



MARGUS SOOTLA/FLICR

Gender, vulnerability, and violence in urban Pakistan

Research in two cities in Pakistan reveals how changing gender roles, corruption, and infrastructure deficits combine to fuel conflict. Research led by the Institute of Business Administration (IBA) highlights measures that can help decision-makers recognize and defuse tensions that lead to violence.

Pakistan is the most rapidly urbanizing country in South Asia, with its urban population growing 3.3% annually. 40% of Pakistanis live in acute poverty. The country has undergone tremendous shifts in the last half century, and while traditional gender roles are rigid, its young population is exposed to new ideas through technology and urbanization.

The challenge: What happens when gender and violence meet?

Recent years have seen a growing focus on infrastructural violence, which explores how housing, roads, lighting, and other urban constructions and systems affect the wellbeing of residents. In 12 working class neighbourhoods of Karachi and the twin cities of Rawalpindi-Islamabad, researchers from the Karachi-based IBA and partners at King's College London explored how infrastructure and services change the way men and women interact with each other, and how this in turn may drive daily violence.

Researchers used an index of vulnerability to violence to survey approximately 2400 people. The survey results, along with interviews and other research tools reveal how access to services and household vulnerability are major drivers of violence and how ideas about 'masculinity' and 'femininity' interact with these drivers.

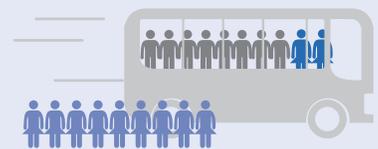
Pakistani cities: gender, services & violence



Most rapidly urbanizing country in South Asia: **3.3%** per year



43% say bad access to Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) driver of violence against women



50% have poor access to public transportation, **80%** of bus space is reserved for men



90% of women with no access to safe transport experienced violence



Unsafe transport = lack of access to education and work

Conflict linked to water and sanitation

Water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) have traditionally been “women’s work” in Pakistan, and rarely explored as a source of violence. But gaps in WASH infrastructure and services emerged as key drivers that are heightening violence linked to gender roles. For example, in Rawalpindi-Islamabad neighbourhoods where flooding is routine, stagnant waters in homes and streets directly harm health and livelihoods, but also fuel domestic violence against women.

“Yesterday a neighbour was beating his daughter and wife because his wife brought unclean water from the well and he got angry with her.”

– Woman, 19 years, Islamabad

In both cities, a lack of solid waste management has led to neighbourhood conflicts and violence between men and between women. And, in six of seven neighbourhoods surveyed in Karachi, “water mafias” are violently exploiting inadequate public water services. They divert government supplies and resell water to residents at extortionate

prices. Where masculinity is defined by providing for the family, men are humiliated and lash out at female relations for their “wasteful” practices

How mobility intersects with gender

Gender plays an important role in the freedom to move and make choices at home, in neighbourhoods, and within the wider city. Across South Asia in general, mobility is equated with masculinity, public space is seen as the natural preserve of men. Women’s mobility is often interpreted as transgression and femininity is traditionally linked to the home or domestic sphere. Economic necessity, educational aspirations, mobile phones and other technologies are helping erode men’s and women’s “traditional” roles. But many customary attitudes and expectations continue to shape the options men and women have for work, education, and recreational activities.

Physical transportation is one important factor, and for men and women — in Karachi especially — poor roads and limited transportation restrict movement and increase exposure to violence. Women face particular challenges: bussing is segregated in Pakistan, with almost 80% of space reserved for men. Women in both cities revealed that fear for their safety in public spaces is widespread, and is also not uncommon among men. The home may be considered a woman’s domain, but this does not translate into safety: it is also the main site of the domestic violence that women suffer routinely.

Looking ahead: taking steps for safer cities

While findings show how frustrated gender roles can fuel violence, researchers also found signs of change and resilience, including many examples of young women finding ways to increase their

mobility and exercise their choices despite restrictions. Their recommendations point to measures that can strengthen policies and plans for safer cities, such as:

- **Measure vulnerability** to inform urban development and security plans and programs.
- **Improve transport, waste, and water services** for the poor.
- **Create safe spaces** for victims of violence.
- **Ease civil registration** of migrants and minorities to increase their rights and access to services.
- **Raise awareness** of changing gender roles.

As research concluded in 2016, team members were sharing research outcomes widely with policymakers in the World Bank, and the Swedish Parliament, particularly on previously unexplored linkages between lack of access to WASH and gendered violence in Pakistan. Programs within the United Nations have shown interest in the findings on infrastructure as drivers of violence. The research is also having academic impact on researchers at the London School of Economics, who are using the participatory photography work that researchers carried out with study participants as a case study for a forthcoming book.

MULTI-FUNDER INITIATIVE



Safe and Inclusive Cities is a global research effort jointly funded by the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development (DFID) and Canada’s International Development Research Centre (IDRC). Launched in 2012, it supports 15 multidisciplinary teams working in 40 cities across sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America to build evidence on the connections between urban violence, poverty, and inequalities.

Safe and Inclusive Cities

International Development Research Centre
PO Box 8500, Ottawa, ON
Canada K1G 3H9
Phone: +1 613-236-6163
Fax: +1 613-238-7230
Email: cities@idrc.ca | www.idrc.ca/cities

idrc.ca

