Women in Public Spaces: Lived Experiences through a Safety Audit Approach

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ABSTRACT:
Background: Rapid 21st-century urbanization has spurred city growth and socio-economic development, offering diverse opportunities. However, cities remain paradoxical, promising better lives while excluding many. Urban experiences, shaped by social identities, result in complex, unequal spatial dynamics, with gender significantly influencing these. Women often perceive urban spaces differently than men, facing conditional access and heightened public vulnerability. A 2021 NCRB report revealed Delhi's lead in crimes against women among Indian cities, with a 40% increase from 2020 to 2021.
Data Methods, Materials and Methodology: This study evaluates women's safety and access to public spaces in Delhi, aligning with SDG goals. Safety audits and structured questionnaires were employed in 10 locations with higher walkability and visibility, examining both objective and subjective factors. The study emphasizes that cities are not inherently designed for women's safety; instead, women 'create' their own spaces, termed "HerSpaces," through constant negotiations in their daily lives. Furthermore, the three A's—accessibility, affordability, and accountability— widen the gap between existing city spaces, their design, and actual usage by women.
Findings: This unequal and highly differentiated access, resulting from and in turn leading to the marginalization of women, presents itself as a multi-faceted challenge exacerbated by institutional inefficiency, among other things, serving as obstacles in the way of transforming Delhi into a city for everyone - safe and inclusive in every sense of the words.

Keywords: Women's safety, Safety Audit, Crime against women, gendered spaces, Inclusivity.

1. Introduction

Space often serves as a backdrop for human activities and experiences. It is not a one-dimensional construct, but rather a multifaceted and intricate one, with each individual imbuing it with a unique personal significance based on their subjective perceptions. Public spaces, in particular, reflect this complexity on a smaller scale. Although urban public spaces are often touted as venues for exploration and exploitation by all who use them, the reality is not always so positive. Spaces are not neutral; they are shaped by perceived inequalities and power dynamics that arise from societal norms and structures. As a result, various human actions and everyday behaviours are infused with meaning.

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The public spaces in metropolitan cities convey a paradoxical picture. On one hand, they represent the promise of a better life for all, but on the other hand, they only fulfil this promise for a select few. Women, in particular, are often marginalized and overlooked. This exclusion is compounded by the numerous socially-ascribed disadvantages that women face, highlighting the fact that not all women are equal. These inequalities within the female group result in diverse experiences of everyday life in public spaces.

The underrepresentation of women in leadership and planning roles has persisted for centuries. However, the emergence of modern women who work outside the home in public spaces has complicated the task of creating inclusive environments for women. While the increased visibility of women in urban areas may suggest progress, it does not necessarily result in equal opportunities or safety for them. Instead, it has led to new forms of harassment and exclusion, and the issue of crime and violence against women remains a significant concern. Women are often blamed for maintaining respectability and morality, while still being subjected to violence and power assertions by men. The fear of violence in public spaces restricts women's access and movement in ways that are multitudinous – for one, it becomes a cause of stress and anxiety, affecting their mental health. Moreover, it keeps them from moving out for education and work, leisure and recreation, even finding a way into their decision pertaining to being in green spaces and the outdoors, in general, for the sake of their physical health. The fear of violence then produces a rippling effect that creates multiples obstacles for women to access and use the city's public spaces, resulting in a poor sense of belonging, identity and freedom, contradicting their right to the city.

Focusing on ensuring women's safety and their access to urban public spaces, particularly the public spaces of Delhi, India- this study employs women's safety audit as a participatory tool that places women at the very centre of planning and designing the spaces of the city. Engaging women as key decision–makers, taking their everyday experiences and fears into consideration, safety audits enable them to voice their concerns and amplify the same to bring about required changes. Keeping this benefit of the said tool in mind, the paper sets out to fulfil the following two aims – 1) To map the geography of public space gender exclusion, using qualitative methods in the capital region of Delhi, India; and 2) To suggest policy measures addressing safety of women in urban spaces.

Study Area
Following the general state of affairs concerning women's safety   and   crime   against women in and their access to urban public spaces, Delhi can be taken as a specific case in question. As per a report published by the National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB) in 2021, among all metropolitan cities in India, Delhi topped the list for Crimes Against Women, also recording a 40% rise in the same between the year 2020 and 2021. In terms of absolute numbers, the capital city recorded   13,892 cases of crimes against women in 2021, as opposed to 9, 782 in 2020. Furthermore, with 19 major cities together accounting for 43, 414 crimes against women, Delhi alone constitutes 32.20% of the total share.
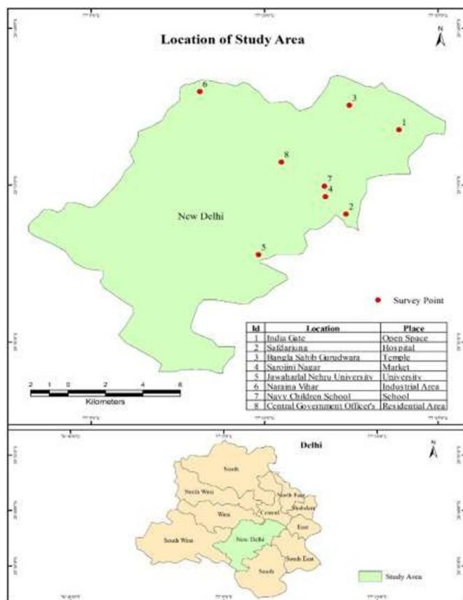
Figure 1: Location of Study Area

In the same year, data recorded by the National Commission for Women (NCW) (2021) reported Delhi to have had the highest number of complaints of crimes against women among all Union Territories. While the NCW attributed this figure to the increased awareness among women and the provision of a greater number of facilities to help women, the same certainly can't be said to be the only causal factor. This reality goes on to reaffirm the UNCSW's concern of various forms of sexual violence against women and girls in public spaces being a matter of great consequence, requiring immediate attention and concerted efforts.

2. Materials and Methods

This paper is a structured, empirical study that primarily makes use of a qualitative approach to gather information on the status of women's safety in public spaces of Delhi. In order to limit the focus of the study, the New Delhi district has been chosen.

2.1 Participants

Given that the study is concerned with women's safety in urban public spaces, particularly those of New Delhi district, the participants chosen were exclusively women, coming to constitute a purposive sample. Furthermore, during the course of the data collection process, as the interviews were conducted in-person at every location, it facilitated the inclusion of women with varied backgrounds in terms of the nature of work that they did/their occupation, socio –economic grouping and age. This enabled us to incorporate different subjective experiences while also bringing out the role of the diverse background in affecting their access to and safety in the urban public space.

