

## Women and the Right to the City

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Imagine an Indian city with street corners full of women: chatting, laughing, breast-feeding, exchanging corporate notes or planning protest meetings. Imagine footpaths spilling over with old and young women watching the world go by as they sip tea, and discuss love, cricket and the latest blockbuster. Imagine women in saris, jeans, salwars and skirts sitting at the *nukkad* reflecting on world politics and dissecting the rising sensex. *If you can imagine this, you're imagining a radically different city.*

It's different because women don't loiter. Men hanging out are a familiar sight in the city. A man may stop for a cigarette at a *panwalla* or lounge on a park bench. He may stop to stare at the sea or drink cutting *chai* at a tea stall. He might even wander the streets late into the night. Women may not. There is an unspoken assumption that a loitering woman is up to no good. She is either mad or bad or dangerous to society.

Of course, no one actually says this out loud. But every little girl is brought up to know that she must walk a straight line between home and school, home and office, home and her friend or relative's home, from one 'sheltered' space to another.

In our book *Why Loiter? Women & Risk on Mumbai Streets*, Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan and I make a case for loitering as a fundamental act of claiming public space and ultimately a more inclusive citizenship. For the right to loiter for all, we believe, has the potential to undermine public space hierarchies. The genesis of the book lies in the Gender & Space Project (2003-2006) at PUKAR on which the three of us collaborated. This research project sought to examine women's access to public space in Mumbai. In the course of our research we spoke to women, individually and in groups, across class, community, profession and geographical divisions; ethnographically studied women's use of public spaces including but not limited to parks, railway stations, and even new spaces of consumption such as malls and coffee shops; graphically mapped the use of public spaces by women; and engaged intensively with students through our pedagogic initiatives. Let me share a few examples of what our studies brought up.

This research demonstrated unequivocally that, despite the fact that in 21<sup>st</sup> century global

Mumbai certain women are both visible and desirable in the public, particularly in their roles as professionals and consumers, women have only conditional access and not claim to public city spaces. In other works, not only is public space is gendered but when comparing men and women of the same class and community, men have better access to public space at all times of the day. This is true even though Mumbai is popularly considered the friendliest city for women in the country. Although political and economic visibility has brought increased access to public space, it has not automatically translated into greater *rights* to public space for women.

Woman's fundamental out-of-placeness in public space is maintained through a discourse which sets up an opposition between the 'good' private woman and the 'bad' public woman. This binary dominates the perception of all women in public space; being in public without a purpose – that is, loitering – would automatically mark a woman as belonging to the latter category. The visible Mumbai woman then accesses public space purposefully, she carries large bags, parcels and babies to illustrate her purpose, uses her cell phone and earphones as a barrier between herself and the world, and heads unerringly for the ladies compartment of the local train. Women's demeanour in public is almost always full of a sense of purpose; one rarely sees them sitting in a park, standing at a street corner smoking or simply watching the world go by as men might. In fact women's access to public space involves a complex series of strategies involving appropriate clothing, symbolic markers, bulky accessories, and contained body language designed to demonstrate that despite their apparent transgression into public space, they remain respectable women, essentially located in the private.

So women might wear traditional markers and signifiers of matrimony, particularly Hindu matrimony, on their bodies to underscore their connection familial structures and male protection. In fact in late night local trains it is not surprising to sometimes come across unmarried women also wear them in order to appear more respectable. Women are also required to reflect respectability in the contained way in which they hold their bodies such as occupying the least possible space in public transport.

Older women might find access to public space through religion when the celebration of festivals like Ganeshotsav, Navratri and the month of Ramzan, as also visits to temples sometimes late in the night (such as to Mumbai's famous Siddhi Vinayak Temple), offer women opportunities to access the celebratory public outside of their everyday lives. These occasions offer spaces for momentary subversion and pleasure in the public that might otherwise be denied to them. At the same time, these spaces continue to be limited by the

acceptable notions of respectable femininity.

Women then have to manufacture an appearance of purpose to legitimately access public space. Therefore in their everyday occupation of public space, women are almost never found standing or 'loitering' in a public place without a clear purpose. They occupy public space essentially as a transit between one private space and another. When moving through public space women, a) walk purposefully from one point to another and b) when walking, avoid such places as may be considered non-respectable such as lottery shops, and bars; or unsafe such as isolated lanes, dark footpaths. The purpose-defined movement of women is deeply connected to notions of respectability which define what good women should/ should not do in public. So long as women's relationship to public space remains framed within the two *lakshman rekhas* of purpose and respectability, women cannot get unconditional access to public space.

The December 2012 Delhi rape case and since then the incessant reportage of similar cases across the country have brought to the foreground the spectre of violence that looms over women in public space. In all forms of public fora from television and the print media to debates in colleges, the question of safety of women in our public spaces is being discussed. While on the one hand, demands for stronger legal structures and effective security measures are being made from the state; on the other hand, the policing of girls and women of all ages by themselves and by those around them has gained an unprecedented justification.

Unfortunately in this situation, violence becomes the only language in which one can engage with questions of gender in public space, a situation which I emphatically believe does **nothing** to further women's rights to public space. The single-minded focus on the dangers to women in public space contradicts two well-documented facts: one, that more women face violence in private spaces than in public spaces, and two, that more men than women are attacked in public. Since conditional protection brings only surveillance and control for women, in order to claim the right to public space we need to move beyond the struggle against violence and articulate women's right to the city in terms of the quest for pleasure.

The quest for pleasure and the struggle against violence are deeply inter-connected. The quest for pleasure actually strengthens our struggle against violence, framing it in the language of rights rather than protection. Furthermore, the right to pleasure by default must encompass the right against violence. This right includes the provision of infrastructure like transport,

street lighting, public toilets, and policies that enable more sensitive law enforcement by recognising people's fundamental right to access public space. The right to the city (rather than conditional access) can only come when all women can walk the streets without being compelled to demonstrate purpose or respectability, without being categorized into public or private women. What we need then is to redefine our understanding of violence in relation to public space—to see not sexual assault, but the denial of access to public space as the worst possible outcome for women. What we need then is to be able to loiter at will.