



Safe  
Cities  
For  
Women

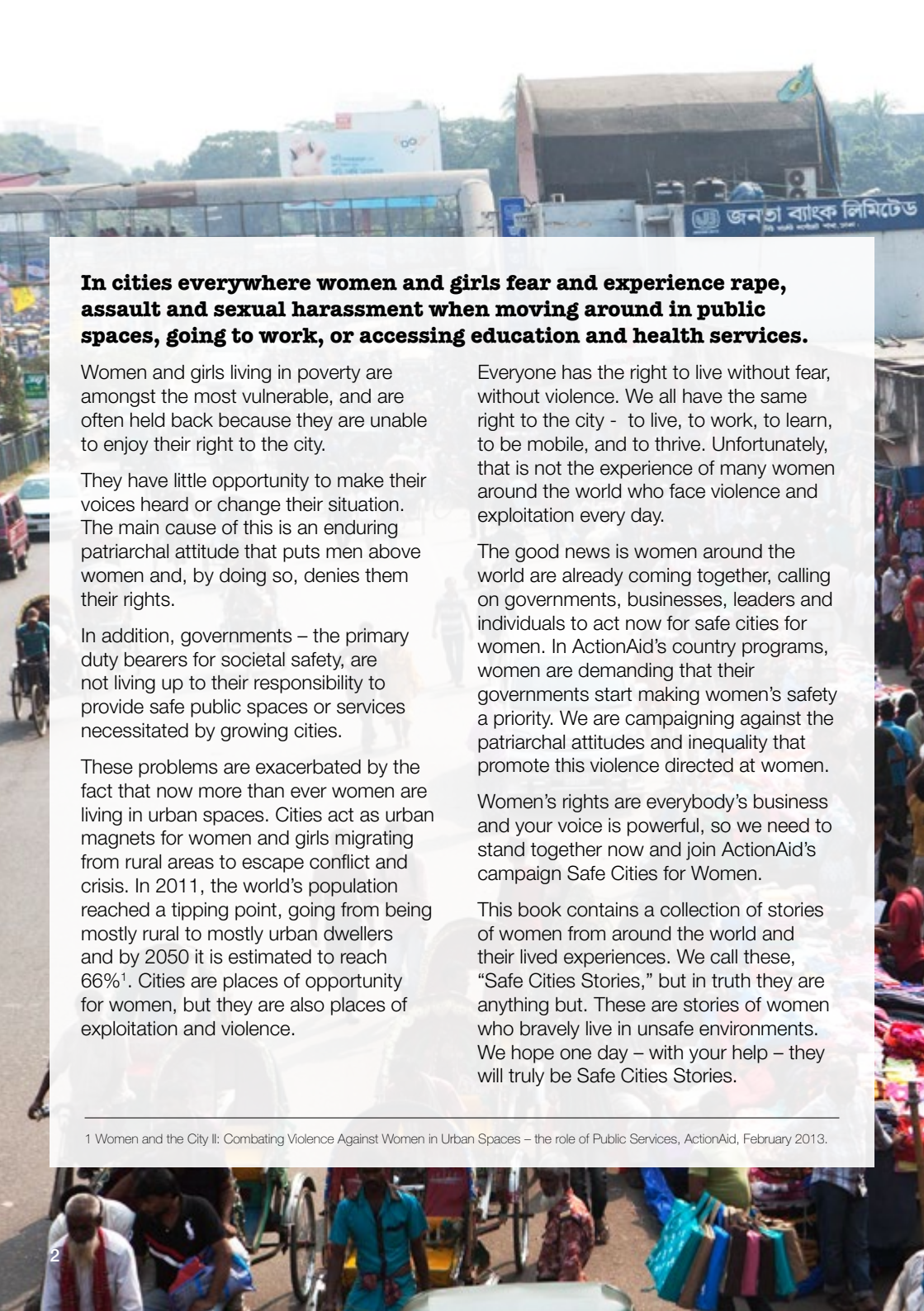
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# SAFE CITIES STORIES

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**In cities everywhere women and girls fear and experience rape, assault and sexual harassment when moving around in public spaces, going to work, or accessing education and health services.**

Women and girls living in poverty are amongst the most vulnerable, and are often held back because they are unable to enjoy their right to the city.

They have little opportunity to make their voices heard or change their situation. The main cause of this is an enduring patriarchal attitude that puts men above women and, by doing so, denies them their rights.

In addition, governments – the primary duty bearers for societal safety, are not living up to their responsibility to provide safe public spaces or services necessitated by growing cities.

These problems are exacerbated by the fact that now more than ever women are living in urban spaces. Cities act as urban magnets for women and girls migrating from rural areas to escape conflict and crisis. In 2011, the world's population reached a tipping point, going from being mostly rural to mostly urban dwellers and by 2050 it is estimated to reach 66%<sup>1</sup>. Cities are places of opportunity for women, but they are also places of exploitation and violence.