2.2 Methods of Data Collection

1. Women's Safety Audit (WSA) - The study employs Women's Safety Audit (WSA) as the primary methodological tool to understand, collect data pertaining to and assess the situation of women's safety in the country's capital metropolitan city. WSA is a participatory tool that is used for collecting and assessing information about perceptions of safety in public spaces. It is a process that brings people together to walk through a physical environment, evaluate how safe it feels and identify ways to make it safer still.

Before conducting the audit, 10 categories of locations were decided upon, for the reason that they constitute parts of the city's public space that women use relatively more actively and are therefore more likely to be seen in. These locations were mapped in a way that they were spread across the entirety of the district and could help us paint a comprehensive picture of the safety of women. Broadly, they are – University Areas, Hospitals, Open Spaces – Parks, for instance, Tourist Spots, Schools, Residential Areas, Markets, Offices/Workspaces/Commercial Complexes, Places of Worship and Industrial areas.

While most other audits conducted around the world and in different parts of the country have followed a similar process of making a team consisting of women, training them and then making them walk along select routes to complete the audit, this one differs in its attempt to focus primarily on the everyday experiences and perceptions of diverse groups of women who have already been using the concerned places on a daily basis for some time now. In line with the same, for each of the 10 locations, groups of women based on age and occupation were finalised to be targeted for the study. The audit therefore relies on randomly choosing respondents from pre-identified groups of women known to be actively using a given public space, deeming their take to constitute a sound foundation for initiatives aimed at transforming metropolitan public spaces into those meant for women, in particular, and more inclusive, in general.

For the purpose of conducting the safety audit, the following three tools were used –
a. Physical Checklist - prepared in order to gauge how accessible and safe select locations are in terms of their –
i) Physical Characteristics – such as those of 'Lighting, Signage, Visibility, Isolation, Escape Routes and Maintenance';
ii) Usage of Spaces – who uses them and how; and how the same affects the level of comfort/safety that women experience in the concerned space;
iii) 'Social Policing', or the presence of people around ('eyes on the street'), at different times during the day.

b. Pilot Study - In order to check the feasibility of the checklist, a pilot study was conducted in parts of Dwarka, New Delhi on different days and at different times. Undertaking the said activity helped us become familiar with how to go about using the checklist, while also highlighting areas that required modification in order to make the current study more reflective of the ground reality. Parama Mitra's physical checklist served as a primary reference for the same (Mitra & Bardhan 2017).

c. Street Survey cum Personal Interview – conducted for learning perceptions of women on the street, with regard to how safe they feel while walking by, using the space and being there on a regular basis.

1. **The structured questionnaire method** has been used for the said purpose. Based on the type and function of location being studied, questions in the questionnaire were modified to account for the differences being reflected across space. These were then distributed to women randomly and their responses were recorded. The Questionnaire can be broadly categorized into the following sub themes - 'Access to Public Space', touching

upon the distance that women have to normally cover to reach their destination, the mode of conveyance that they prefer using, their usual time of arrival and departure and how safe they feel on their way to and from the said location, among other things; 'Safety Perception in Specific Study Locations', including questions on factors that the respondents hold responsible for their safety or, more importantly, the lack of it, the precautions that they use as a means to overcome the same, improvements that they'd like to see and an overall safety score after taking everything into consideration; and their 'General Awareness' with regard to safety provisions for women that are already in place. The select stakeholders of the study were illiterate or semi-literate therefore the informed consent was obtained verbally after ensuring that they fully understood the purpose and procedure of the study and their rights to withdraw at any time.

2. Photographic Evidence - Finally, while conducting all of the aforementioned activities, photographic evidence was collected using our mobile devices and notional maps were prepared to capture how women perceived the space. In addition to this, recording devices and field notes were used to collect narratives.

2.3 Methods of Data Analysis

a. Thematic Analysis - Responses collected from the participants have been organised and analysed theme wise. This ordering is similar to the one followed while writing the literature review, that is, arranging them in the broad themes of time, space and safety; physical infrastructure; eyes on the street; and mobility, among others, while also looking at how each is closely linked with the other. Narratives relevant to each theme have also been included in support of the points made as part of the discussion, thus providing real–life experiences as evidence;

b. Quantitative Analysis – Constituting a much smaller part of the data analysis, this approach was used only for the representation of safety scores collected at the end of the interviews. Graphical representations of average safety scores of different locations and that of the entire district have been prepared in the form of bar and pie charts, using on calculations made, based on a simple frequency distribution method.

3. Review of Literature

Urban spaces are complex due to their uniformity, differences, and dialectical relations (Lefebvre 2003). Gender is just one of the many forms of identity and social groupings that contribute to the pluralistic nature of urban spaces (McDowell 1983). The public-private dichotomy of space with respect to gender is a key characteristic, where the former is associated with men and the latter with women (McDowell 1983). Other distinctions such as city-suburb, work-home, and production-reproduction also follow this pattern, where the latter is often referred to as the 'sphere of the woman.' Habermas' initial understanding of public space as cohesive and uniform was challenged by Fraser, who argued for and described public spaces as 'multiple, contending, and sometimes mutually exclusive (Whatmore et al. 2009).

Men's status has historically been higher than that of women and the same also features in the making of 'Gendered Spaces'. The gendered spaces of the city are marked

by a predominance of one sex (Spain 2005; Samanta & Pallabi 2013), and the greater visibility of and approval for men to be in such spaces stands out as a common characteristic of most spaces, particularly urban public spaces, thereby reinforcing the idea of them being meant to be used by men, as opposed to women. Public and private have been argued to be constituting two sides of the same coin, parts of the same world and aspects of the same socio-economic systems and existing institutional structures in and of the two have been found to reinforce one another (Collier et al. 1987; Moore 1988; Spain 1993).

Ensuring unrestricted access to public spaces for women requires acknowledging their 'Right to the City', which includes the freedom to use urban spaces in daily life to foster a sense of belonging (Fenster 2005). The belongingness being talked about here can be created only when one gets to walk in, use, interact with and experience a given space (Certeau 2011). The larger Right to the City comprises of two main rights – the 'right to appropriate urban space' and the 'right to participation' (Lefebvre 2003; Purcell 2003). When women are excluded from the urban public space, it leads to the creation of 'Forbidden Spaces' for them, while also leading to them being treated as 'the Unbelongers' (Fenster 2005; Phadke et al. 2011). Public spaces are often designed without considering the needs of women, resulting in an environment that unintentionally supports the development and reinforcement of gendered meanings (Raju & Paul 2017).

It is further explained that the nature of gendered spaces in India (and the east, at large) is a lot more fluid, in comparison to those found in the west (Raju & Paul 2017). The authors propose the concept of the 'New Indian Woman' who embodies both 'Indianness' and 'Westernness' in her dual roles across public and private spaces in post-modern Indian cities. While there is an increased number of women in these urban public spaces due to greater opportunities for work and leisure, their access and freedom in these spaces is conditional at best, as their role in the home is still considered more important. This suggests that greater visibility does not always lead to better access, inclusivity, and equality of opportunity.

