
Is improved infrastructure the key to women's safety in Delhi?

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14848190>

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1.1 Introduction- Understanding A Woman's Place

To be seen as a category not worthy of specific attention while constructing a planned, built environment is not to be recognized. The trajectory of urban planning and infrastructure building worldwide has been historically characterized as a neutral endeavour, focusing on the aesthetics of architecture rather than accessibility. The general belief that gets fostered in the fields of architecture, engineering, and urban planning, impinges on this idea of neutrality, perceiving it as a public good; whereas, the reality paints a different picture wherein, despite the attempts to paint the field of architecture as neutral, urban planning has not been 'inclusive', often overlooking the everyday lives of women while planning for its design (Escalante & Valdivia, 2015). Accessibility for the privileged sections of society (in the Indian context, upper caste, class affluent men) has been normalized within the biases of infrastructure, especially in public spaces. Despite claims of supposed neutrality, these spaces are specifically constructed to make them the biggest stakeholders, invisibilizing certain populations/identities not considered significant enough for the planners, largely because of their oppressed status. Another important factor that needs to be considered is the very nature of public spaces such as roads, streets, transport, buildings, etc. These were created for mobility for men, wherein women were expected not to transgress the boundaries of the domestic household. Therefore, when women started to transcend the carefully thought-out division of the private and the public, they ventured into a space, a built public environment initially designed for men. However, it is also pertinent to explore beyond the contours of normative binaries which consider the public to be restricted and the private, somewhat free for women. There is always tacit ostracization women face, even when they remain within the boundaries of their household.



Navigating the public space would mean that women must always be mindful of regulating their visibility and loitering in such spaces. Phadke et al. (2011) while conceptualizing the idea of gendered spaces through a nuanced analysis of restricted public spaces for women in the streets of Mumbai, opined that space is an ‘embodied experience’ for people, even more so for women. This reifies the understanding that geographically, temporally (and even culturally), different bodies experience spaces differently, and the same space becomes restrictive for some, highlighting the caveats in ‘neutral’ and ‘accessible’ urban design and infrastructure. Datta (2010) while examining the complexities of unequal spaces marked by gender constraints, invokes the work of sociologist Fatima Mersinni (1987). In her theorization, the street is entrenched as an intrinsic male space in traditional Moroccan ideals. In India too, the concept of veiling Hindu and Muslim women, despite being culturally different, is also dependent on the gendered geography of the neighborhood, and by extension the entire town itself. Moreover, the a priori categorization of spaces into public and public has also hindered understanding spaces through their everyday production of power, hierarchies, and social relationships (Abraham, 2010). Therefore, anyone who is not a male and is visible in such spaces is considered a trespasser, in this context, women. Since the woman by being in a male space is committing an act of aggression against men by upsetting the constant and fixed patriarchal threshold, she is deemed unfit to be present in such spaces and must be ‘unseen’. Therefore, there is a consensus as to who certain spaces belong to, which in turn becomes extremely oppressive and debilitating for others who aren’t allowed mobility in these spaces, such as women. This makes any male-dominated spaces gendered and thus begins a very gendered struggle for women who try to navigate through restricted spaces.

1.2 Aim of the Assignment

This assignment argues against the archaic framework in which public spaces, such as the streets are imagined and actualized through architecture and infrastructure. It also strives to look into the hierarchization of needs that get imprinted while planning these spaces, using popular theories and literature about gendered spaces and architecture/infrastructure. Placing these arguments in the larger matrix of spaces, visibility, and accessibility, the assignment also aims to seek how not just improved infrastructure, but also infrastructure built on specificities of gender, in particular, can be a viable method to ensure an accessible public space for women, a key attempt to deliver women’s safety, in the context of the streets of New Delhi.