Everyone has the right to live without fear, without violence. We all have the same right to the city - to live, to work, to learn, to be mobile, and to thrive. Unfortunately, that is not the experience of many women around the world who face violence and exploitation every day.

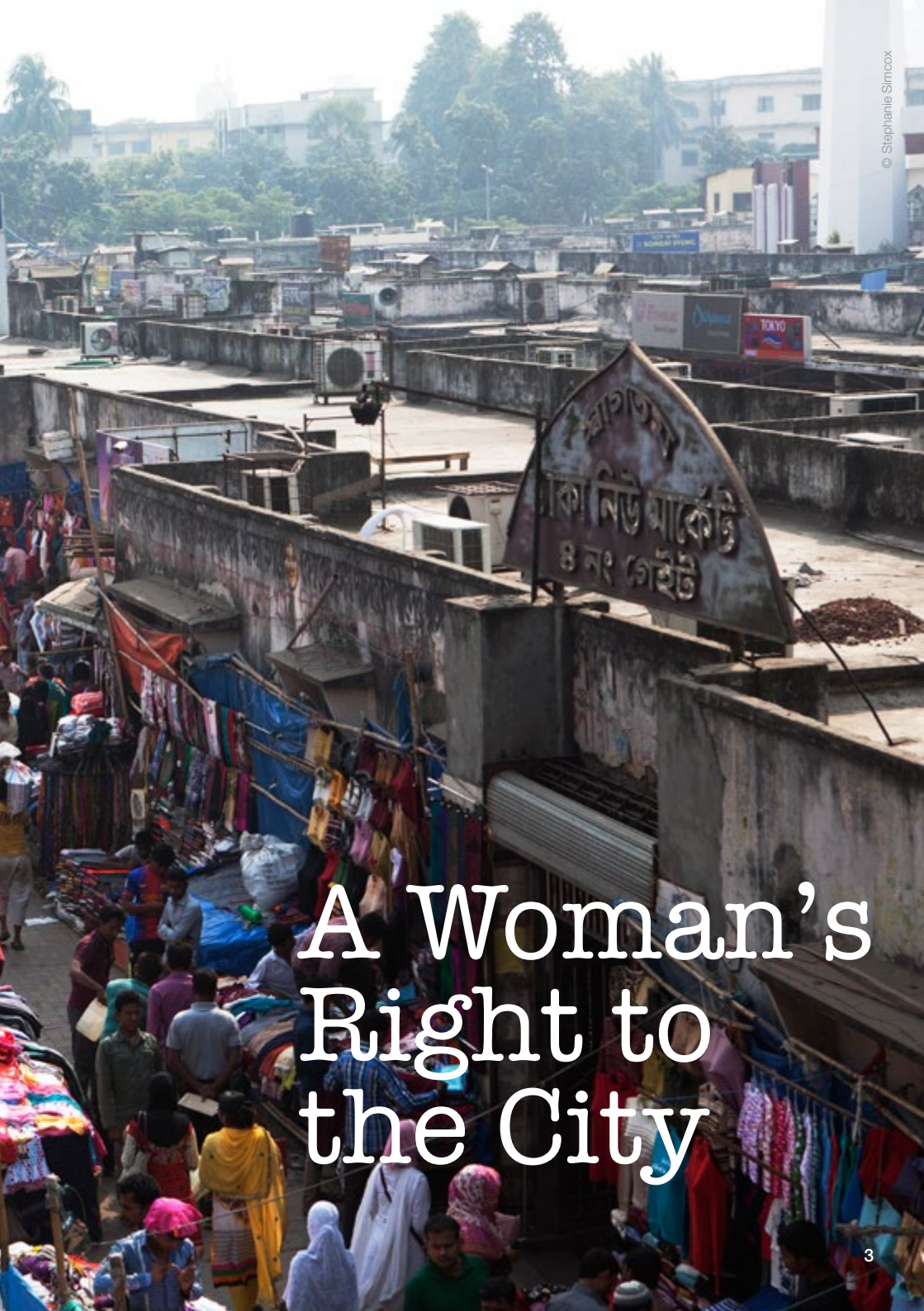
The good news is women around the world are already coming together, calling on governments, businesses, leaders and individuals to act now for safe cities for women. In ActionAid's country programs, women are demanding that their governments start making women's safety a priority. We are campaigning against the patriarchal attitudes and inequality that promote this violence directed at women.

Women's rights are everybody's business and your voice is powerful, so we need to stand together now and join ActionAid's campaign Safe Cities for Women.

