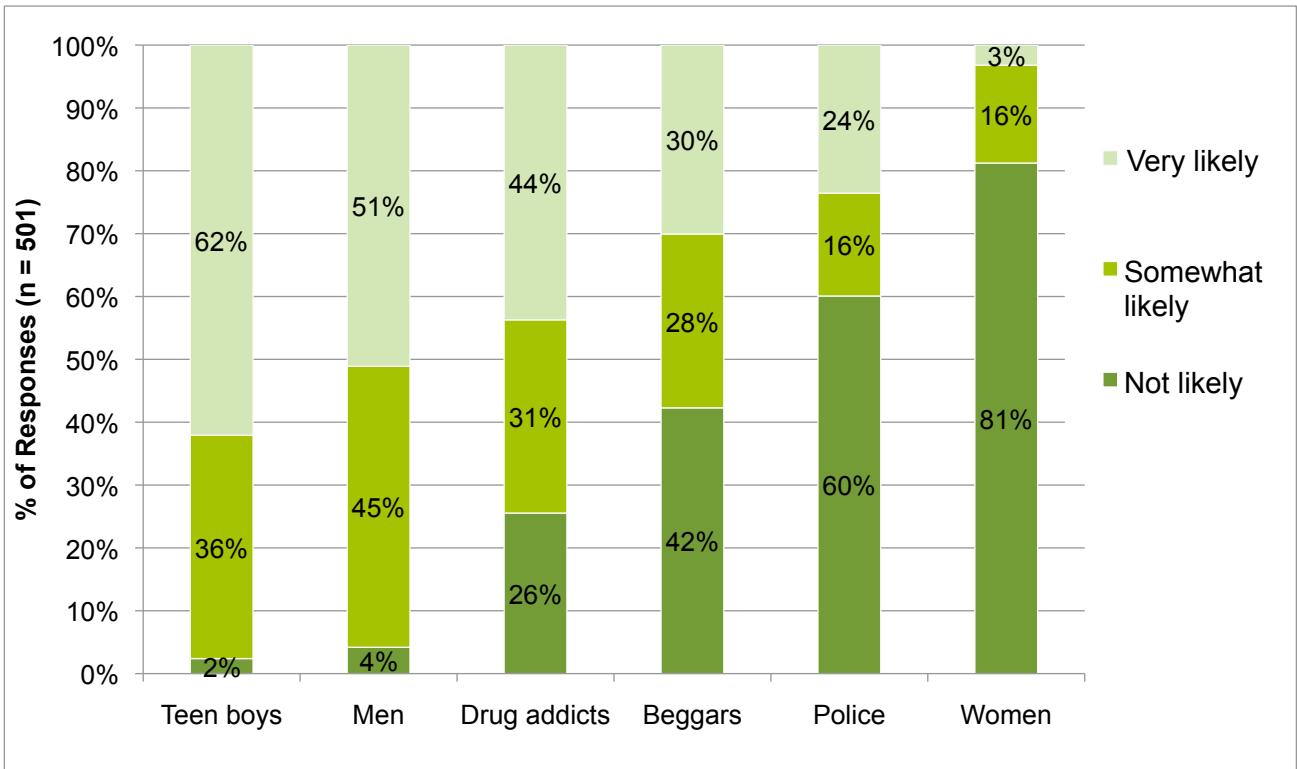
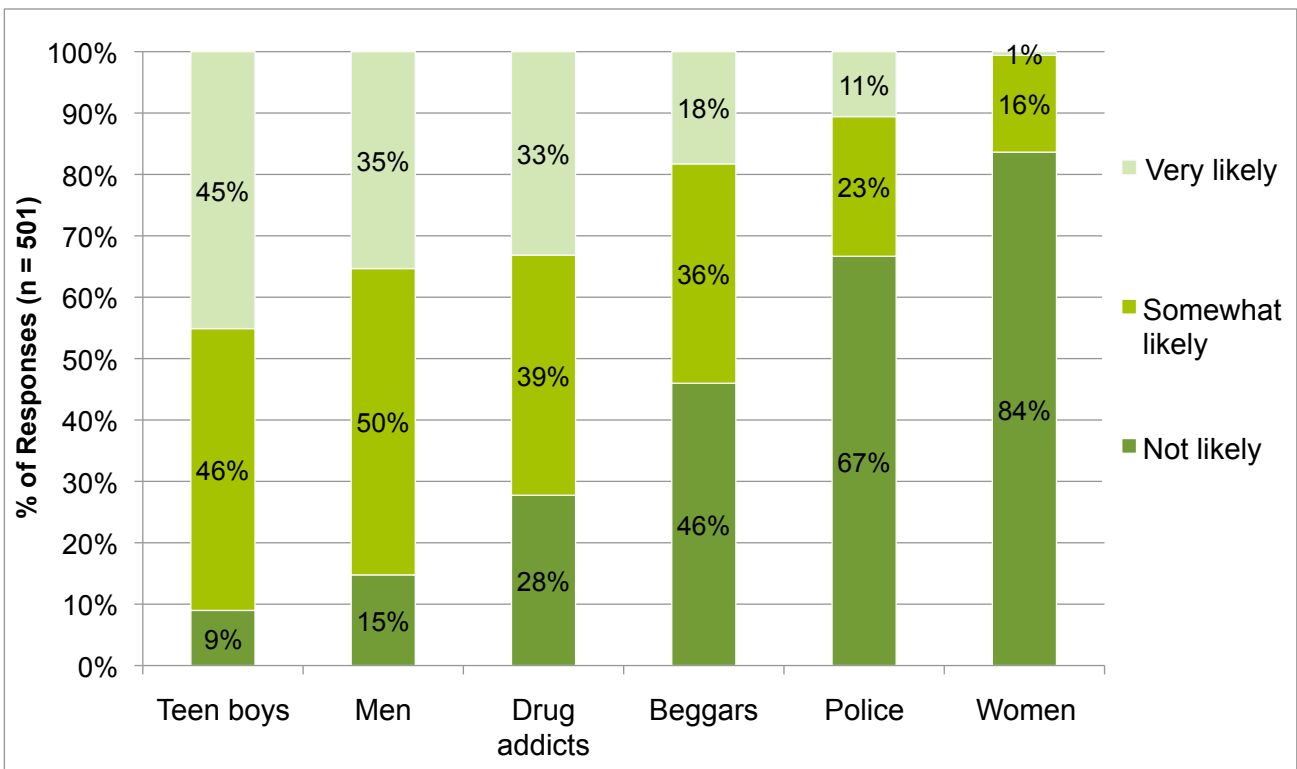


