

## SAFETY AUDITS: A CATALYST FOR CHANGE

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Throughout the 1990's I managed safety initiatives for a feminist organization in Toronto, the Metropolitan Action Committee on Violence Against Women ([METRAC](#)). The organization was established in 1984 in response to a large number of assaults on women in public places in the City. It was supported by the municipal government with a founding mandate to be “a catalyst for change.”

One of the key areas of focus for change was women's experience of violence or fear and threats of violence that prevented them from fully participating in community life. A previous study (the Women in Safe Environments Report) based on the stories of hundreds of diverse women describing their concerns for their personal safety in the city, greatly informed METRAC's direction. In the study, women described specific places they were afraid to go, the characteristics of those areas, and when they were afraid to go there. Cities have not been planned or built with women's needs taken into consideration and in this first-ever study about their experiences they wrote about what they did to protect themselves and what they didn't do for fear for their safety. Most profoundly, some even spoke about not going out at all! Clearly, this was a problem of unequal access to public space.

The 'women's safety audit' was developed in 1989 by METRAC to address this problem of women's unequal access to public space and their unequal participation in planning decisions that affected their sense of safety in their communities. This 'audit' had nothing to do with financial accounting but was an assessment of factors in the physical environment that affected our sense of personal safety such as inadequate lighting, unclear signage, impeded sightlines, restrictive movement predictors, and isolation with limited access to emergency assistance. Recognizing that factors beyond those related to the physical design of a space affect our sense of safety, the audit has evolved and expanded its assessment criteria to include negative attitudes and threatening behaviours (such as racist, sexist and homophobic comments), and the effectiveness of policies and practices.

The fundamental belief of the audit process is that women are the experts of their own experience – no professional training is necessary. It typically works like this: five to six women get together, identify the geographic area they want to 'audit', and using a checklist with the above- listed factors, go around their community and comment on their experiences, fears, concerns, and suggestions for change. During the audit, women have the opportunity to identify concerns in their own way, using their own language and forms of expression. They are integral in this process of knowledge creation about their community. Ideally they then synthesize the

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information and share it with key stakeholders such as elected representatives, and city officials (including the police) who have the power to make the recommended changes.

Over the past twenty years I have participated in hundreds of women's safety audits and have noticed the powerful impact they have to effect change on many levels, both individually and collectively. The process of participating in the audit itself is empowering. This has been demonstrated not only in the North American context but globally. I have seen women who, previously, had never spoken up in a public forum gain a sense of confidence and authority because their experiences on an audit were legitimized. Audits have been adapted for use in urban and rural environments in different cultures and communities around the world, including Dar es Salam, Durban, Delhi, Mumbai, and Cochabamba, Bolivia. They have been adapted for use by other marginalized or vulnerable groups including people with disabilities, gays and lesbians, and children.

Some examples of their impact include:

- Effective changes to personal safety on public transit in Toronto including intercoms for emergency assistance, request stops for women -only on late night bus routes, designated waiting areas on subway platforms.
- An elementary school that uses audits to familiarize and integrate newcomer families to the school community.
- City-wide 'safety audit nights' with hundreds of participants identifying their concerns with the participation and support of their elected representatives.
- Women who used their safety audits as a lens through which other issues such as access to safe drinking water and health care were raised.

Despite some of the ongoing challenges of audits related to their inclusiveness and representation of community interests (particularly of those who are most vulnerable), and the potential for audit participants to develop unrealistic expectations for change, the outcomes and impact of safety audits go far beyond the changes initially anticipated when the tool was developed in 1989. As a recent study on "The Effectiveness of Women's Safety Audits" (*Safety Journal* n. 22, 2009: 205-208) documents, the audits are an effective tool for community development and can help bring about tangible changes both in the short and long-term. They are flexible and adaptable for use by different people in different contexts, and help foster partnerships between communities and local agencies and governments.

In fact, the audits that result in the most effective changes are those that are a partnership from the start between the women who have local safety concerns and key stakeholders such as elected representatives, city officials or the police, who have the authority to implement recommended changes.<sup>1</sup> Ideally the partnership is established based on a mutual respect for expertise, women's safety concerns are acknowledged and they are encouraged to conduct an audit with a commitment by civic leaders, for example, to support and act on the recommendations.

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<sup>1</sup> The work with the Toronto Transit Commission in the early 1990's is an example.

In my experience, however, this ideal rarely happens. Audits are often initiated in response to community concerns that have been ignored and the process of the audit is a tool for galvanizing a disenfranchised community into action and drawing public attention to the safety problems. Even in these cases, the results of the safety audit can effectively be used as a tool for lobbying for change.

The women's safety audit is a process for involving vulnerable people in identifying and making changes in their communities around the world that has unlimited potential because of its very design as an engaging and empowering exercise. It is an adaptable and flexible process that can respond to local conditions and needs. Next steps? I'd like to see an audit designed by and for girls and young women, perhaps to be used to assess their dating relationships – a key site where violence and exploitation occur.

**Further reading:**

<http://www.cvr.d.bc.ca/DocumentView.aspx?DID=1608>

[http://womenincities.org/pdf-eneral/WISE\\_new%20safety%20audit%20guide.pdf](http://womenincities.org/pdf-eneral/WISE_new%20safety%20audit%20guide.pdf)

<http://www.unchc.org/pmss/listItemDetails.aspx?publicationID=2847>

<http://www.metrac.org>