1.3 Contextualizing the Public Space as Gendered



Ranade (2007) espouses how there is always a purposeful appearance of women whenever they access the streets, unlike men who have the privilege to aimlessly loiter around the streets, engage in roadside conversations for long periods, and be visible in the streets. For women, however, visibility seems permissible only when they use the roads to travel from one place to another, rarely stopping to loiter. Therefore, how women access public spaces like the streets becomes restrictive and a moment of intensive scrutiny because they are constantly on the go. The relationship women (or other minority gender identities) have with the infrastructure of public spaces affects their understanding of safety, mobility, and body, as their restrictions become embodied as well as rationalized through biased architecture and city planning. The public streets are rarely seen as the space where women can truly feel comfortable, as the threat of unspoken violence creates a sense of fear among them, restricting their mobility not just on the streets, but in places they cannot travel to, because of stringent accessibility in said streets.

Kern (2020) sheds light on how women face challenges and complexities while navigating the city space during various stages of their lives. Her thesis is an extensive work of ethnographic feminist geography, where she asks questions that bring in feminist interventions in the field of urban planning itself, apart from the social exclusion of women in the public. She also emphasizes asking a simple yet powerful question, that is ‘Who writes the city?’

To answer this, Kern (2020) talks about her own experiences of being extremely disappointed and later resigning to the fact that the articles about urban planning and ‘needs’ featured in the alumni magazine of the University of Toronto were written by middle-aged white men. These architects, therefore, map the city and incorporate infrastructure with their own biases and privileges, which makes the entire urban space accessible to some sections only, who are themselves privy to such privileges. Relating urban planning to academic citationality (as espoused by Sara Ahmed), Leslie Kern says how the field of urban planning is gate-kept by white men, and it's difficult to enter that close-knit circuit unless we modify our skills and adapt to their styles of urban scholarship.

Even though there are increasing numbers of feminist geographers who have brought important interventions to the field of urban planning, keeping in mind spaces become gendered if city planning is mapped with a biased mindset, they still operate with significant power structures that render women and their position within such spaces precarious at best, especially during times they are alone or there are elements of lack of safety. Even though Kern’s theories reflect a Western approach to understanding



urban planning and infrastructure, it is also imperative to acknowledge the universality of gender biasness that comes with the discourse of ‘technical’ disciplines such as Architecture and Infrastructure. In such a scenario looking at both Ranade and Kern’s works in the setting of streets of Delhi becomes an interesting approach. Mehta (2024) writes on architectural education in India and how there needs to be a shift from its archaic pedagogy to more interdisciplinary training in social sciences and humanities, which would aid in understanding the built environment and tackling its biases rooted in social structures. Therefore, without feminist intervention and subjectivities in the field of infrastructure and urban planning, the domain would continue to engage in striving toward the vested interests of the privileged sections of society, which in turn would lead to women’s restrictions being curbed, citing reasons such as safety from danger.

1.4 Delhi’s Precarity- The (In)security of Women on Streets and Structural Ways to Combat it.

In Delhi, as per a survey conducted by Safetipin, 37% of public places in Delhi are considered unsafe for women because of ‘poor visibility at night’. While it may be argued that dark locations can create danger for everyone, it has to be acknowledged that in addition to being victims of accidents or robberies, women have another fear- the fear of sexual violence. This claim is not being made to be dismissive of male victims of rape/sexual assault, but to simply reify the fact that women are more vulnerable to sex-based crimes than men, and even then this statement essentializes the binary of gender, instead of problematizing it. The December 2012 Nirbhaya rape incident, which became the push for India to amend its rape laws, including the POCSO Act, is another instance of how women when defying patriarchal norms by venturing into the public sphere at hours trespassing their stipulated permissible time, have to fall victims to violent sexual crimes. While Nirbhaya was fortunate enough to fit into the notions of the ‘perfect victim’, she was also outside with her male friend to have ‘fun’ and watch a movie (Phadke, 2020). Therefore, the punishment meted out to her for transcending the patriarchal social order was seen fitting by her rapists, none of whom showed any remorse for their actions and kept a firm faith in their own justifications. However, the question remains- despite society’s inclination toward patriarchy as a concept, what measures could possibly be taken to make sure public spaces become safer for women (in this context, Delhi)?

