GENDER PERCEPTION OF SAFETY IN URBAN PUBLIC SPACES: CASE OF NEW DELHI

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Over the past few decades, the process of urbanization has intensified and accelerated throughout the world. This process has brought in its wake problems of poverty, inequality, and exclusion. The National Capital Territory of Delhi is one of the rapidly growing cities in the world where violence against women and girls in public spaces has emerged as a major developmental challenge. While Delhi has been successful in creating a global image with respect to many urban innovations, it has not been able to successfully tackle the problem of gender-based violence, especially in its streets, market-plazas, parks and public transport systems. This lack of safety for women, both experienced and perceived, significantly undermines their right to the city – the right to move around freely; to use and access public spaces and services; to make choices about their place of residence, work, or leisure; and more broadly, to make the best of the opportunities the city offers. The paper, while theorizing on the issue, focuses on women’s safety and its perception by finding out design parameters, indicators and physical components specific to urban parks in the city which make them safe or otherwise.

Keywords: Urban public spaces, Design-parameters, Urban parks, Women-safety, Perception.

Gender

The concept of ‘gender’ is composed of a package of cultural differences and factors that shape the lives and expectations of women and men, in relation to their social role and duties. Gender is a socially-learned behavior and expectations of the society from both the sexes and is constructed socially. The term ‘Gender’ is different from the term ‘Sex’. ‘Gender’ refers to expected social roles within society, for women and men, whilst ‘sex’ refers to biological differences. ‘Gender’ embodies the acceptance of varying gender identities, differential levels of power, and differing roles for women and men, which result in them using space differently (Bowlby et al, 1986) both inside and outside the home within the built environment (Wigley, 1992).

Gender can be seen in terms of social structure or as a symbolic order which is the way in which notion of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ is described. (Davis and Cowles 1991) Gender imposes privileges and restrictions and defines power dynamics in a society where men always have the dominant position. To date, gender research has acknowledged a specific form of gender-relations, namely patriarchy, that disadvantages women and which thus requires emphasis on women’s needs (Panelli, 2004). Maleness and femaleness dictate the disposition of opportunities as well as burdens which affect social life and establish spatial needs of a community (Khan 2011). Considering gender as a socially-learned behavior and expectations of two sexes which is constructed by society it is to be taken into consideration by designers while shaping urban outdoors by and large (Khan, 2011).
Urban Public Spaces

Urban Public spaces play a vital role in our day-to-day life. They are used by a variety of user groups with uniquely different physical and psychological frames thus generating a variety of experiences and perceptions.

Three characteristics often used to analyze the meanings of “Public” and “Private” are access, the agency of control and interest (Been & Gauss, 1983, Pitkin, 1981). City streets, squares, market-places and parks are usually both publicly owned and open to the entire population. Other spaces and buildings, privately owned and controlled, are open to the public but the owners may refuse or discourage entry by certain segments of the population (Brill, 1989, Forrest & Paxson, 1979). Examples are stores, shopping malls, libraries, and museums.

For the present research, Urban Public Spaces are a variety of outdoor spaces around our built environment like market-places, bus-stops, and metro stations, streets, plazas and parks.

Defining Women’s Safety & Perception of Safety

Women’s safety has been defined in various ways, but the essence of these definitions is a reduction in gender-based violence (or violence against women), including women’s fear of crime. This includes, first of all, creating safe public spaces, where women can move freely. Different sections of the community – for example, men, women, youth, the elderly - use public spaces differently, and their concerns must be kept in mind while planning and managing public spaces, services, and infrastructure.

Women’s safety also includes freedom from poverty and ensuring that women have safe access to water and sanitation services, as well as other public infrastructure and amenities. Freedom from abuse, domestic violence and sexual harassment at the workplace are also essential ingredients of women’s safety. Finally, a sense of self-worth, along with financial security and independence, are also seen as integral to women’s safety. Strategies, policies, and practices to ensure and enhance women’s safety must aim, first of all, to prevent perpetration or victimization. This can be done, inter alia, by improving knowledge and changing attitudes that correspond to the origins of domestic or sexual violence; and by ensuring that women and girls participate fully in community life and in local decision-making processes.