FIGURE 1.3. PERCEIVED LIKELIHOOD OF PHYSICAL HARASSMENT

In this area, what is the likelihood of women being physically harassed/groped by the following?



(In)Visibility

The presence of many observers does not stop frequent verbal and physical harassment of women in Kabul, as the shame of harassment lies with the victim and not the perpetrator, according to socio-cultural norms in Afghanistan. Harassment is silently condoned by witnesses that will rarely, if ever, intervene, and victims seldom report it, even to family members.

The challenge for women in Kabul is not to be visible, but rather to become invisible, so as not to attract attention and possible harassment when moving through public spaces. They do so by avoiding or minimizing travel to certain locations, travelling in groups and modifying clothing choices to limit their exposure to harassment.

- 69% of surveyed women reported avoiding certain areas for fear of harassment or assault.
- While the presence of other women does not prevent harassment as well as that of a male chaperone, it does help women feel more comfortable when moving about the city.
- Wearing conservative clothing, notably the *chaddari*, or *burqa*, is another commonly used strategy for maintaining a low profile. For many women, the *chaddari* is the “only protection they have to move in public locations without being harassed.”⁶

Assistance & Harassment

When asked to whom they would turn first for assistance if travelling alone, 67% of surveyed women named the police, and 54% of women suggested that additional police would make them feel safer. However, willingness to seek police assistance does not extend to cases of harassment.

Kabul women are extremely reticent to admit that they have been harassed, as they are afraid it would reflect poorly on themselves or their families. A common response women provide when asked if they have been harassed is, “I am from a good family,” demonstrating that they feel harassment speaks more about their own reputation than that of perpetrators.

There are many types of harassment that are common in public spaces in Kabul:

- **Physical:** inappropriate touching/groping
- **Verbal/audible:** comments, insults, noises, horn honking, whistling, singing
- **Visual:** aggressive staring, lewd gestures

In most cases of harassment, women in Kabul try to ignore it and keep walking.

Navigation, Design and Maintenance

Rapid urbanization after three decades of war has left little time for reflection about how the look and feel of urban space influences peoples’ behavior. Even in neighborhoods where buildings and gardens are immaculately cared for on the inside, little regard is paid to the condition of the public space beyond the perimeter walls. Street signs are also rare in Kabul; none of the audited location had signs offering directions.

⁶ OHCHR/UNAMA (2009), “Silence is Violence: End the Abuse of Women in Afghanistan,” Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Human Rights division of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan.

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

While the physical characteristics of the locations change, women's fears when moving in public in Kabul are the same. Fears of spectacular violence (*i.e.* suicide bombs) and everyday harassment are constant worries for active women. These fears in turn restrict women's access to the city and its services as they attempt to minimize their exposure to risk.