When the women overstep their limits by accessing public spaces, they are often subjected to varied sanctions including violence, which is just one of many such forms of retaliation (Anand & Nanda 2022). It is used as a policing mechanism and comes to control women's access to public space (Anand & Nanda, 2022). In addition to the actual occurrence of violence, the fear of the mere possibility of the same happening affects women's behaviour regarding access the public space (Anand & Nanda 2022; Phadke et. al. 2011; Whitzman at al. 2013). Violence against women in public spaces includes sexual abuse, verbal harassment, inappropriate physical contact, catcalling, groping, intimidation, staring, and coercive behavior, such as ushering women into secluded areas or entering women's restroom blocks during power failures. These forms of violence have been reported in Morocco, Kenya, Dar-es-Salaam, and India (especially Delhi) (Niboye 2023; Phadke et al. 2011; Mehrotra et al. 2010). The nature of response given to such incidents against women is also seen as part of the problem, especially when it places the blame/responsibility on women (Anand & Nanda 2022).

Numerous studies have been carried out to investigate women's mobility in cities, including reports and case studies. The Ease of Moving Index Report presents a Comprehensive Mobility Index comprises nine parameters such as seamless mobility,

gender inclusivity, affordability, clean energies, efficiency, reliability, first- and last-mile connectivity, and future mobility (Toshniwal et al. 2022). This suggests that innovation can enhance the mobility experience by promoting cashless technologies. Furthermore, a comprehensive assessment of 82 global economies based on five key dimensions: health, education access, technology, work opportunities, protection, and institutions has also been calculated (World Economic Forum 2020). Several case studies examine the incident rates of gender-based violence in the city of Columbia using statistical techniques, and the relationship between various variables focusing on gender and socio-demographic characteristics has also been explored (Rodas Zuleta et al. 2022). In the Indian cities of Kochi and Surat, the authors specifically focused on a set of gender-neutral transport policies that enhance mobility (Swamy et al. 2021).

Feminist Urban Planning, which incorporates gender-neutral physical infrastructure and transport, leads to the creation of inclusive public spaces (Visakha 2021). It presented a critical approach to planning and participatory planning aimed at addressing the needs of diverse societal groups, with a focus on women, girls, and gender minorities. Further, a comprehensive report which highlights the personal experiences of sexual harassment and abuse faced by women in public spaces, emphasizes the importance of 10 key principles, such as women-friendly urban commons, pedestrian-friendly streets, and convenient last-mile connectivity, to promote secure and inclusive cities from a female perspective (Reimagining the City from a Woman's Perspective: A Primer, 2018). In Konak, a woman-friendly city in Turkey, an analysis was conducted to identify the critical components of inclusive urban design (Guney at al. 2020). In addition to incorporating female-oriented and inclusive design and planning techniques, it is crucial to foster active collaboration across local, national, and global levels to bring about comprehensive changes that extend to all corners of the world (Klodawsky et al. 2016; Whitzman 1992). The United Nations underscores the beneficial consequences of fostering inclusive cities through cooperation with a range of stakeholders (UN Women 2017). The "State of the Urban Poor Report" also incorporates the dimension of poverty, including women living in extreme poverty with limited access to essential amenities (Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation (India) & Department for International Development (UK) 2016). This brings these women within the purview of inclusive city planning (Bhardwaj et al. 2016); Mitlin et al. 2016). Safety audits have gained traction as a participatory method in research and design. Women are now considered as principal stakeholders, making them the main focus of these audits. Women's Initiatives for Safer Cities (WISE) findings from 2005 state that individuals who use or avoid a particular space are the experts on its safety. Consequently, a Women's Safety Audit (WSA) is a useful tool for gathering and evaluating public space safety perceptions. This technique involves individuals walking through a physical environment, assessing its safety, and suggesting improvements (Mehrotra et al. 2010).

To ensure a comprehensive approach, handbooks suggest involving diverse groups of women in the study as every woman's experience of access to public spaces differs (Viswanath 2013). To attain a holistic approach, likely partners, and domains of

comprehension, including physical features have also been examined (Mitra & Bardhan 2017; Women's Community safety audit guide 2005).

The implementation of safety audits has been customized to suit local needs in various regions and carried out using a variety of methods, such as dialogues, poetry, and visual arts, focus group discussions, sub-mapping, and exploratory walks and key informant interviews (Bhatt 2020; Basu 2018). Researchers have also examined the potential of digital technology, particularly the 'SafetiPin' app, in enhancing women's safety and inclusivity in cities through safety audits. Furthermore, several studies have focused on specific groups of women, such as domestic workers, low-income women living in informal settlements and transgenders, including trans women.

4. Results & Discussion

Exploring existing literature reveals that the conditionality of women's access to urban public spaces is a multifaceted concept with numerous layers of meaning. To decipher this complex issue and comprehend how each aspect contributes to women's presence in urban areas, this section has been divided into several themes. These themes encompass the nature of space and its forms, the groups that occupy it, women's mobility, the impact of violence on women's movement, and preventive measures along with women's awareness of them.

4.1 Time, Space and Safety

Time and nature of space can be highlighted as two crucial factors that work closely to lay influence on women's safety in and access to space. As (Viswanath et al. 2007) explain, "Women's ability and right to access and use public spaces is dependent on the kinds of boundaries imposed upon them due to nature of the space and its usage." Different kinds of public spaces have the aforementioned playing out in different ways and an example of the same can be drawn from the narratives collected in and around the university, on one hand, and those from around the school, on the other.

The nature of space of the University campus is a gated space with specified timings to move in and out and certain other security provisions in place, the campus comes to constitute a semi-public space having boundaries more permeable for some than the others. Furthermore, students (aged 17 – 20) make for the most predominant demography and with classes primarily being held during the day, it is common to observe all connecting roads around the university being quieter, with people being visible only at given times like the dismissal or beginning of lectures. As informed by a group of students, the picture remains somewhat the same till about 6 pm. It is therefore during late evenings and night time, once everyone gets free from their respective formal routines, that one finds people, particularly students, stepping out in bigger groups for leisure, transforming the space into one with a mixed crowd, bustling with activity. It is this change that also causes girls on campus to feel safe even during nighttime, becoming an exception to the general belief of spaces being unsafe for women after dark.