This book contains a collection of stories of women from around the world and their lived experiences. We call these, "Safe Cities Stories," but in truth they are anything but. These are stories of women who bravely live in unsafe environments. We hope one day – with your help – they will truly be Safe Cities Stories.

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<sup>1</sup> Women and the City II: Combating Violence Against Women in Urban Spaces – the role of Public Services, ActionAid, February 2013.



# A Woman's Right to the City

# The Late Walk Home

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## BANGLADESH

Many women are pressured to work long hours in order to make sufficient wages, which force them to return home late, along poorly lit and lonely streets, leaving them vulnerable.



Bangladesh Institute of  
Development Studies report



**Sumi is 17 years old. Like many Bangladeshi women, she works within the country's manufacturing industry, which predominantly employs women, yet fails to provide the proper services that ensure safe working environments.**

Many women are pressured to work long hours in order to make sufficient wages, which force them to return home late, along poorly lit and lonely streets, leaving them vulnerable. Workplaces often fail to provide transport facilities, and even on public transport there is no refuge, as harassment is common and often ignored by witnesses.

In a country where poverty is rife, Sumi spoke up about the dangerous conditions workers have to face in order to provide for themselves and their families.

***"I was returning home with three other colleagues of mine from the factory after completing my overtime. I left work at around 10 pm by their watch. Suddenly, from nowhere 8 or 9 men pounced on us ... That day fate was not on my side, before I could even realise I was in their clutches."***

Sumi was raped repeatedly throughout the night and the ordeal continued through the next morning. When she went home, her mother knew by Sumi's anguished state exactly what had happened. In order to avoid a scandal, Sumi was taken more than 5 hours away to their hometown in Rangpur for treatment.

Yet, even after all this, Sumi did not receive justice. As news spread, local leaders intervened to settle the issue.

***"The matter was settled by mutual understanding. The offender paid me money through influential people and my family did not take the matter further. Besides, my family was powerless in front of them."***

Sumi's story is one of many, as women in Bangladesh face perilous conditions and apathy towards their suffering.

# Her Dangerous Night Job

## CAMBODIA

Earning such a low income and with a daughter to provide for, whatever money Leang loses threatens to put her and her daughter on the street.



less than **38%**  
of women report  
feeling safe when  
walking alone  
at night

Gallup World Poll 2014





**Cambodia's sex industry is treacherous – workers face the dangers of sexually-transmitted infections, violence, exploitation and rape, all while barely making enough to live. Leang is a 37-year-old mother of three, who works as a sex worker and experiences its dangers every day.**

Leang lives in a dark room just 2.5mx2m with her 18-year-old daughter, having not seen the other two of her children since birth. The shelves are lined with HIV medicine, which is free, although condoms are hard to acquire.

***“If you have a condom in your bag, you are not a good girl,”*** states Leang. Due to anti-trafficking laws, Cambodian clubs no longer sell or supply condoms. Her daily rent is \$2.50 – which is roughly what Leang makes a night – so she cannot afford her own, leaving her sexual health at risk. In fact, Leang doesn't even know whether her daughter has HIV or not.

Leang finds no support from the society at all. She makes an active effort to avoid the police, as they arrest her often and she cannot afford to miss opportunities for work. ‘Gangsters’, a term used in Cambodia to refer to dangerous men more than those in organised crime, also pose considerable threat towards her safety and livelihood.

***“Sometimes the gangsters pay me for sex then beat me and take back the money,”*** Leang reveals. Earning such a low income and with a daughter to provide for, whatever money Leang loses threatens to put her and her daughter on the street.

For many women in Cambodia, the life that Leang lives is one of very few possible options. Only 5% of Cambodian women have completed less than a tertiary education, so many are living below the poverty line.<sup>2</sup> The dangers that Leang faces are the dangers faced by many Cambodian women left abandoned by their society.

2 Gallup World Poll 2014

# The Critical Commute

## BRAZIL

The insecurity Scarlett feels due to her living conditions and the unsafe streets in her city is now jeopardising her future.



**78%** of  
women aged 16-  
24 have suffered  
harassment in  
public spaces

Avon Institute Research  
(December 2014)







**Scarlett is an 18-year-old student living in Brazil, a state infamous for its violence and poverty. Rapid urbanisation has led to a large influx of male workers in Scarlett's city of Cabo de Santo Agostinho, who are contributing to the insecurity felt by many women there.**

Though she has now graduated, she recounted that occasions of being followed by men in cars, led her to stay at home in fear for her safety.

***“The first time it happened, I got so afraid I spent a week at home without going to school ... The next time it happened, I was so disturbed I stayed ten days at home.”***

Recently, Scarlett turned down an important internship opportunity because it would mean having to take evening classes, and walking home along streets with poor lighting and not many people on them. The insecurity Scarlett feels due to her living conditions and the unsafe streets in her city is now jeopardising her future.

