

TEAR Australia: Developing a female safety and security training programme

Background

[TEAR Australia](#) is an NGO accredited by the Australian government for the delivery of international aid and development, working through 92 partner agencies located in 22 countries. Partners are located in south and south-east Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and the Pacific region. Programme officers based in Australia, of whom 40% are women, undertake regular monitoring visits to projects overseas. Staff are likely to encounter a range of challenging situations, arising from local methods of travel, crowded urban environments, insecure accommodation options and civil unrest.



The need for a female safety training programme

Programme officers undertake safety briefings before travel but it became clear that women were encountering some unique issues which made their visits more difficult and sometimes, more dangerous. Below are the reported examples of situations that occur where TEAR female employees have felt insecure:

1. Travelling alone or with male staff only, or being in a situation where there are all male project staff going out to visit a project
2. Being offered accommodation without sufficient security or privacy
3. Rail travel alone or overnight rail travel and other unsafe public transport
4. Travelling, arriving or departing in the dark or late at night
5. Being isolated: not the same as travelling alone, this is more about who else is around
6. Crossing land borders
7. Unintentionally ending up in the middle of a situation where a crowd is gathering and becoming agitated
8. Unwanted attention from males
9. Attempted room invasion in guest houses
10. Being hijacked by a car driver
11. Walking alone in a city at night, after needing to buy food or eat in a restaurant away from the accommodation

“Amanda was on a monitoring visit to Bangladesh. The male project leader led her to a motorbike and told her to sit side-saddle and hold tightly to the bar below the seat. She was aware that she could not hold on to the driver. Amanda survived the journeys but was aware that she was unstable and in danger of falling for most of the travel during that visit.”

The leadership team discussed this need and decided to plan a female safety training course for women travelling for TEAR. This included all female programme officers as well as communications and education staff and consultants who undertake visits on behalf of TEAR.

Planning

Planning the course needed the committed time of one staff member (part-time over a number of weeks) as well as a small budget of about AUD\$6000 (around £3000). Once the commitment to train female staff was made, this staff member designed a short survey for all women who had travelled for TEAR in the past two years, asking about their experiences together with suggestions for areas of learning to be covered. The questions included:

“What would help you feel more prepared or equipped to better face situations like these?”

Respondents reported the following:

- Opportunities to share with and learn from others about how they approach travel situations
- Good training
- Use of GPS trackers, SPOT Satellite GPS messengers, satellite phones
- Having contactable phone number(s) of the partner organisation’s staff member who is going to pick me up at the train destination
- Having a hard copy of the route and schedule of the train I am taking
- If travelling by taxi to hotel from an international airport in India, buying a pre-paid taxi voucher from inside the airport
- Having a local prepaid SIM card and making sure my phone is not running out of battery

“I was travelling with the director of a partner organisation to a remote project location in Maharashtra State. The journey necessitated an overnight stay in a hotel in a large regional town. As we went upstairs we heard the sounds of alcohol-driven revelry coming from one of the rooms on the floor below mine. I was awakened by very loud noises - banging on my door and shouting. The man outside was shouting and demanding that I let him in ... For future visits, I was accommodated in a completely different town, in a small, family guesthouse, which was comfortable and secure.”

When asked about **areas that would be good for training** to cover they reported the following:

- Handy tips and tricks such as what to carry with you or personal behaviours that enhance safety e.g. personal alarm
- Negotiating effectively with a partner organisation or staff around something you feel a bit unsure about
- Inappropriate advances or sexual assault and tips to prevent
- Common scenarios, assertiveness, risk analysis, practical strategies, self awareness and working out what is OK for you, sensory responses to fear and learning to tune in to that sense, good preparation and what that covers, preventative strategies
- Cultural and social awareness when travelling
- Personal defence training, vigilance, awareness of surroundings, staying out of threatening situations, common danger situations and how to deal with them

This material was then collated into a training needs document. Two providers were approached with this needs assessment and proposals solicited. One was selected and negotiations of price and which training personnel would deliver the programme took place.

Training needs identified

1. Prior preparation and planning
2. Situational awareness
3. Prevention and response to security threats and incidents

4. Transportation and vehicle safety
5. Accommodation safety including fire
6. Surviving natural disasters
7. Women's self defence

Women appreciated being given a say in what needed to be covered in the training and had a rich store of travel experiences to share. There have however, been some logistical challenges in planning the training programme, mainly due to female staff travelling regularly and finding a common time when all could attend. This meant that a long lead-time of five months was needed.

At the time of writing, the course is planned to start in August 2015. The expected outcomes are:

- Changes to TEAR Australia female travel policy and protocols in the areas of accommodation and in-country travel.
- Changes to the advice we give to partner organisations regarding the visits of TEAR women.
- Changes to individual travel behaviour.

Facilitating factors

The commitment of leadership at TEAR was a critical factor and the process of de-briefing staff after traveling had revealed a number of challenges. The leadership team realised that female staff had concerns that were specific to them and responded to the suggestion that tailored training was needed. For example, a member of the leadership team held the responsibility of tracking the process of surveying staff and developing the training needs document.



Figure 1: Staff travelling overseas can encounter safety issues.

TEAR Australia already had a Gender Working Group, and its work had resulted in a gender audit and revised gender policy, as well as sensitising the organisation to the voices of female staff. A commitment to listen and learn from what the women had experienced, and to take steps to address the issues, was an additional important factor.

Anticipated impact

The impact of this training will be measured using a number of indicators such as:

1. Fewer reported negative security incidents for women;
2. More female staff reporting satisfactory accommodation and travel arrangements;
3. The TEAR Australia international program team comprising at least 50% women.