The female students from the school reported that the time of day, particularly after it becomes dark, and the alterations in the characteristics of the surrounding area as the day progresses, serve as a limiting factor for their presence in public spaces. The school's operating

hours, from 7:30 am to approximately 1:40 – 2 pm, correspond to a period when the surrounding area is highly active, with teachers, students, parents, female bus marshals, residents from neighboring colonies, and pedestrians and vehicular traffic all present. This heightened activity level is what leads the target groups to perceive the space as secure. However, as night falls and the area becomes quieter, the respondents feel less secure. The perceptions of safety among women in areas surrounding the hospital, as well as in residential and industrial areas, have exhibited similar shifts over time. In the case of the hospital, the surrounding areas have become more open and public, which could potentially result in a mixed crowd that makes women feel safer. However, despite the increasing presence of women in these areas, there are still fewer women than men, which can be considered both a cause and an effect of an unsafe space. In the residential area, respondents reported changes in the usage of certain places at night, with groups of men meeting and drinking together at less conspicuous spots, which was considered a threat to the safety of all residents, particularly women and children. Overall, the study highlights the complex interplay between time, space, and perceptions of safety among women in different areas.

The perception of safety in public spaces for women is influenced not only by the amount of time and usage but also by their familiarity with the area. Researchers, who were both women and first-time visitors, found certain spaces to be unsafe, while regular users of the space did not perceive the same level of danger. For instance, the researchers felt uncomfortable in the male-dominated Naraina Industrial Area during the day, despite being accompanied by a male colleague. However, women who worked in the area did not consider it unsafe, as the prevalence of men was a norm they had grown accustomed to. Similarly, regular visitors to India Gate did not view the area as unsafe at night, while non-regular respondents expressed hesitation. Overall, the level of familiarity significantly impacted women's perceptions of safety in public spaces.

The use of frequently travelled and deemed safe routes encourages women's presence and access to public spaces. Even if the preferred routes undergo changes, such as due to darkness, the respondents reported feeling less affected due to their familiarity with the route. Safety concerns only arise when the respondents are forced to take an unfamiliar route. Therefore, familiarity with a space can have both positive and negative implications for women's safety.

Finally, it is crucial to emphasize that although the instances previously discussed have focused on modifications in women's perceptions of safety and accessibility to public areas in terms of time, familiarity, and the characteristics of the space (i.e., its human and social aspects), the physical components (infrastructure) of the space can also significantly influence the perception of safety and its suitability for women's use throughout the day.

4.2 Physical Infrastructure

Physical infrastructure is a vital aspect of urban design, serving as the foundation for a city's shape and form. However, it is often subject to criticism for overlooking specific needs of certain groups of residents, leading to their exclusion from the city's space. For instance, infrastructure issues can limit women's movement and participation in the city, thus denying them their right to the city (Andrew 2000; Moser 2004; Whitzman 2002). Studies conducted in Delhi revealed several gaps in the physical infrastructure of the city's

public spaces, discouraging women's presence and use of those spaces. To assess the efficiency of infrastructure, factors such as lighting, visibility, escape routes, isolation, maintenance, and community participation can be considered.

In this study, women reported that insufficient lighting was a significant infrastructural issue. All eight locations evaluated suffered from inadequate lighting, which hindered women's movement at night and added to their unease and apprehension. Furthermore, concerns about poor visibility, overgrown vegetation, and obstructed sightlines exacerbated the safety risks for women. These factors created conditions that could conceal potential perpetrators, making women vulnerable to violence in public spaces. For example, dark alleys in residential areas, spots behind trees and parked cars, and benches situated behind thick bushes in parks with no lighting could serve as ideal locations for criminal activities. As a result, women may feel uncomfortable walking in these areas, fearing the possibility of being victimized.

In the given narrative, the *sunsaan* or quiet and deserted nature of the by lanes can be attributed to infrastructural shortcomings that discourage women from using the same actively. Insufficient infrastructure presents various obstacles for women, such as limited choices, greater effort, and ultimately, a waste of energy and time. Take for instance, the story of a domestic worker who avoids the lane adjacent to the water pumping station because of its poor lighting and instead opts for a longer path. This change in her usual route not only consumes more time and energy but also demonstrates the need to adapt to unfavourable situations.

Accessible footpaths stand out as an important physical design feature in terms of women's safety. The reason why poorly – maintained and occupied footpaths are seen as unsafe for women is that in the instance where they have to make an escape/run away from a likely threat, they won't be able to do so as a result of all the hindrances along the way which will work to slow them down and/or injure them, exacerbating the problem in the process.

Providing separate spaces for men and women in urban settings is crucial in acknowledging their unique needs. Our culture's persistent gender segregation norm further emphasizes the necessity of distinct spaces. The absence of public or independent restrooms for women, particularly in areas such as India Gate, Sarojini Nagar Market, and the Residential Area, as well as the lack of separate waiting rooms in hospitals, highlights the failure to provide such facilities. As more women are present in public spaces, it is essential to provide separate washrooms, resting, and changing spaces, as well as waiting rooms. The lack of these facilities reinforces the perception that women are not welcome in public spaces and perpetuates the marginalization of women in the city. In recent times, what has also come to be part of the larger physical infrastructure is technical surveillance through cameras. It was found that while cameras were present at most locations, they were not consistently present and were mostly owned by private individuals.

Table 1 – State/Availability of Physical Infrastructure at Study Locations

Location/Features of Physical Infrastructure	Lighting	Accessibility of Footpaths	Separate Facilities for Men & Women	Availability of Cameras
Hospital	Dull corridors and insufficient lighting, both inside and outside. Small bulbs and malfunctioning streetlights contribute to the uninviting atmosphere.	Not as prominent inside, but present outside with obstructions in between	The absence of separate waiting rooms for male and female visitors causes discomfort to women as they are forced to share the same space with male strangers and have no changing rooms.	Found in corridors, but scantily; none available outside the gates, along the footpaths
School	Adequate during the day; inadequate at night, also obscured by dense trees	Broad and accessible for the most part, except for one point of obstruction due to an overhanging tree	Separate facilities available within the premises for both girls and boys	Available at each gate and even within the premises, thus adequate
Tourist Spot (India Gate)	Good only around the walkpath, got worse on moving away from them, towards the centre of the lawns	The interior path was well-maintained, but visitors and vendors congested the circular footpath outside, causing pedestrians to sometimes walk on the road.	Available, but inadequate in number because of the large crowds that the location often sees	Seen only at a few select locations, not all around

Gurudwara (Place of Worship)	The lighting was only adequate on one side due to the bulbs used by the stalls, making it difficult to have a clear view across.	Mixed use by pedestrians and stall owners, thus inhibiting their continuous use along a stretch	Inside the gurudwara, facilities are provided by the authorities; however, there are no such facilities outside, where stall owners and hawkers usually spend their time.	Available, but reportedly inadequate (outside, where all the road - side shops are)
Industrial Area	Minor lanes almost entirely dark and secluded, major roads better lit	The roads lacked footpaths, causing women and visitors to walk on the main road, which was broken and uneven. Additionally, the main road was used for parking and the movement of heavy vehicles.	Available within the premises of each factory unit, but not outside (as a common facility meant for everyone)	Common roads lacked cameras, but private cameras monitored by guard teams were present.
Residential Area	Main road well lit, by lanes poorly - lit	Partially accessible with continuous road, but some obstructions due to overgrown trees, uneven manhole covers, and broken road surface at the same level.	The confinement of domestic workers and their families to one toilet and bathing space on each floor, deprives them of their privacy and jeopardizes their safety/security, affecting both male and	Unsure about cameras in common lanes and their functionality; some houses have privately owned cameras.

