

Effect of Design of Public Open Spaces on the Perception of Safety of Women

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Abstract—Public spaces are a mirror of social values, customs and culture and interaction between people. Public spaces (including streets, street markets, shopping area) play a vital role in the social life. Public spaces generally are functionally required which influence social interaction, comfort and security of people. The condition of public spaces will encourage interaction, comfort and people's security. Sociability will help a person to interact with each other which increases the scope of the public space. The sociability, interaction, open spaces will help people to feel secure in the public space.

The perception of public open spaces is different for different people. The feeling of comfort, security is different for men, children, and women. Women feel less secure in overcrowded spaces whereas men can feel secure. Women make a mental map of the public open spaces, so they perceive that the space is secure or not. There must be various factors related to the security of women in public open spaces. The design of any particular open spaces affects the perception of safety of women in public open spaces.

Public spaces have many benefits; it is a place where people can display their culture, their tradition irrespective of their backgrounds. It is a place for people of different backgrounds to meet. This paper will investigate the uses of public spaces and perceptions of security in public open spaces. It will also investigate, if there is an effect of open public spaces and the built spaces on the Social security and the wellbeing of the women. This research also evaluates how the built environment influences the use of the open space. The Functional Use of the space and the transportation and access around the Open Spaces affect the social life and security of women.

1. INTRODUCTION

Women's experience of safety in public open spaces, the implications of fear for their use and access to, the public space, the role of urban design in planning safer places for women and some of the trends and solutions to issues of women safety. If we change public places so women feel safer, then we will make these places safer for everyone. It is important to know that while there may be similarities in women's fear of crime, there may also be some differences. Not all women are the same and they will not experience the same fear. Nor will they necessarily experience fear in the same way as one another. Women's access to public spaces like these parks, railways stations and streets are sometimes restricted simply due to bad planning. Public places where

women feel fear have been found to contain elements also present in public places where actual crimes have taken place.

Fear about safety plays a part in the way women use public space, whether they use it at all, and if so, when they use it and what locations they use. The impact, whatever the cause, on their use of public spaces has implications for the planning and design of public spaces. Planning is a key part of building communities. Planning guides land uses, development and the design of public places. Planning of a city or any public open space has an influence on the security of the women. The women feel safe in well planned open spaces whereas bad planning results in the fear.

Bad planning doesn't take into account the way women use public places, their needs and concerns. For example, women are often the most frequent users of public facilities - public transport, shopping centres, public toilets, parks. Yet most women won't even consider using them at night. Bad planning does not consider the future of an area and how it might change - through the course of a day or over years. Today's lack in planning vision can be tomorrow's social or safety problem. 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.

Perceptions of personal safety, as well as actual safety, influence the extent to which public spaces are used. Women, particularly older women, are likely to modify their behaviour to avoid safety risks and this has repercussions for their use of public spaces e.g. they go out less at night, return home earlier, or go out at night only with an escort. [Source: *women centre for health matters report*]

In New Delhi, a baseline study conducted in 2012 reveals that 92 per cent of women experienced some form of sexual violence in public spaces in their lifetime, and 88 percent of women experienced some form of visual and verbal sexual harassment (unwelcome comments of a sexual nature, whistling, leering or making obscene gestures) in their lifetime

There is a growing body of research showing a strong connection between health and wellbeing and the design and structure of cities. The built environment can be a major determinant of lifestyle and health, and can magnify health disparities and compound existing health conditions, especially among the elderly and other vulnerable groups (Marmot et al. 2010). Safe environments in cities are important because they reduce the risk of injury, and increase the perceptions of safety, which promote access and support active living.

2. WHAT MAKES DELHI UNSAFE FOR WOMEN?

Delhi is considered to be unsafe for women still there are some public spaces in which women can feel safe and there are some public spaces in which women can feel unsafe. Planning of public spaces have a direct impact on the perception of safety. Some public spaces are planned so well that it helps women to feel secure.

Many non-governmental organizations have been addressing the issue of women's safety in Delhi. Their work has become more intensive in recent years, given the escalation in crime against women. JAGORI, for instance, a Delhi-based women's resource centre working for over two decades on issues of women's rights with a particular focus on violence against women, has been conducting participatory safety audits' of various areas in Delhi, including residential areas, shopping centres, government buildings, educational institutions, and cinema complexes. The audits are a means to identify unsafe' factors in the area, as well as to sensitize participants (who include members of the local community and clients/users of services) to the issue of women's safety.

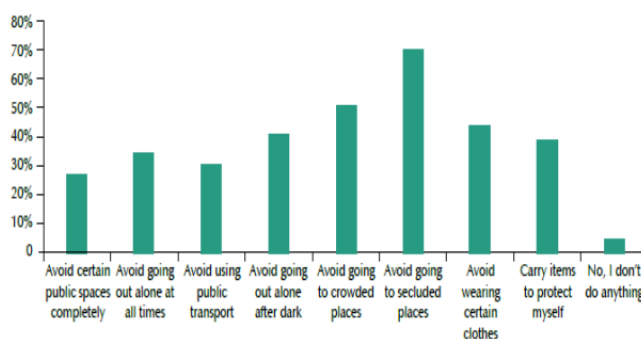
Some of the following factors have been identified as constituting a risk or creating a feeling of vulnerability for women.