A safe city for women is a safe city for all (UN-HABITAT, WICI et al. 2008)

Women’s perception of safety is an experiential state where women feel or do not feel safe in a given situation or place because of some incidence – heard of or seen. It is not enough to focus only on reducing actual incidents of violence. We must work to ensure that women and girls also feel safe and free from the threat of violence. “When women and girls are not protected from violence in public or in private spaces, they are more likely to feel afraid and excluded in their cities. Therefore, although women’s and girls’ perception of insecurity may sometimes not directly correspond with objective events, it can have the same consequences. A situation of violence suffered by one woman impacts on all women because all women become aware of the possibility of experiencing violence because of their gender - fear is transmitted and can be learned as part of women’s gender roles. For this reason, safe cities should address women’s actual and perceived sense of safety.” (UN Women, Safe cities module)

Women’s safety and perceived safety is affected by a variety of interrelated factors. In addition to levels of crime and violence, a complex intersection of social, cultural, economic, and familial issues combine to affect women’s feelings and experiences of safety or unsafety.

Some socio-economic factors that impact the safety of women and girls in the city include:

i. Poverty and socio-economic status: Poor women often face heightened safety challenges related to their difficulty accessing essential services. For many of them, especially homeless women, women vendors, and domestic workers, the need to regularly access public spaces and public transport creates heightened vulnerability.

ii. Infrastructure: The availability of safe and clean public toilets for women promotes women’s safety. Toilets that are dark and dirty, with broken doors and no attendants are seldom used by
women. Poorly lit areas pose a threat to safety. Walking on dark roads and unlit streets is something most women avoid. Additionally, the lack of street lighting in commercial areas makes it difficult for women to work late. In addition, lack of efficient and safe public transport can make it difficult for women to access the city.

iii. Usage of spaces and familiarity: The gender of the people using a space, affects women’s safety. A Delhi-based NGO called Jagori, in a research, found that women in Delhi feel uncomfortable in male-dominated spaces such as cigarette shops, dhabas (informal eating-shops), taxi stands, and liquor shops. Women not only hesitate to use these spaces but may even avoid going near them for fear of harassment.

iv. Societal attitudes: Trivializing and normalizing the sexual harassment of women and girls as harmless “eve-teasing” contributes to women’s unsafety. Further, women and girls are often blamed for inviting sexual harassment because of their clothing or behavior, which places the responsibility for ensuring their safety upon women and does not expose the patriarchal attitudes behind these notions.

v. Attitude of the police: The difficulty of reporting a case to the police is often linked to a lack of faith that the police will follow up and take the case seriously. The insensitivity of the police to women’s experiences of gender-based violence discourage women from approaching the police, thus eliminating one potential avenue of response. (Jagori)

Gender-Space Relationship in Indian Context

Indian womanhood has always been at the cross-roads of changes and the results have been evident in the space-gender relationship at various times. From the beginning of Vedic Era (1500 B.C. – 500 B.C.) till Medieval India (12th Century A.D. – 16th Century A.D.), women were supposed to follow societal rules which kept them bound to residential limits mostly except during certain durations when men-women were treated almost equal. Largely women were excluded from public domain. Women were not allowed to go out and if they did so, they had to pay a fine. The earliest reference to it is in Panini III,2,3,6, which yields “Asuryampashya Raja-darah” which means those who do not see the sun, that is, the wives of a king.” Women were politically, socially & economically inactive and were put to lowly jobs like farming & weaving. They were restricted to home only and complete exclusion of women marked the era.

During the time of Mughals in India (16th Century A.D. – 18th Century A.D.), women were secluded from common public spaces but they enjoyed their space through specially dedicated open spaces for women only. Detailed descriptions of women-only palaces, pavilions, and gardens of Mughals are found in the historic texts wherein women preferences and security were categorically taken care of. Around late 19th Century, the Second Wave of Feminism emerged as a powerful movement. Energy was focused on passing the Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution guaranteeing social equality regardless of sex. Many women-only organizations were formed. This wave drew women from all over the world. The idea of women-only spaces, which had started to be visible from the time of Mughals in India, got added support. With the Second Wave emerging, the gender-space relationship witnessed a vital shift in terms of usage. It enhanced the development of women-only spaces and they started to emerge consequently all over the world and the idea seems to be realized in practice even today in fragments somewhere or the other. In the present situation, in day-to-day life, women boggies in metros and trains and special ladies buses are noticed. These women-only spaces are assumed to have gained importance and participation because they helped overcome certain long-lived societal evils. Women had not been able to access public space for long in history because of factors like long history of oppression, social outlook, and family responsibility, sense of leisure disenfranchisement, the concept of the ethic of care, patriarchy and male domination, fear of crime and harassment by men.
Present-Day Situation

Today, there are gender-related acts like National Environmental Policy Act, UN-Habitat Gender Mainstreaming Unit and UN Women and many other organizations which are in a constant process of rendering support and empowerment to women across India and the entire globe. There is a visible clue of changing trends in Gender roles due to education, emancipation, and gentrification. Sharing of child-rearing role is also evident these days. Nowadays, 35% of men with children under 12 are the primary carer of their offspring because their wives are at work and them likely to have problems carrying out those duties that were part of women’s traditional role (Adams and Ingham, 1998; statistics are taken from ONS, 2004).