			female members.	
University	Main roads better lit than the by lanes which were darker; overall, inadequate	Accessible and well - maintained along main roads inside campus; missing in the by - lanes	Separate facilities available in department - buildings and hostels	Placed only at the main gate, not seen anywhere else along the main roads and by - lanes
Marketplace	Similar to residential and university areas, obscured by tree cover; poorly lit parking lot poses threat.	Unusable due to the presence of ice cream vendors, hawkers, parked two-wheelers, and overgrown trees.	Unclean and poorly maintained public toilets deter women from using them, hindering accessibility for women.	Street cameras present; their functionality unclear; private cameras outside larger stores.

Source: Field Survey, Researchers' Observation.

Urban planning and management should, thus, be rooted in the understanding of everyday life (Whitzman, 2013). More importantly, it should be based on reading the different ways in which different people come to use the same city space, for a multitude of purposes. The findings shared above reveal how women's everyday concerns and experiences of using the urban public space in Delhi is not given due attention.

4.3 Women's Mobility in the City

Affordability and accessibility are two key factors that affect women's transportation choices when traveling to public spaces in the city. The study found that public transportation users consistently outnumber personal vehicle users. Within the city, informal workers and factory employees are the most common public transportation users and make up the majority of the pedestrian population. These groups are particularly vulnerable due to their increased utilization of public spaces, such as streets. The study also shows variations in exposure and susceptibility among the three transportation categories based on their mode of conveyance.

Table 2 – Modes of Conveyance Preferred by Respondents

Locations	Conveyance generally preferred by the Respondent during opening and closing hours	
	Day Time	Closing Hours (Late Evening Hours)

India Gate	Public Bus, public subway (metro)	Public metro subway (metro), public Bus, auto rickshaw
Safdarjung Hospital	By public Bus, personal scooter, train, auto rickshaw (shred)	Personal vehicle and Bus.
Bangla Sahib Gurudwara	Metro, bus, private vehicle, cab	Personal vehicle (accompanied by family member or known ones) and metro.
Sarojini Nagar Market	Metro, bus, cab, auto rickshaw (personal and shared), own vehicle	Metro, cabs and personal conveyance.
Naraina Industrial Area	Walking/on foot, bus, train, e rickshaw, personal vehicle	Bus, personal vehicle and e rickshaw, walk in a group or with a family member, and e rickshaw.
School	By school bus	School bus
JNU Campus (University Area)	Within campus - by walk; outside campus - shared and personal auto rickshaw and cabs	Outside the campus - personal auto and cabs; Inside campus – walking in groups.
Chanakyapuri Residential Colony	Walking within the colony; using available modes of public transports when going outside.	By walk because respondents reside within the same colony itself

Source: Field Survey, Researchers' Observation.

Table 2 offers a comprehensive overview of the transportation preferences and choices of the respondents for their daily commute. Women generally opted for public transportation systems, with the most commonly complained issue being the service frequency. This problem is exacerbated during nighttime, leading to longer wait times at bus stops and increased vulnerability to unwanted attention. Additionally, the lack of reliable schedules, inadequate provisions at bus stops, and an overall lack of public transportation availability create unsafe environments that deter women from using public spaces. Therefore, it is crucial to establish a robust, efficient public transportation system that is safe, reliable, affordable, and accessible to encourage women's mobility within the city.

The issue warrants further investigation, especially concerning the various groups of women who account for a disproportionate share of public transportation users. This reveals a socioeconomic divide separating those with access to personal vehicles (or independent cabs

and autos) from those without and reliant solely on public transportation and/or walking. This divide not only influences their transportation choice but also their perceived safety and access to public spaces.

4.4 Eyes on the Street: Desirability vs Prying

The individuals occupying public spaces at a given time as potential observers of events are closely associated with women's safety in urban public spaces. The presence of certain groups adds to the perceived safety of women, while presence of others is deemed undesirable. The study participants' felt uncomfortable and less safe in the presence of drug addicts, drunk men, and groups of men/boys gathering at tea and *paan* shops, whereas felt safe in the presence of police officers, familiar or affluent individuals, and ordinary vendors. The participants also advocated for the presence of more women, or "female eyes," to challenge male dominance in public spaces in order to enhance women safety.

4.5 Experiences of Harassment/Crimes Against Women

Violence against women or fear of it is perceived as a sanction against women for breaching the stringent rules and regulations imposed on their everyday behaviour and movement, particularly in the public space, In many cases, the fear alone is used as a form of deterrence against ways of living, being and doing in the public that are deemed inappropriate for women. Majority of the respondents were not familiar with the distinction between physical and sexual violence and what constitutes harassment. This may be attributed to the common perception that women's safety is synonymous to their sexual safety which is closely related to notions of honor (*izzat*), dignity, morality (Phadke 2011). It also confirmed that everyone, particularly women have grown accustomed to certain forms of violence and harassment as it is normalized.

The majority of women, particularly those who are subjected to verbal or visual harassment, and in certain instances, physical harassment, consider it inevitable and tend to rely on ignorance as their primary response. Respondents shared that taking action against harassment in crowded areas often proves to be a challenge for it is hard to identify the perpetrator and even if one succeeds in identifying, they end up giving them a benefit of doubt. Women who choose to confront their harassers are seen as being too assertive, thus discouraging similar actions in the future. This limited approach to dealing with male harassment minimizes the seriousness of the situation and may even encourage the perpetrator to continue their behavior without consequences.

Respondents also reported experiencing harassment, as well as disturbance from the police or 'committee *wale*' (female street vendors in industrial areas and outside gurudwaras), unsupportive employers (domestic workers in residential areas complained of insufficient payment and lack of support), uncooperative medical professionals and senior staff members (at the hospital, patients and their family members were disregarded, and lower-level staff members received no assistance in obtaining basic facilities such as separate changing and restrooms for female guards), and threats from permanent shop owners (female vendors in Sarojini Nagar Market) and instances of theft (reported by respondents in Naraina Industrial Area)- all of which posed threats to their livelihood, job security, and well-being,

resulting in compromised safety. Whereas some respondents provided vague and evasive answers.

