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Making a city safe for women is also about making space for her pleasure

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The gang rape of a young physiotherapy student in Delhi in December last year has unalterably transformed the discourse of women's right to the public space.

In 2011, when we argued in our book, *Why Loiter? Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets*, that women had every right to the public space for work or pleasure, and even to loiter, our suggestion was met with some reservation. But why, we were asked, would women want to loiter?

Perhaps the word "loiter" is still too incendiary for many, but today many more people are willing to grant women's right to the street without necessarily having a purpose, or at least a purpose related to recreation (such as watching a film) is seen to be respectable. If the discourse has not changed radically, at least we are seeing noteworthy transformations. These are specifically pronounced when

we look at how the issue of violence against women, particularly in public, has gained centre stage in terms of the law, media and civil society.

The Justice Verma Committee report based as it was on the depositions of feminists, lawyers and gender activists, significantly altered the legal terms of the debate. The media in the recent past has become more prompt in reporting on crimes against women. Though not always sensitive and sometimes grossly invasive, it does report now with an urgency that demands action.

Most notable, however, have been the strong voices that have arisen. Woman survivors, including young journalists, legal interns and followers of godmen, have spoken up about rape, sexual assault and molestation. And most pertinently, many sections of civil society have vociferously spoken up in defence of women's safety in the last year.

But all this does not hide the fact that so much more needs to be done to reclaim the streets for all women. Unfortunately, so far the conversation on violence has focussed largely on public violence and has evaded any real questioning of private or domestic violence. The discussion on violence in the public space has largely remained a conversation about violence against middle-class women. Not only does this exclude violence against poor, rural and tribal women, it also excludes many categories of marginal citizens who face as much violence in a different tenor

as women.

At the same time, in the media focus on some cases of rape, we tend to forget the everyday violence

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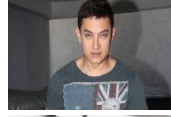
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that is perpetuated on women. Recently, for example, a 21-year-old college girl in Mumbai's Kandivali suburb was being harassed by a group of minor boys in her neighbourhood every time she went outside. The girl told her brother about the regular verbal/physical harassment that made going to college an ordeal. The brother warned off the boys and registered a police complaint. The next day, he was brutally beaten up by the boys, who then went to the girl's home and threatened her with dire repercussions. The very next day, she was pulled out of college and sent off to her village.

With each such episode of violence, the choices for women dwindle and their access to public space shrinks. Also, everyday harassment (stalking, verbal taunting, etc), if ignored, as it often is by the police, frequently leads to greater violence. Clearly, changes in the law cannot be effective unless they are accompanied by changes in the attitudes of law enforcers towards violence against women.

But there are also infrastructural changes that might create an environment that makes the streets friendlier for women. Sensitively planned infrastructure like transport, street lighting, public toilets and policies, is a recognition of people's fundamental right to access public space. More often than not, our cities and public spaces are designed for an abstract "generic" user. In the context of an ideology that deems women's proper place to be at home, this imagined "neutral user" is invariably male.

Besides gender, all manner of politics — class, caste, religious and sexual, as also physical ability — are part of imagining this "neutral" user. The prototype user then, is not just male, but is most often also middle or upper class, Hindu, upper caste, able-bodied and heterosexual. This reflects in the design of our infrastructure and planning, starting from the scale of a public toilet to the largest scale of the zoning in our cities.

Not only are there inadequate numbers of public toilets in our cities, the facilities provided for women are usually less than half of those for men. Moreover, the design of facilities in toilets that do exist also fail to provide for the specific needs of women. Most "ladies" toilets are dark, unfriendly and designed with minimal thought to women's particular biological and social needs. Moreover, as against men's urinals which are open through the night, most women's toilets close at 9 pm, sending the clear message that women are not expected to — and not supposed to — be out in public at night.


At the other end, zoning spaces on the basis of use into residential and commercial areas — the choice of many planners — is detrimental to women's mobility. Our research shows that women have more access to public space in mixed-use areas, where shops and business establishments are open late into the night, ensuring activity at all times. Moreover, when public space falls off the agenda in planning, what is left becomes increasing privatised, policed and often fraught with risk. Contrary to common sense notions of urban "beautification", clean lines and people-less streets do not equal comfort or safety for women who often seem to prefer a degree of chaos, ambiguity and multiplicity to univalent notions of cleanliness and order.

Taking risks is only possible, especially for women, when the infrastructure is in place and available to women at all hours. Infrastructural facilities might not be adequate by themselves, but they are essential for making city public spaces more accessible to women. These facilities are not favours bestowed by the state but the right of all citizens.

Finally, while we work towards making public spaces safe for women, we must remember that our discourse with regard to women in public space cannot be limited to notions of safety and violence. That only serves to increase the policing of girls and women of all ages, both by themselves and by those around them. In fact, several women now report higher levels of anxiety when accessing public space and also increased regulation by their families.

Thus, it is worth repeating the argument we made in our book— that even as we continue the struggle against violence, we need to also express women's right to the city in terms of the quest for pleasure. We must not see sexual assault as the worst thing to happen to women in the public space; it is the taking away of their access to public space that has the most detrimental consequence for women. Unless we do that, Indian women will at best only have provisional access to the streets — conditional upon them being "good girls" that society deems worthy of protection and safety.

It is time Indian women claimed the streets unconditionally, unapologetically, unashamedly. It is time.

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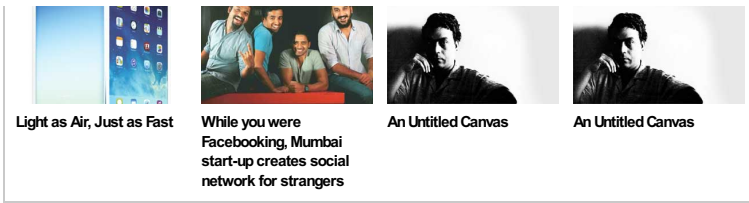
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