1.4.1 The New Way Forward?

The entire urban planning, infrastructure, and transport system in Delhi (and elsewhere in India) is invested in development and technical advancements, focusing only on quality without considering any



gendered implications. The lack of feminist subjectivity in Urban Planning and infrastructure implementation thus gives rise to inaccessible public spaces for women. In such a context, it is important to highlight the underlying connection between the built environment and crimes against women. It is greatly essential for the creation of separate and dedicated committees alongside the government planning structure, namely the Crime Prevention Through Environment Design (CPTED) in cities like Delhi, considered one of the most unsafe cities in the world, there can be attempts made to negotiate a more accessible and comfortable environment for women in the public space, especially through its design and safety facilities (Dhawan and Ali, 2018). This model of interpolating feminist sensibilities into the built environment has been working in countries like Australia and the USA, so adopting this structure of infrastructural development in Delhi can achieve a semblance of women's security in the face of impending gendered violence. In Chapter 3 of the Toolkit for Mainstreaming and Implementing Gender Equality 2023, named Mainstreaming Gender Considerations into Infrastructure, there is an admission of differential effects of infrastructure on both men and women. While men are kept in mind during the drafting of any urban planning, the consideration that women are distinctly perceived by society at a much lower status is often overlooked. This creates an atmosphere of inequality, which gets reflected in the construction of public spaces such as roads, transport facilities, workplaces, etc, in turn aggravating the embodied experiences of violence (or the threat of it) that women face daily. The report therefore emphasizes the importance of a gendered consideration while developing the built environment, by not only creating an inclusive space for women but also involving them as stakeholders in urban planning. This calls for a feminist perspective in the discourse and pedagogy of architecture and infrastructure as well. When the discipline of architecture and urban design gets rooted in the social aspects as well as the technical, there will be a holistic approach towards creating a new social design of the city, embedded in feminist principles. The report also talks about the practice of feminist infrastructure in Canada, the UK, Austria, and Spain. While it is imperative to realize that their efforts haven't been able to fully ameliorate gendered violence, statistically they are at a much higher level than Delhi in terms of women's safety. Adopting a robust gendered infrastructural pattern in Delhi, therefore, would not only create equal public spaces for women but also structurally change the very nature in which urban planning as a discourse and praxis is viewed and analyzed.

1.4.2 Jagori and Safetipin- Relentless Endeavours in Reclaiming Women's Right to the City

Similar sentiments can be observed in the Delhi-based feminist organization, Jagori, which was formed to strive toward a comprehensive and better understanding of gendered divisions in society. With



extensive works in the sphere of women in public spaces, and the challenges they face while being in the public, be it roads, transport, or workplace, Jagori acts relentlessly to ensure feminist epistemologies are adopted in the context of urban planning and infrastructure design. In that regard, providing support services to victims of violence, which are effective as well as fast, would be one of the main strategies cities like Delhi should adopt to increase levels of safety for women, besides updating the built environment. This is exactly where organizations like Safetipin come to the rescue. Founded as a response to the horrendous 2011 Delhi rape incident, this organization has been extremely helpful to map the safety inside urban localities, and to audit, which places are safe and which are unsafe. Attempts have been made to ensure that women have access to all opportunities, especially while navigating the public space. This calls for certain physical and social parameters, along with people's perceptions. Some examples would be to determine the light, walk path, openness, visibility, transport, security, people, gender usage, and feeling while looking at the streets of Delhi. Visibility should also be accounted for with the help of the concept of eyes on the street, which is a marker of greater feelings of safety among women. The data collected from this kind of urban mapping would in turn help in tracking the safest route possible for women who wish to commute.

Safetipin's conceptualization manifested into reality when in 2016, 7000+ dark spots in the city, unsafe for women were marked. After careful deliberations with the concerned government officials, in 2019, the numbers came down to 5000 in 2019 and 695 in 2023. The new project at Safetipin, 'She Rises' deals with gender-based violence in public spaces, how the infrastructure is often gender-coded, and the means to provide opportunities and amenities to women. This would lead to 'Cities for Youth' where there would be mobility without fear, growth with pride, a life with rights, and so on. The integration of technology and meticulous feminist planning of the streets and transport system of Delhi would therefore aid in refashioning the contours of normative aspects of the processes of urban planning.