The respondents were found to hold contrasting perception with regards to the causes of harassment and violence against women. One view was that patriarchal structure and societal attitudes perpetuate harassment and violence against women. Another perspective was of blaming women for the violence they endure. Women frequently lack the backing of a supportive community when seeking to hold perpetrators accountable and are frequently conditioned to disregard specific forms of violence. Consequently, women's safety remains a matter of concern when accessing urban public spaces. Women are regularly compelled to make concessions in order to venture beyond the confines of their homes into the public sphere, where they confront alternative and conceivably more subtle barriers.

4.6 Negotiations or Methods of Generating Safety

Women are expected to navigate public spaces at their own risk, relying solely on themselves, and expecting no assistance from others if trouble arises. They are forced to engage in negotiations or adopt strategies that create a false sense of security by employing various tactics such as fidgeting, appearing visibly uncomfortable, or rushing when waiting at bus stops; walking briskly past places without stopping to linger; and ignoring palpable threats. For instance, some domestic workers in residential areas continue to use dimly lit lanes despite the risks involved because they are accustomed to doing so.

Other forms of negotiations employed by women include accessing public spaces in groups to convey the message that they are accompanied; refraining from venturing outside after a specific time, especially when it becomes dark; adhering to the same route every day since it has been deemed safe due to factors such as heavy foot traffic, a constant presence of people, and adequate lighting; altering one's route frequently to evade being followed or monitored; turning and looking around to keep track of the people surrounding you when using the road or sidewalk; moving out of the way of individuals, particularly men; walking rapidly and quietly, strictly between home and a destination that has a legitimate reason for your presence; seating in a particular manner on public transportation - crossing your legs, shifting to the side to occupy as little space as possible; speaking on the phone or pretending to do so, using headphones to detach yourself from and remain somewhat invisible in your surroundings; and avoiding paying attention to or steering clear of certain situations in order to maintain a safe distance from everyone and therefore protect themselves – all constitute a set of conscious and subconscious modifications that women make before and as they move through and use the city's public space. It is imperative to point out that these negotiations are essentially many ways of making a compromise only to avoid having to forego the freedom (albeit conditional) that they have today to be in public spaces and tap into the opportunities that they hold.
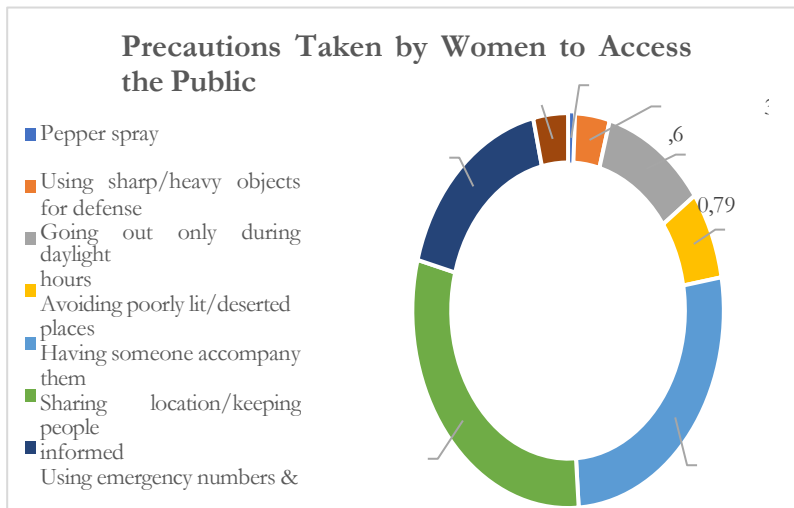
Figure 2: Precautions reportedly used by Respondents

As shown in the graph, our respondents too were found using one or many of the aforementioned ways of generating safety for themselves in public spaces. These underscore how no trip for women outside their homes is free of careful calculations and considerations that ultimately lead them to mentally mark places as relatively safe or unsafe for their use.

4.7 Access to Technology and Communication

The chart above depicts varying levels of awareness among respondents regarding the use of technology for women's safety. The majority of respondents had access to mobile phones, with informal women workers from the market and factory workers being the largest group with limited access to technology. During the study, it was observed that the knowledge and skills of the majority of respondents regarding mobile applications and technology were limited, with only one respondent from the religious spot location demonstrating a fair understanding of women's safety applications. Although some respondents were aware of women's safety helpline numbers, only a few individuals in the market, hospital, and religious spot locations provided such responses. In contrast, the respondents in schools and universities only knew the police helpline number. This highlights the need for active campaigns to raise awareness about women's safety initiatives, such as available helplines and safety apps, to improve women's safety across the city. The respondents were also asked about the nearest police station to assess their awareness and level of observation regarding safety-related mechanisms available at locations they frequented daily. Lack of awareness was observed in the university and residential area locations due to the higher prevalence of Hostelers and house helpers, respectively, leading to limited understanding and knowledge of the surrounding areas and nearby police stations. The study participants expressed dissatisfaction with the inadequate efficiency and dependability of the police and other security measures.
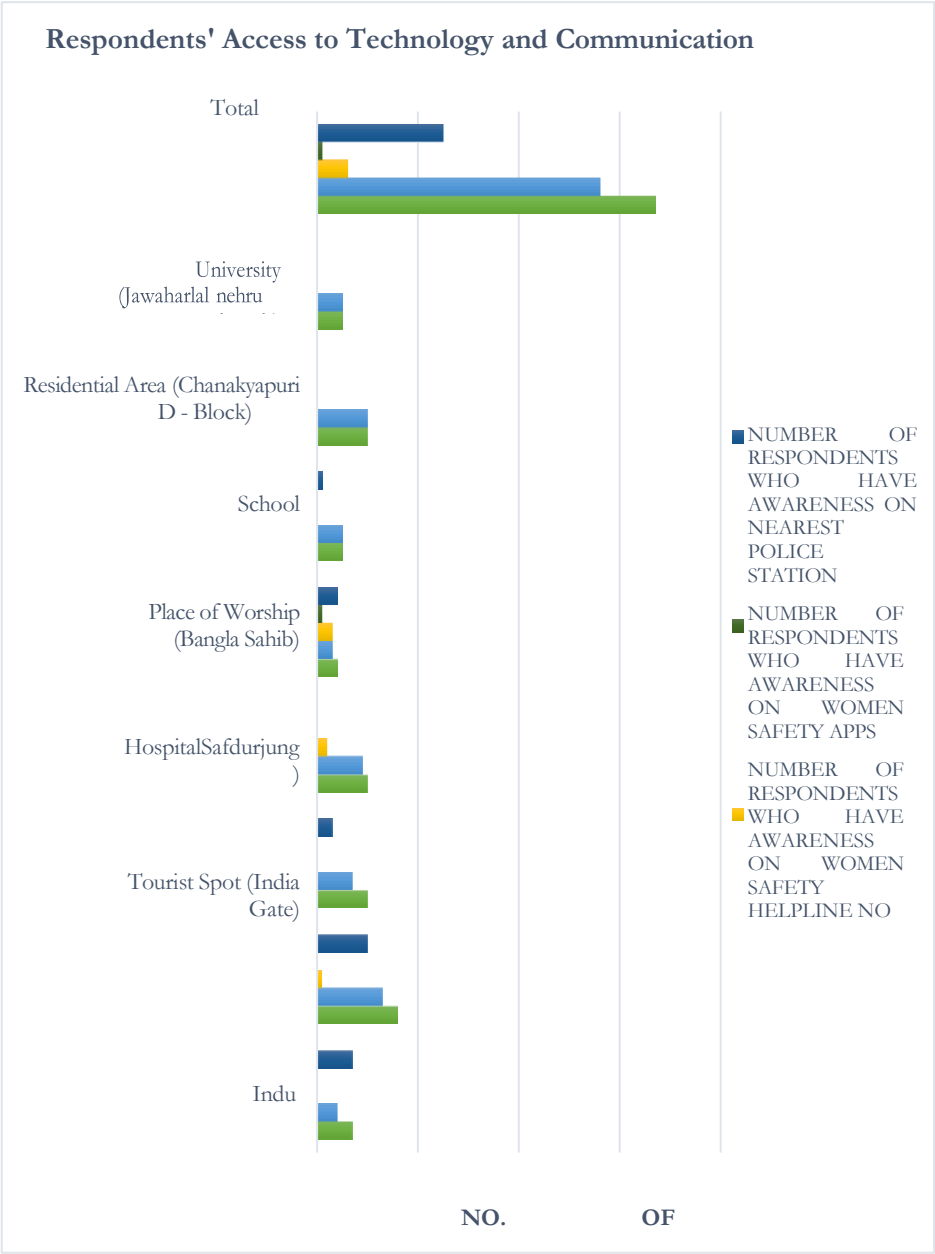
Respondents' Access to Technology and Communication