In the last 10-15 years, the gender roles have come to a state of existentialism. The two genders are sharing, to the extent of exchanging, responsibilities and roles as partners. Women’s and girls’ development potential and options for action have substantially increased and their life patterns have diversified. Women and girls have successively advanced into spheres of life formerly dominated by men. In contrast, changes in male life patterns and biographical orientations have been less marked. Today, women find themselves in a particular transformation dilemma. (cf. Harth 2006, 94 ff) As a result, women have started to project a bolder and a much freer way of use and behavior in public places.

Delhi as a City

With a population of 15.3 million people, Delhi is the seventh most populous city in the world and the second in India (after Mumbai). Much of the Delhi metropolitan area lies within the National Capital Region of Delhi (NCR), which has the status of a union territory. New Delhi, the national capital and also the seat of the government of the NCR, is jointly administered by the union government and the government of Delhi. Civic services are provided by the New Delhi Municipal Council (NDMC).

According to the Economic Survey 2001-02, Delhi had a per capita annual income of Rs. 38,860 and recorded an annual economic growth rate of 9.9 percent. Most of this growth comes from the tertiary sector which contributed 78.4 percent to the GDP in 2001-02. The city, once a center of manufacturing, has seen rapid de-industrialisation in the last decade with a consequent rise in the unemployment rate. Construction, real estate, information technology, banking, hotels and tourism are presently the largest contributors to the economy. Other key sectors include government administration and defense.

Delhi’s relatively high per capita income, better living standards, and the high economic growth rate have attracted a lot of people from rural areas in neighboring states. Due to this high migration rate, Delhi is one of the fastest growing cities in the world. According to a report by United Nations, Delhi will be the third largest urban agglomeration in the world by 2025.

The Delhi Development Authority (DDA), created in 1957, is the body responsible for planning for the development of the city. Five years after its formation, the DDA unveiled a master plan for the city which proposed to develop 44,770 hectares of the urban area by 1981 for a projected urban population of 4.6 million. This turned out to be an underestimation, and an additional 4,000 hectares of urban area were added to the target. In 1981, with gaps remaining in fulfillment of targets, the master plan was reviewed, amended and extended to 2001.

Shortfalls in planning are most visible in the dis-jointed open space system and the area of housing. Heavy numbers live in unorganized settlements. The effort of Delhi over the past few years to position itself as a global city with state-of-the-art infrastructure leading to modern real-estate housing enclaves presents a very complex and heterogeneous fabric of the city.

Today, narrow streets of high-density areas like old Delhi, extremely low-density Lutyens bungalow zone, ceremonial formal Kings-way, modern housing enclaves, extremely sophisticated rapid transport systems, highly cluttered slums & unauthorized colonies altogether paint the face of Delhi.
Issue of Women Safety in Delhi

Delhi has the dubious distinction of being one of most unsafe cities in the world for women. Statistics show that women in Delhi face more violence than in any other city in India. Delhi tops the list of all crimes against women including molestation, rape, dowry harassment, domestic violence. According to the 2005 National Crime Records Bureau statistics, one-third of all reported rapes in mega cities took place in Delhi. Similarly, 23 percent of all reported molestation in mega cities took place in Delhi. In 2014, Delhi was identified in the areas with maximum incidences of Crime against women in India. (Fig. 1) In the lead up to the first Delhi Human Development Report (2006), a public perception survey revealed that people felt the safety of women to be one of the three main problems facing the city, along with employment and housing.

Other surveys also suggest that fear of harassment in public places structures women’s lives and movement. The fear and insecurity that women face in accessing public spaces prevent them from availing the benefits of being an urban citizen. They are not seen as legitimate users of the space, except at certain times and for certain activities. Thus women are seen in public when they have a purpose – going to work, market, picking up children and other such activities. But it seems public spaces are not meant for women to be seen if they do not have a purpose.

Figure 1. Map showing Delhi identified as one of the cities with highest crime rate against women
Source: National Crime Records Bureau, 2014
As per Survey carried out by International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) in Delhi in 2012, only 5% women and girls considered public spaces in Delhi to be safe and 1 in 5 girls chose not to venture out alone for fear of violence. 80% women and girls feel unsafe in streets, 50% in markets, 47% in parks and 37% feel unsafe on bus stops. (Fig. 2)

Focus and Area of Research

There is already a lot being endeavored to make public spaces safe for women in Indian Urban areas. In the present research, the first stage is to survey and observe various public spaces of varied activity and scale to identify spaces perceived as safe by women. The second stage focuses on women safety and its perception by finding out design parameters, indicators and physical components specific to urban parks in the city which make them safe or otherwise.

