

WOMEN'S SAFETY

Please spare us the safety lectures. Women should claim the Right to Risk in the city

Paternalism is not the answer. Women's right to be in public space must be unchallenged.

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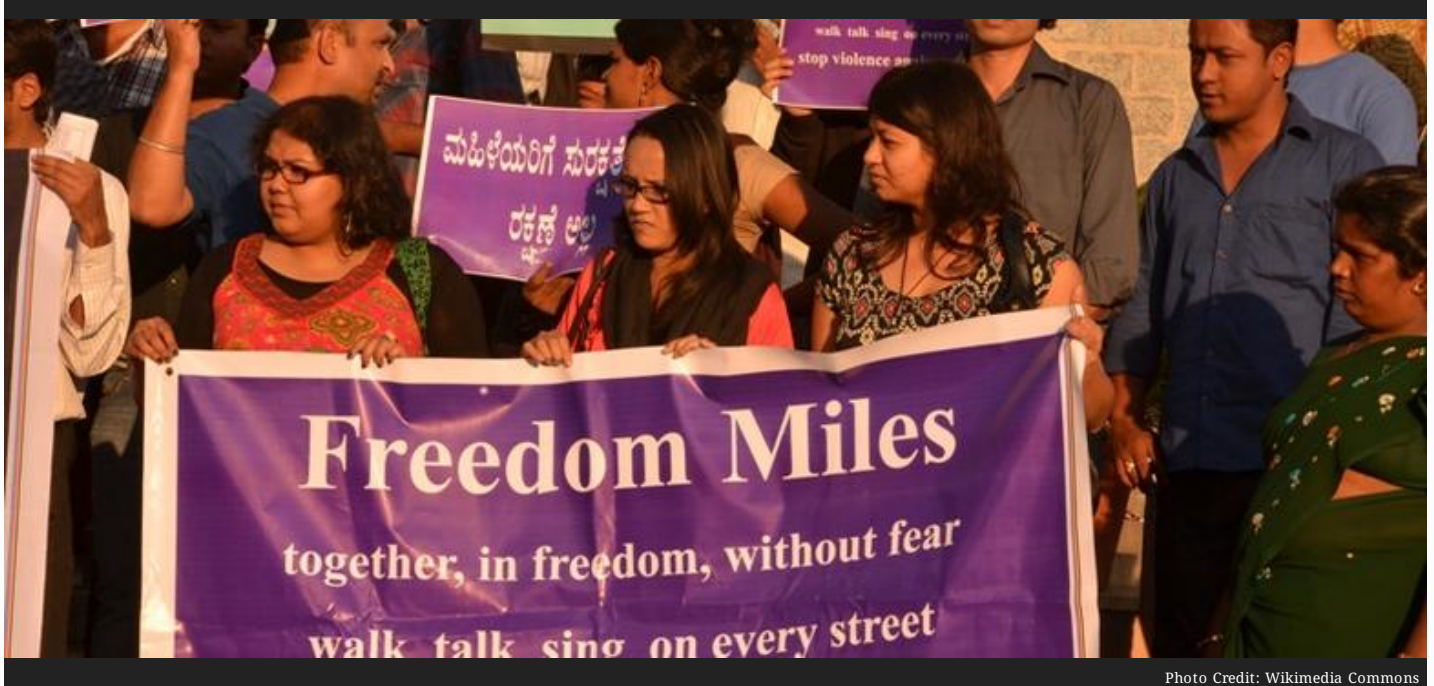


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Almost everyone seems preoccupied with the issue of violence against women. That in itself is not a bad thing, considering the steady stream of sexual assaults against women in India. This is counting not just the cases that get reported but also the ones that escape media attention, especially those involving assaults on marginalised women and the violence happening behind the closed doors of a home.

Unfortunately, as it happens, we have yet another round of victim bashing after the December 5 rape case – this one happening just days before the two-year anniversary of the horrific Delhi gang rape and murder that brought thousands of protesters on the street. Every time, soon after the details of the crime are reported and the accused is arrested, the inevitable questions begin.

“Sleep?” people ask shrilly. “You mean she fell asleep?” Presumably, these are people who have never slept on their way home after an exhausting day at work.

Producing safety

Close on the heels of the questions follow the safety instructions: how to behave in a train/bus/autorickshaw/taxi, how to act when a handyman is doing repairs at your home, and even how to open your door to another lower-class man, the *istriwala*. Here we have it, feminism presented to us

as commonsense.

The irony is that if there is one thing women do, it is create safety for themselves. We do this without thinking. During our three years of research for our book *Why Loiter? Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets*, women enumerated a variety of strategies used to create safety in a context where institutional structures often fail us: women hold on to their mobile phones, sometimes talk or pretend to talk all the way home, carry safety pins, knuckle-dusters, beg escorts, travel in groups. The survivor of the Uber taxi assault also did what she could to produce safety for herself. She used an app-based service that promised safety, which should have been tracked by global positioning system. That should really have been alright.

There is another thing we discovered in our research: safety for women is a false goal. It comes with all kinds of restrictions, conditions and moral policing. The right to risk is a far more realistic and liberatory goal.

Pleasure in the city

In order to understand risk, we need 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 outcome for women. The demand is that women's right to be in public space be unquestioned whether we are assaulted or not.

Today, violence has become the only language in which one can engage with questions of gender in public space. Every time a woman steps out of her home, it is the spectre of violence that she must confront rather than anticipation of pleasure. The claim to seek pleasure in the city is a deeply political one that has the potential to seriously undermine the public-private boundaries that continue to circumscribe women's access to and visibility in public space.

The right to risk is not abstract. From the perspective of the city, it must be mirrored in the provision of infrastructure. While the decision to take certain risks must be chosen, risks must not be thrust upon women by inadequate or poor planning. The right to pleasure, by default, must include the right against violence in the shape of infrastructure like transport, street lighting, public toilets, besides policies that enable more sensitive law enforcement recognising people's fundamental right to access public space.

Fear of violence

By our suggestion that courting risk might be a viable strategy, we are by no means suggesting that women, or indeed any individual, should be forced to take risks. At the same time, this should not curtail the freedom of those who wish to court risk. At no point are we ignoring or even minimising the violence, both sexual and non-sexual, that might potentially take place in public. The fear of violence in public space is real. It contains the possibility of physical and psychological trauma.

Nor is it our intention to romanticise risk itself, for risk is a term that is already value-loaded in terms of good and bad, and desirable and undesirable women. Still, the presence of violence should not preclude the possibilities for women seeking pleasure in the city. The presence of well-lit streets should not mean that women found in dark corners should be deemed unrespectable or blamed if they are

attacked.

Choosing to take risks in public space undermines a sexist structure where women's virtue is prized over their desires or agency. Choosing risks foregrounds pleasure, making what is clearly a feminist claim to the city.

The authors are co-authors of Why Loiter? Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets. This piece draws on the ideas of the book.

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