Figure 3: Respondent's access to technology and communication

The chart above depicts varying levels of awareness among respondents regarding the use of technology for women's safety. The majority of respondents had access to mobile phones, with informal women workers from the market and factory workers being the largest group with limited access to technology. During the study, it was observed that the

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4.8 Awareness Regarding Safety Generating Mechanisms in Place

There are two significant aspects of safety-generating mechanisms. The first aspect relates to the initiatives taken by concerned authorities to create a safe and habitable environment for city dwellers. The second aspect focuses on women's awareness of these measures so that they can avail themselves of the services when needed. To evaluate these dimensions, the study attempted to gauge women's knowledge of the police's availability in their vicinity and helpline numbers specifically designed for them. It was found that the school administration, the Residents Welfare Association (RWA), and the university administration had taken measures at their respective levels to ensure safety in and around their areas.

The school reportedly provides registered buses to transport students and teachers to and from their homes and school. Each bus is accompanied by a female marshal, whose contact information is shared with the parents for emergency purposes. Parents are also issued I-Cards with their photographs, which are required for pickup. The school staff conducts sessions on reproductive health, well-being, and safety for both male and female students. The residential area's RWA has been commended for their proactive approach in addressing concerns, such as filling in gaps between garages to improve security. They also have a dedicated security officer for the entire colony, including domestic workers. Lastly, the university has implemented gender sensitization drives and workshops for students and staff, and the female security guards stationed outside the girls' hostels are reportedly cooperative.

At the market, a pink booth was observed, while the presence of police officials and the availability of CCTVs were noted at the place of worship. Women security guards were also present at the tourist spot, and a Police Station was seen in the industrial area. However, roads in this area were completely deserted, along with the absence of CCTV cameras and adequate security measures.

4.9 Safety Scores

To conclude the study, each respondent was asked to give a safety score to the location where they were interviewed at. This rating takes into account all factors that tend to have a bearing on women's perceptions of safety – design and adequacy of physical infrastructure, the presence of eyes on the street, the over – all physical and social set – up of the specific location and even its vicinity (routes used regularly to reach the location, etc.). Several challenges did come up in trying to collect the scores – several respondents were unable to understand how to go about doing so even after attempts of giving simple examples to explain the concept to them, or simply refused to rate the location; and in the case where the respondents did know what to do, some of the ratings were found to be inaccurate for they did not seem to be in line with the observations made by the respondents with regard to the select parameters.

Based on the limited data that could be collected as a result of the stated challenges, average safety scores could be calculated for only three locations, of which the residential area was found having the highest average score (Figure 4). It is to be noted that a few select respondents gave different scores for the same location, based on time (i.e. day versus night) and generally deducted safety points due to the following reasons- visual harassment (school), poor lighting, instances of robbery, inadequate policing (around school area, particularly at night time) and a lack of cleanliness (back lanes to servants' quarters in the residential area). Lastly, individual scores were found ranging from 2 out of 5 (India Gate at night) to 5 out of 5 (Residential area) but mostly remained towards the higher end, thus leading to the moderately high average score of the entire district (Figure 5).
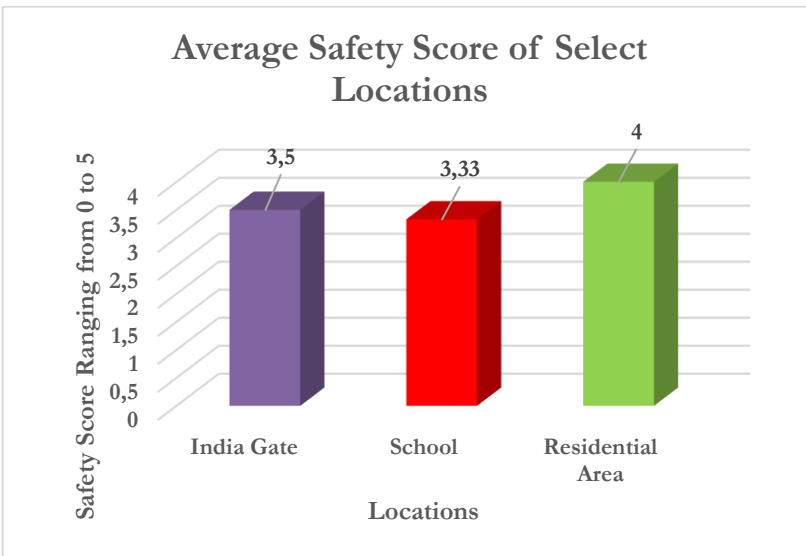