- **Poor lighting.** Back lanes of markets and service lanes in residential colonies are badly lit and often obstructed with rubbish or debris. Underpasses and subways on main roads have non-functional lights. Parks within residential colonies seldom have any provision for lighting
- **Poor signage.** Road signs and house numbers are either missing or unreadable. Helpline numbers are not clearly displayed in public buildings. Signboards bearing the names and contacts of elected representatives do not have addresses and emergency contact numbers.
- **Poor infrastructure.** Women's toilets few in number, dirty and ill-lit if free. Public phone booths are few, especially in affluent colonies. Private phone lines do not permit calls to toll-free helpline numbers. Bus stands are dilapidated, and the area behind them is a de facto urinal for men.
- **Deserted and derelict spaces.** Few women are visible in public spaces after dark, unless accompanied by a man.

Most public parks are deserted after dark. Vacant plots obscured with debris and building materials are scattered across residential areas. In affluent colonies, houses are hidden behind high walls and no people are visible in the lanes.

3. STRATEGIES USED BY WOMEN TO AVOID/DEAL WITH HARASSMENT

Women are forced to adopt their own protection strategies which include self-imposition of curfew hours, observing some form of dress code and restricting their mobility. This is due to their lack of trust in police and other support systems, thus indicating that the onus of safety and protection continues to be on the women.



Research of the findings about the design of urban spaces for women's safety are summarised as follows:

- The planning and design features of some environments can and do contribute to women's perception of personal risk in a city.
- Sensitive design and planning can contribute to women feeling safer.
- Although women are fearful of areas of their environment, especially at night they felt that they could not influence environmental design decision-making processes.
- Urban planning and design do not create problems of violence to women but a recognition of the dangers and the implications for women's use of the city could do much to create a safe environment.

4. FACTORS WHICH CONTRIBUTED TO WOMEN FEELING UNSAFE

Public places where women felt unsafe had certain characteristics in common. Women said they felt unsafe in places which have:

- Dark and have poor lighting
- Large deserted spaces

- Poor access to and from a location, or within the location, or have obstacles to access
- Lack of signage or signage that is easy to understand (not large enough and unclear)
- Isolated and unused or poorly maintained
- Visible to others or nobody watches over them (there is no natural surveillance)
- No access to help
- Inadequate security
- Hiding spots
- Areas which encourage users or groups of users who are perceived as threatening or 'unsafe' (people in the area who appear to be under the influence of drugs, people begging for food in the area)

5. CONCLUSION

While all the groups, cutting across class and profession, shared a common perception of Delhi as a city of exclusion, poverty clearly emerged as an important axis sharpening this vulnerability. There is an alarming level of 'normalization' of violence which threatens public spaces. The experience of violence and fear of violence at all times of the day and night, and virtually in all kinds of public spaces, underlines the flawed architecture of the city spaces and the gender insensitive attitude of the institutions that govern.

It is worth noting that the women reported feeling unsafe in both secluded and crowded places, as well as during day and the night. While they are afraid of being physically hurt, harassed, molested or raped in deserted spaces, they also fear harassment in crowded spaces, most commonly in crowded public transport. What emerges from the experiences of the women is the fear of violence, feelings of exclusion, and lack of confidence in the agencies which are supposed to ensure their safety.

The research has also brought to the fore a number of factors that play a role in creating safer spaces for women and girls. These include better planning and design of public spaces such as roads, bus stops, parks and public toilets. Some recommendations included lighting, design of pavements, presence of vendors and designated spaces and better design of male and female public toilets.

The glaring lack of public toilets for women is a strong indictment of the state of services. A second important factor is way that public spaces are used. The presence of a multitude of users made a space more amenable to inclusion and safety. Thus parks that had a range of users including older people, young, children etc were safer. The research findings have also made clear that a comprehensive set of interventions and programs are needed to address the issue of safety and

inclusion such as urban design and planning, provision of services, policing and law enforcement, community involvement and awareness building for men, women and youth. Creating safer cities for women and girls needs to be put firmly on the agenda of a wide range of stakeholders including local and national governments, service providers, police, educators and communities. What the research has demonstrated is the wide range of issues involved and the need for a multi strategic and multi stakeholder approach.

The seven areas that have been identified for planning interventions are:

- Urban planning and design of public spaces
- Provision and maintenance of public infrastructure and services
- Public transport
- Policing
- Legislation, justice and support to victims
- Education
- Civic awareness and participation

The strategic framework draft explicates in some detail how and why these seven areas need to be addressed, as also the range of stakeholders who need to be involved in creating a safer and more inclusive city for women and girls.

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