In other cities that conducted women's safety audits, physical changes to space such as better lighting and clearer pathways created environments that not only felt safer but discouraged harassment and violence. However, harassment and suicide bombs are not confined to dark alleys and dilapidated neighborhoods in Kabul. Suicide bombers target high profile locations, destabilizing society with the fear that violence can occur anywhere at any time. Moreover, harassment against women in Kabul occurs in broad daylight and is widely condoned by society.

To really make a difference in women's mobility and correlating access to services in Kabul, changes to physical space must also be accompanied by initiatives that address the underlying causes of their fears (*e.g.* socio-cultural norms regarding harassment). Such initiatives to improve safety and security should be the result of participatory processes that include both men and women in decision-making processes. Community murals, just one example of a community-based initiative, have been used in other cities to address harassment against women and promote respectful behavior.

Community Mobilization

Organize community meetings to discuss the issue of harassment in public spaces.

The problem must first be recognized before any steps can be taken to address it. These meetings should not be designed to attack men, but rather to discuss perceptions that lead to harassment.

Participants of these meetings should identify messages to spread awareness in their communities about harassment and promote a more respectful treatment of women. It is important that these messages come from the communities themselves. Both men and women should take part in the process, and messages should address men's attitudes of women as well as women's attitudes about themselves and their rights to personal security in public spaces. Participants should also identify the best channels for disseminating these messages (*e.g.* posters, murals, radio).

Participants should also identify physical changes to public space that they feel would create a safer atmosphere and discourage violence and harassment. Recommendations can be submitted to local municipalities through meetings with government representatives and/or members themselves can work together to implement changes.

Education and Awareness

In parallel to these three actions, meetings should be held with women to discuss fears related to spectacular violence in addition to everyday violence and harassment. While the risk of such violence is lower than that of everyday violence, fear of suicide bombers still impacts the mobility of women in the city. Having a forum to share these concerns with others may help women develop strategies to better manage and possibly overcome these fears.

Conduct pilot programs to raise awareness amongst children and youth of the consequences of harassment and address respect for others in public spaces. Attitudes about women and the association of shame with victimhood begin at a very young age. A pilot initiative with young children in schools, coordinated with the support of both the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Women's Affairs, could yield positive results in tempering the hostile environment women experience in public spaces in the future.

Raise awareness of harassment and its consequences amongst the police. Police play a major role in enabling or discouraging harassment. Encouraging police to systematically intervene when witnessing harassment could help create a safer environment for women and prevent harassment.

Box 1. What is a Women's Safety Audit?

The Women's Safety Audit (WSA) is a "participatory tool that is used for collecting and assessing information about perceptions of safety in public spaces."⁷ It was first developed by Toronto's Metro Action Committee on Public Violence Against Women and Children in 1989. Since then, it has been adapted and implemented in communities in Africa, Asia, Europe, North and South America, and Oceania. Local NGOs and international organizations alike have put the tool to use; UN-HABITAT's Safer Cities Programme has utilized the WSA as a tool since 1995.⁸

Women's Safety Audits (WSAs) are typically conducted by small groups of women (and sometimes men) that organize a walk through a designated area in their neighborhood, noting observations along the way. Participants share their findings and determine recommendations for improving the safety and security of the audited public space. The methodology is often adapted to the local context, as was the case for this audit, which used a survey methodology to ensure adequate representation of the diverse profiles represented amongst active Kabul women.

Related publication: "Women's Perceptions of the Afghan National Police: Gender dynamics of Kabul women and police"

The security needs of Afghan men and women differ. Whereas men bear the brunt of the direct impacts of conflict, women disproportionately suffer from the indirect effects such as increased levels of domestic violence, decreased access to health care and poverty. Due to this difference in security needs, gender must be taken into account when evaluating the relationship between citizens and the Afghan National Police (ANP).

Heinrich Böll Stiftung commissioned this study to examine the perceptions active women in Kabul hold of the police. Active, urban women were targeted specifically as they are more likely to interact regularly with police than women that spend a majority of their time at home. The report seeks to i) establish a gender-focused baseline for the evaluation of community trust building and police capacity building programs; ii) identify major trends and evolutions in public perceptions of the ANP in Kabul, notably amongst women; and iii) propose pragmatic recommendations for improving the relationship between Afghan women and the police.

The report is available for download at: www.boell-afghanistan.org

⁷ Jagori (2010), "Understanding Women's Safety: Towards a Gender Inclusive City," Research findings prepared by the Jagori team with support from Women in Cities International (WICI) and the United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women (UNTF), New Delhi.

⁸ Whitman, Carolyn et al. (2009), "The Effectiveness of Women's Safety Audits," *Security Journal*, Vol. 222, No. 3, p. 205-218.

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