Figure 4: Average Safety Scores of Select Locations across New Delhi District
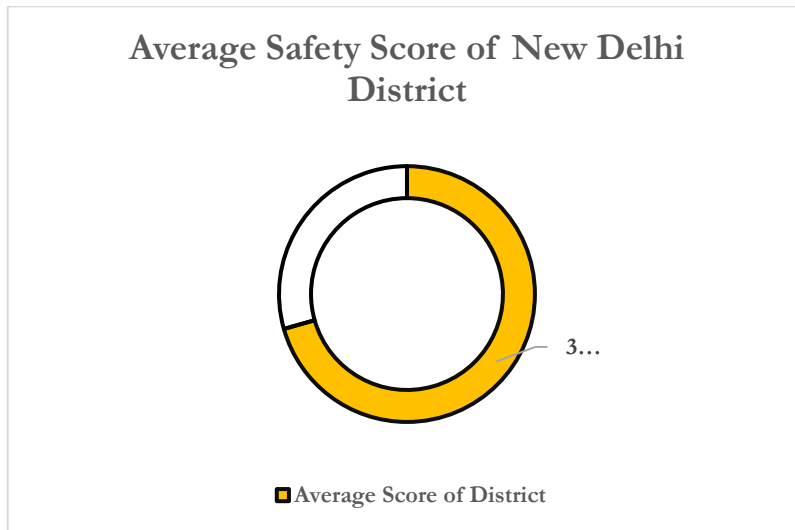
Figure 5: Average Safety Score of New Delhi District

Recommendations

Creating an inclusive city requires a holistic approach. This includes not only ensuring proper lighting, but also considering the placement of these lights, either away from or under dense vegetation to prevent obstruction. Additionally, wider and even pavements should be built to allow for unobstructed movement. Building more washrooms for women, equipped with sufficient cubicles, sanitary napkin disposal machines, and dustbins is crucial. Installing CCTV cameras with the aim of monitoring perpetrators and covering blind spots can act as a deterrent. Maintaining these facilities is also essential for their success.

Accommodating needs of Informal Women Workers - Establishing designated areas for street vendors and hawkers can safeguard them from being ousted by unions, committees, and officials. Encouraging the formation of informal committees and unions of women street workers in each locality can enable them to collaborate and share resources. For example, the few women vendors found outside the gurudwara reportedly cooperated, shared contacts and resources, and carved out a place for themselves in the otherwise male-dominated locality.

Improvements in Frequency, Availability and Efficiency of Public Transportation Systems - The research indicated that a majority of respondents utilize public transportation to access public spaces. Therefore, in order to enhance women's mobility, the frequency and availability of transportation should be improved, particularly during nighttime hours. Introducing female conductors and drivers can also encourage more women to use public transportation. Additionally, seats should be made wider to prevent unwanted physical contact, such as touching, rubbing, or brushing against someone, which can be especially problematic for women. Implementing a schedule for bus arrivals with fixed waiting times, similar to metro services, can ensure continuous operation of the

service and minimize long wait times. Finally, installing adequate lighting at bus stops can improve safety for all users.

Bringing more women out on the streets through recreational activities such as heritage walks, community activities such as yoga, self-defence classes, dancing etc, can be held in public parks to boost their numbers and visibility.

Fixed timings for opening and closing Kiosks (paan and tea stalls) so as to limit the crowd of men causing discomfort to women and girls.

Spreading awareness on generating self-safety and better use of technology - community awareness programmes held in public spaces with a mixed audience so that men and women can find a space to learn together and engage with each other; hoardings with helpline numbers written on them in as many languages as possible, clearly visible in public spaces, to make them more easily accessible;

Greater presence of police, especially women police officers along with their training in dealing with cases pertaining to women so as to make them more sensitive to gender-oriented differences in approaching such matters;

Encouraging women interest groups to collaborate with the urban authorities in devising sustainable solutions to improve the mobility and presence of female cohort in the urban public spaces by moving beyond the narrative of compromise and negotiated safety. This would turn the 'HerSpaces' into safe zones.

It is crucial to acknowledge that prevalent stereotypes contribute to the challenges and disparities mentioned earlier. While immediate and comprehensive change is not plausible, taking small steps can lead to gradual progress. Initiating conversations with family members and questioning gendered norms, while promoting more equitable ones, can help drive change. Furthermore, media representations of women need to be improved. As a reflection of society and an opportunity to challenge existing beliefs, media can play a pivotal role in challenging restrictions placed on women. Advertisement campaigns, street plays, newspaper cartoons, and comic strips can all contribute to relaxing such restrictions.

5. Conclusion

While we may have come a long way in ensuring a relatively better status of and opportunities for women, we are still far from reaching the goal of having safe and inclusive spaces for women in cities. Several limitations continue to exist and they have been identified to have taken the form of poorly designed public spaces overlooking the needs of women; social curtailments pertaining to time, space, safety and mobility, that lead to different and multiple underprivileges and layered exclusions for women; and instances of violence against women. This is something that holds true not just in Delhi, or the cities of India, but those of the Global South (Durban, South Africa; Dar es Salaam,

Tanzania; Nairobi, Kenya; Tijuana, Mexico) and the Global North (London, UK; and Montreal, Canada) as well, for such is their universality.

In a bid to maintain the access that women have to the city's public spaces, although subject to restrictions, they resort to several strategies that take forms of both conscious and sub-conscious negotiations. Being a woman therefore comes with trade-offs that allow access to the urban public space subject to compliance of gendered norms and concerns such as modesty, respectability and honour. The cumulative result of inefficient functioning of authorities and poor implementation of policies results in rigid constraint on women and girls' movements to an extent that their rights and access to education, paid work and even leisure- to just be, loiter and move around in the city spaces, are violated.

Differences in identity and social status can make people vulnerable or protected by society. This is illustrated by the distinctions between men and women, as well as among women themselves, who have diverse experiences and are not all the same. Disparities in access to basic services stem from a complex hierarchy of gender, class, caste, race, and religion. Women's limited access to public spaces presents numerous challenges, including gender stereotypes and lack of awareness about provisions and safety. Moreover, a gendered digital divide and ineffective institutional responses hinder efforts to make Delhi an inclusive city for all. These challenges can be addressed by focusing on changing existing gendered norms and beliefs, starting with listening to women's voices and suggestions for achieving their desires.

This study paves the way for future research where the specific interventions for ensuring safety of   women in public spaces such as better lighting, more public toilets, etc can be quantitatively assessed.   A longitudinal-study would provide the policy makers with practical insights on urban investments and their measurable impacts in securing inclusivity. Further, the future studies must factor in the constraints of oral data collection methods and consider visual aids or co-operative inquiry to solicit active engagement of participants and precision in the recorded responses. There is a scope of inclusion of male subjects and their perspectives and insights from law enforcement agencies for a comprehensive understanding of the safety landscape. Similar studies with a more intersectional approach that include other   members   in urban public spaces can be done for an improved understanding of the shared and contested dynamics of urban public spaces and to devise more inclusive policies.

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