1.5 Personal Accounts of an Unsafe Delhi

This brings me to some very personal anecdotes of me navigating in the streets of Delhi, a city I am relatively unfamiliar with and about which I've grown up hearing lores of danger and insecurity. A very exciting visit to Sarojini last year proved to be extremely traumatic for me, for I was subjected to sexual assault in the crowd of people I was surrounded by. The most astonishing part, I realized was that I was among a lot of people, in a well-lit area, and there was no way I could specifically blame the planning of Sarojini. However, what I later understood was an inexplicably uncomfortable truth- such a huge crowd



in Sarojini reflected the poor design of the place itself. This is also one of the reasons I could not protest or give an immediate response, besides the usual trauma-induced sense of freezing that every woman is familiar with. Had the streets been wider and accommodative of the huge crowd Sarojini Nagar is infamous for housing, incidents of men getting the opportunity to grope women would definitely be avoided in a certain capacity. A similar phenomenon can be noticed in crowded metros and buses as well, where women are at a higher risk of molestation. This makes them limited to the women's compartment of metros, and while a separate reservation is appreciated, it also hints at how limited women's mobility tends to be when it comes to traveling in public spaces. This restriction is not something men have to deal with on a daily basis, effectively proving the biased nature of infrastructural mapping in cities like Delhi. In addition to this, the lack of security women face when they are in less crowded, empty, and dark places reifies the vicious nature of mobility restrictions for women at any given time.

The recent and most profound of my realizations came in the wake of the current RG Kar incident in Kolkata, my home city. While this event opened avenues of discussion regarding workplace safety and the infrastructural lack in such spaces in terms of security cameras, guards, and separate resting rooms for female doctors, it also showed me the irony of the 'Reclaim the Night' movements that took place nationwide to protest against the increasing gendered violence against women. I distinctly remember going to AIIMS Delhi with my friend at 11:45 pm, so that we could participate in the movement happening there. Starting from feeling the threat of danger in the almost empty metro, even though we were in the women's compartment, to the men deliberately sitting in the compartment stipulated for women only, I realized the ingrained nature of patriarchal manifestations of society. Despite these men being aware of the hefty fine they have to pay for being in the women's compartment, they continued to do so, simply because there was none to surveil them. The walk to AIIMS from the metro station again proved to be quite intimidating to us. The streets were dark, dimly lit by flickering streetlights, and even though we were walking through the main road we were scared. This is ironic considering we were going to reclaim the night as being the rightful time for us to venture into public spaces. We were hesitant to ask the men and auto drivers for the correct directions to AIIMS and the constant watchful attitude we had to adopt to reach our destination was not just exhausting, but was very against the fearless spirit we were fighting for. This experience proved to be an eye-opener for me because I understood the nuances of the gendered power hierarchy that operates in the built environment of Delhi, which has permeated into the everyday psyche of both men and women. For men, it serves as an



opportunity to indulge in violence without consequences, and for women, the fear of something violent renders them immobile and fearful.

1.7 Conclusion

While this assignment has spoken at length about the urgent need to develop a feminist consciousness in urban planning operating in cities such as Delhi, it is imperative to understand that a structural change in society in terms of women's safety is only possible to exist if there is a social acceptance of patriarchy being the sole factor towards gendered violence in the first place. The vicious cycle of patriarchal machinations influencing the biased infrastructure in Delhi, which in turn provides opportunities for sexual crimes to surge, is something that must be considered while approaching the lacuna present in current forms of smart city planning taking place in Delhi. It is also helpful to realize that planning an improved infrastructure in Delhi would not alone reduce crimes against women, but a dual framework of implementing those plans successfully and making sure there is a smooth network in place that responsibly aims to achieve a safe public space for women is required. This is why Delhi must employ more workers who would ideally be present in the streets 24×7 for quicker actions. Additionally, a feminist way of planning Delhi is not the lone solution against gendered crimes. It is equally essential to imbibe such gendered consciousness into the everyday lives of people, in attempts to uproot the problem at a much deeper level.

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