

*Safer Towns,
Cities and Public
Spaces for Women*

*'A place that's safer for women
is safer for everyone'*

Safer Towns, Cities and Public Spaces for Women

"A place that's safer for women is safer for everyone"

**The Labour Party
May 2009**

Introduction

In 1993 the United Nations provided the first internationally agreed definition of Violence Against Women in its Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women:

“any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats such as acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life”.

In 1995, Women's Aid published the first research into domestic violence in Ireland entitled *Making the Links*. One of the recommendations of this research was that an Interdepartmental Taskforce on violence against women be set up, to include members of Governmental and non-governmental bodies.

This recommendation was implemented by the Rainbow Coalition the following year with the establishment of the Taskforce on Violence Against Women, chaired by Labour Party Minister, Eithne Fitzgerald, TD. The Task Force produced its report in April 1997, setting out many progressive recommendations, some of which have been acted upon in the intervening years, while some are in the process of being acted upon, albeit inadequately or too slowly.

In December 2006 Labour Women produced a policy document entitled Violence against Women as a contribution by the Labour Party to the '16 Years of 16 Days Campaign' to end violence against women and as an information, communications and awareness resource on the issue of violence against women and on Labour's principles and policy direction on this issue.

The Labour Party has also acted to tackle domestic violence at international level. Working with our sister parties in the Party of European Socialists, Labour was instrumental in first establishing and then expanding successive EU Daphne Programmes, the specific EU programme to prevent and combat domestic violence against children, young people and women and to protect victims and groups at risk.

At the 2002-03 Convention on the Future of Europe, which prepared the draft Constitutional Treaty, Labour's representative Proinsias De Rossa MEP supported the campaign to insert a commitment to tackling domestic violence in the European Union Treaties. This campaign was successful with Declaration 19 of the Lisbon Treaty now reading:

The (Intergovernmental) Conference agrees that, in its general efforts to eliminate inequalities between women and men, the Union will aim in its different policies to combat all kinds of domestic violence. The Member States should take all necessary measures to prevent and punish these criminal acts and to support and protect the victims.

Making public spaces safer for women

The Labour Party believes in making Ireland's towns, cities and public spaces safer for women because it is one of the main contributors to the inequality between men and women. Women need to feel safe enough to walk in public without facing intimidation or physical harm and without the fear of violence, crime or harassment. This brings women a sense of belonging which is vital on a personal level and, in turn, allows women to be more visible and energising group within the community.

Unsafe towns, cities and public spaces for women

Statistics indicate that young men are the most vulnerable to actual attack in towns and cities, but merely looking at official crime statistics invalidates the experience of women who are told that they have no 'objective reason' to be afraid based on the statistics.

The logic of a statistical correlation between the number of reported crimes and the level of insecurity is not a means of understanding women's insecurity and of remedying it. While the CSO 2006 Crime and Victimization surveys show that younger adults, in particular, males between the ages of 18-24 years, are most at risk of becoming a victim of crime (excluding domestic and sexual assaults), crime statistics are skewed by the fact that women are afraid to go out on the streets alone and consequently they are less likely to become victims of crime in towns and cities.

Women consistently express greater fears for their personal safety in towns and cities than do men. The 2006 CSO survey reported that 42% of women feel unsafe or very unsafe walking alone in their own area after dark, compared to 11% of men.

The fear that many women feel is a response to the threat and reality of violence against women. Women can experience violence in the privacy of their homes, as well as in public spaces - on the street, in workplaces, community facilities and places of study. Women are more likely to experience workplace harassment, including leers, name-calling and sexual assault. Most victims of harassment do not report the behaviour, fearing that they might lose their jobs. That reporting incidents will make things worse and/or that no one will believe them.

Women's fear of going out alone after dark means that many women, particularly older women, confine themselves indoors from 4pm onwards during the winter months. This has a huge impact on their ability to engage in employment, adult education, civic and community participation and social and leisure activities. Some groups are more vulnerable due to various factors including their ethnicity, religion or beliefs, social origin, sexual orientation, and physical and/or mental abilities.

A Canadian survey shows that women regard physical assault, discrimination, harassment, and sexual gender issues as three of the top four factors impacting their personal sense of safety.

The best information on women's perceptions of safety and public spaces comes from consulting women. This is the case with the 'Exploratory Walks' model developed by Toronto's *Metropolitan Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children* (METRAC) project since the early 1990s and taken up in other countries such as the '*Making Safer Places*' initiative in the UK over recent years.

'Exploratory Walk' - Developing Safety Audits of public spaces

An 'explanatory walk' is one of the means developed by Toronto's METRAC project to make a 'safety audit' of a public space and to identify how changes to the physical environment can help women to reclaim the right to use public space as and when they wish.

The procedure is based on the principle that women are in the best position to identify the elements of a public space likely to give rise to the risk of assault and to affect their feeling of safety. Considering insecurity from the point of view of what women feel gives a definition to the insecurity that includes elements that do not emerge from crime statistics.

An exploratory walk is carried out by a group of roughly six people, most of whom are women and one of whom may be a policewoman. The participants identify for a chosen area the elements of the design that can give rise to the risks of assault and cause a feeling of security or insecurity. Any place can be the subject of an exploratory walk: a car park, a street, a lane way, a public square, a public building, etc. As soon as women feel ill at ease in a given place, or they feel it is necessary to have 'eyes in the back of their head' an exploratory walk is justified.

Concrete elements of the area are assessed and graded on a sliding scale by the group, such as signage, lighting, real or potential hiding places, number of passers-bys, provisions for movement, how help can be maintained, maintenance of the area, internal and external fittings, such as street furniture.