“This is not good for me. The course I’m doing requires me to have 600 hours of internship experience to graduate. And I cannot do that while I am studying. I’ll have to wait to finish the course to start an internship which will delay my professional qualification.”

In Pernambuco, fear of harassment and abuse is causing women like Scarlett to prioritise their safety over their education and work, limiting their future opportunities. Scarlett’s story is an example of how unsafe conditions for women can do more than make them feel at risk – simply by being a woman, they can be disadvantaged in their education and work due to the fear they feel daily.

# A Treacherous Path to Water

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC  
OF CONGO

For the women of the DRC, harassment, assault, rape and further violence are constant threats.



Only **25%** of  
women reported  
they felt safe  
walking alone  
at night

Gallup World Poll 2014



**The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is a nation suffering from the lasting effects of poverty and civil war. In the DRC, only 25% of women report feeling safe walking at night, ranking the country second lowest in the world in that regard.<sup>3</sup> Marie, 56, lives in a commune, which has recently had a rapid increase in population but the public services in this area are struggling to catch up.**

Marie became a victim of the commune's underdeveloped infrastructure when she was forced to collect water at 10pm one day due to a lack of a nearby water source. By herself on an unlit road, she was kidnapped by 4 men who took her into an incomplete worksite where they gagged her, stabbed her, and punched out one of her teeth. They then ripped off her clothes and gang-raped her; **"They forced me to comply,"** recounts Marie.

Although Marie survived the traumatic ordeal, the experience was not completely over. Marie went to the police to file an official complaint but was unable to because she had no money. This is one of the main reasons why only 36% of women in the DRC report having confidence in their police force.<sup>4</sup>

Marie then went to the hospital, and sought help and support from her community. However, upon sharing her story, she was marginalised. Eventually, Marie left the community altogether.

Partially constructed houses, like the one where Marie was raped, are common in her commune. These are another example of how infrastructure is struggling to catch up with the population growth and leave women exposed to insecurity. One police car patrols 17 neighbourhoods Marie's commune, and corruption is rife. For the women of the DRC, this means harassment, assault, rape and further violence are constant threats.

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3 Gallup World Poll 2014

4 Gallup World Poll 2014

# Danger Lurks in the Shadows

## ZIMBABWE

The conditions created by poor infrastructure in areas of Zimbabwe are contributing greatly to the continuing harassment of women.



Only **47%** of  
women reported  
they felt safe  
walking alone  
at night

Gallup World Poll 2014





**Ruth is a 25-year-old woman living in Harare, Zimbabwe's largest city. Inadequate electricity supply is a symptom of the country's sharp economic decline and has become a normalised aspect of Zimbabwean life. However, this contributes to women's insecurity, as streetlights are sporadic and unreliable.**

In October 2014, Ruth's area experienced a power outage; a common occurrence that she says happens at least four times a week. As she went out to buy a candle so she could get through the dark periods, she was harassed by a man who slapped her buttocks in the middle of the street.

Ruth explained that the streetlights often do not work even if power is being supplied. There are also electrical towers, which are supposed to supply power to the area but are really just there for looks, and provide no power at all. Conditions become especially poor in summer, when people are growing the staple crop, maize, and other tall crops, which makes streets especially dark from the shadows they create.

The conditions created by poor infrastructure in areas of Zimbabwe are contributing greatly to the continuing harassment of women. The lack of consistent power means there are fewer working street lights in public spaces and this adds to women's sense of insecurity in the cities of Zimbabwe.

**These stories are not isolated incidents. Women and girls in cities aren't able to take advantage of the opportunities that cities offer because of fear. It is this fear and experience of rape, assault and sexual harassment when moving around in public spaces that prevents women having a life free of violence and exploitation.**

ActionAid's campaign Safe Cities for Women aims to hold duty bearers to account to make streets, public places, work places, learning institutions and transportation safer, so that women and girls are able to share in the vast benefits of their cities.

This can only happen if we demand that decision-makers build women's safety into the construction of cities, ensure public services meet the needs of women and girls, end sexual violence against women in cities and towns, and end impunity of sex attackers.

That is why we need you to help us make this issue a global concern, so that it becomes an international priority prompting immediate action by governments to create safe cities for women and girls.

**Your voice has power, and it is time to use that power to get action on these global issues.**

**Sign the pledge and spread the word that sexual harassment and abuse must stop, and stand up for women in cities everywhere.**

**[global.safecitiesforwomen.org](http://global.safecitiesforwomen.org)**



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পি, ঢাকা-১০

Join our  
global call  
for Safe Cities  
for Women

# act:onaid



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ActionAid is a global movement of people working together to further human rights and defeat poverty for all.

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