The public spaces surveyed are three neighborhoods of three different economic strata. Studying these neighborhoods included studying the perception of safety by women in all kinds of spaces i.e. last mile connectivity (small streets), neighborhood parks, plazas with shopping at a local level, multi-purpose grounds and play grounds. Two large parks - One in Mixed Land-use Area of Very high Economic Class and the other in Residential Area of Medium to high Economic Class were also studied.

Discussion

The findings from Stage-1 suggested the preference of public spaces in Delhi w.r.t. safety of women. Women were mostly comfortable using urban parks while play grounds and small plazas came out as unsafe and hence not preferred. Though urban parks are generally perceived as safe yet there are lacunae and loose ends which need to be addressed. This formed Stage-2 of the research. Most women opt to be in Neighbourhood parks close to residential areas. They prefer to be in Parks only in morning and early
evening to evening and strictly avoid afternoons and late evenings for reasons like environmental discomfort and lack of safety due to inappropriate lighting levels etc. Above all, when asked whether they would prefer to be in a park alone or with someone, 80% women declined to be in a park alone.

Most important finding which emerged from these sessions is that specific group of women have specific meanings and tolerance levels which define safe and unsafe. So, smaller and more precisely defined sample groups are being done again. Coming to design components and details which increase or take away the feeling of being safe in a park, through observation and interviews:

i. Parks of residential scale with definite and watchable boundaries are preferred over large amorphous greens.

ii. The presence of hiding spots is a big negative for a space to be perceived as safe.

iii. Spaces which allow a long view through vegetation layers generate a perception of safety instead of thick enclosures which look very mysterious and hence not too safe.

iv. Edges of parks which are transparent to let the users visually connect with outside while being there are considered as safe.

v. Women prefer to be in spaces which promote an activity of their interest instead of activity like active play or shops like liquor, bank squares etc. which are assumed to be men’s choices.

vi. It is seen that women like to be in spaces which have enough people especially kids and other women. They avoid being in spaces occupied by men-only especially men of lower economic strata.

vii. Parks with well-designed and maintained walkways and amenities make women prefer them.
viii. Front yards of monuments and visual centers of spaces are perceived to be safer than corners and edges.
ix. The presence of other people and vendors adds to the feeling of safety in a space.

Looking holistically at planning and design strategies, detailing, infrastructure and amenities, the following measures may prove to be instrumental in improving the condition of women safety and its perception in the city of Delhi:

**Planning & Zoning**

- Promoting mixed land use
- Efficient distribution of Parks near residential and work areas

**Design & Detailing**

- Design for all ages, classes and types of people
- Multiple activity parks should be designed
- Eliminating dark alleys, dead ends, hiding spots and ‘entrapment areas’
- Transparent boundary walls for ‘eyes on the street’
- Instituting hawker-friendly policies

**Infrastructure & Amenities**

- Optimum Lighting
- Comfortable and Discernible Walkways
- Clear Signages
- Cleanliness
- Clear Visibility
- Security and Surveillance
- Essential proximities
- Clean toilets
- Environmental Comfort

**Place-Making:** Last but a very important component is place-making which is very abstract in definition but can be achieved by ensuring multiple activities to gather multiple kinds of users at different times of the day, the presence of vendors, sitting areas with shade and furniture to allow longer usages as interaction spaces. All in all, spaces which are designed in a way that they become successful destination spots for users.

**Way Forward & Broad Recommendations**

Planning and designing safe public spaces for women and girls means creating public spaces with features that enhance safety and feeling of safety, and detract from features that cause women’s insecurity and feeling of insecurity. The planning process should also consider physical and social characteristics of space. The broad areas of intervention should be:

- Societal/Cultural reforms of how we interpret gender
- Policy decisions on distribution of spaces
- Design and detailing to make spaces safe and inclusive for women
To sum up, the following are the broad recommendations towards designing and making cities which offer safe public spaces for women:

- Efficient and Gender-sensitive planning and design of public spaces
- Provision and management of public infrastructure and services
- Dedicated and affordable Public transport for Women
- Place-making
- Policing and Surveillance
- Gender-mainstreaming
- Involving women in policy making
- Including gender as an aspect in Design Education Schools
- Designers to cater to both actual and perceived safety
- Legislation, justice, and support to victims
- Bringing awareness in society
- Education and civic awareness towards gender-issues
- Challenging societal norms

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