In the course of the exploratory walk, several factors of importance to safety and risk management are examined:

Isolation - by reducing the number of isolated spots, women are less likely to fear being attacked or assaulted in deserted areas. This measure also reduces the opportunity for criminal or violent activity to occur without being seen, heard or interrupted by witnesses.

Lighting - good lighting can be a deterrent for criminal activity. If the lighting in a space is adequate, women can survey their surroundings and take precautionary action, if necessary.

Accessibility - Accessible spaces enable women to move about freely and reduce their vulnerability to entrapment and possible violence. Accessible spaces are more inclusive and can remove barriers to participating in regular activities of work, recreation, community programmes, and education, for children, older women, and women with disabilities.

Signage and layout - areas with clear visible signs and a simple and easy to follow layout can reduce confusion and disorientation. A woman who knows her whereabouts is less conspicuous and less likely to feel or be more vulnerable to violence.

Clear views - women who can see clearly what lies ahead and/or behind their path have a better chance of anticipating problems and taking evasive action. Unobstructed views can reduce fear of the unexpected. Objects such as pillars, walls, shrubs, sharp corners, fences and landscaping can block views and create fear by decreasing casual surveillance and increasing the potential for surprise.

Maintenance - Proper maintenance of security systems can increase the ability to prevent and deal with unsafe situations. Well-maintained spaces and lighting can reduce incidences of violence.

Attitudes and behaviour - People's attitudes and behaviours can affect the comfort and safety of a space. Discriminatory actions such as name-calling can create feelings of fear for everyone. By having clear policies, interventions and consequences for dealing with discriminatory attitudes and behaviours, institutions can set appropriate standards for members of the community that can result in more respectful and equitable environments.

Practices and policies - Safety is affected by an area's rules or 'patterns of behaviour', such as when a place opens or closes and when lights are turned on and off. Practices and policies can benefit some while creating hardship for others. Practices and policies of an institution can create safer environments by fostering a sense of belonging, and by removing barriers to safety for vulnerable groups of people, even if those practices and policies may seem neutral on the surface.

In general the conclusions of 'exploratory walks' are always very similar. The factors that give rise to feelings of insecurity are hardly surprising and night magnifies all of them:

- Deserted and empty roads, streets and spaces, or spaces that empty in the evening
- Poor or inadequate lighting
- Littered, dirty areas, badly maintained parks and gardens
- Corners, bushes and other possible hiding places
- Small 'transition' spaces between public and 'private' spaces, such as the entrance halls of buildings

- Areas where it is difficult to find your way due to the lack of clear signage
- Areas where 'threatening' behaviour creates suspicion
- Absence of taxis, too few buses and badly supervised or regulated public transport

The intention of an 'exploratory walk' is to identify the factors that can reduce the sense of insecurity in a given area or chain of places.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to put the issue of making towns and cities safer for women on to the political agenda, the Labour Party is making the following proposals:

- To promote a specific initiative on safer public places, towns and cities in the European Parliament to be submitted for EU funding under the next calls for proposals under the EU anti-domestic violence DAPHNE III programme, which is expected in early 2010.
- The development of closer links with and learn from **organisations and programmes operating in other countries and internationally** to make towns and cities safer places, such as the UK's 'Making Safer Places' initiative, the METRAC programme in Toronto, and safer urban areas projects already funded under the DAPHNE programme (e.g. the European Forum for Urban Safety) etc.
- The establishment of an **Irish Task Force on Safer Towns, Cities and Public Spaces for Women**. The Task Force should be made up of government departments, official agencies and key non-governmental bodies working to end violence against women. Its task will be to examine and issue - within one year - recommendations on making towns, cities and public spaces safer for women.
- The **gender dimension** should be strengthened in the gathering and processing of data and statistics in Ireland in order to identify hidden violence and insecurity, whilst ensuring that this does not cause more insecurity for women.
- A Local Authority-led programme of **Exploratory walks** to develop **Safety Audits** of towns and cities and public spaces based on the model developed by Toronto's METRAC programme. These audits should help identify what makes them feel unsafe and determine what would make them feel safer. This information and understanding to be fed into the planning and maintenance processes.
- Practical examples of steps that could be taken to make towns and cities safer include the "**Between Two Stops**" service set up in Montreal, with the agreement of public transport authorities, which allows women to get off a bus wherever they wish in the evening so that they are closer to their final destination. **Dedicated parking places** for women could be allocated near the entrance of car parks or close to monitoring personnel and CCTV cameras.

- **'Whose Job is it'** contact information should be made available by Local Authorities, including for downloading on mobile phones, in order to report faulty services such as public lighting, missing signage, damage to public services such as bus stops, graffiti, litter, etc.
- To strengthen the **consultation and involvement of women in the design of public spaces and urban areas at local authority level and in national Development programme Projects**. Women are in the best position to identify the elements of a public space likely to give rise to the risk of assault and to affect their feeling of safety.

Links

EU DAPHNE III Programme

http://ec.europa.eu/justice_home/funding/2004_2007/daphne/funding_daphne_en.htm

Metropolitan Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children (METRAC)

<http://www.metrac.org/>

'Making Safer Places' Initiative, UK

http://www.wds.org.uk/www/projects_msp.htm

The European Forum for Urban Safety

<http://www.urbansecurity.org/>

Labour Party policy document on Violence Against Women

<http://www.labour.ie/policy/listing/20061204165835.html>

Crime and Victimization, Quarterly National Household Survey 2006, CSO

http://www.cso.ie/releasespublications/documents/crime_justice/current/crimevictimisation_qnhs2006.pdf

Women's Aid

<http://www.womensaid.ie>

Report of the Task Force on Violence Against Women (1997)

<http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/dvreport.pdf/Files/dvreport.pdf>