

Urban Safety and Gender in Hyderabad

Findings from a Pilot Safety Audit

By SriPallavi Nadimpalli

I glance into the mirror one last time to see that I am dressed “appropriately” before I venture out. In spite of this there will likely be staring and, possibly, inappropriate behavior. I hate it when the staring never stops or when men take the liberty to pass lewd comments about my appearance. I feel violated and uncomfortable.

I took this behavior for granted until the day I realized that this is a violation of my fundamental right to enjoy the public space like any other individual. Why should my gender restrict my movement and create anxiety and fear?

If societal behavior and attitudes have created restrictions, so has my physical environment. At dusk, I increase my pace between the better-lit zones. Insufficient lighting and isolated spaces create more opportunities for assault or maybe rape. I know that this may never happen, but the fear of a possible assault is sufficient to keep me on my toes. My movement is further restricted by the fact that I need to choose my routes based on availability of public toilets. I have learned to control my bladder and avoid drinking water when out and about.



SriPallavi Nadimpalli is an independent architect and planner from Hyderabad, India. She holds a master's degree from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in urban planning (nadimpalli.p@gmail.com).

STUDIES across the globe have shown that safety in public spaces ranks a close second after domestic or partner violence and sexual violence with respect to women's safety concerns. Nonetheless, this is not a concern generally taken seriously in large-scale planning agendas. Space is not neutral and cities are designed for the neutral user. In India, according to Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan and Shilpa Ranade in their book *Why Loiter?: Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets*, the neutral user is usually “the middle- or upper-class young male, usually a Hindu, a heterosexual who is able-bodied.” Cities can be designed to be more inclusive, but only when designs reflect an awareness of how



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Dumpster located in the space provided for the sidewalks

characteristics such as age, sex, sexuality, caste, religion, economic status and difference in ability lead individuals to experience the same space quite differently.

When I became aware that I could not enjoy urban space equally with men, I decided to research the connection between gender and women's perceptions of safety in public spaces. My research is based on the safety audit process first developed in 1989 by The Metropolitan Action Committee on Public Violence Against Women and Children (METRAC), a non-profit located in Toronto, as a method to evaluate the environment from the standpoint of those who feel the most vulnerable to violence and to make changes that reduce opportunities for assault.

I began with a pilot safety audit in Hyderabad, India. Based on findings from the pilot safety audit, I will conduct a larger research study with the goal of recommending ways of including a gender lens in planning policies regarding public spaces in the city. In terms of my research, urban public space includes all the areas in between built structures and other spaces the public is attracted to. In addition to streets, roads, public toilets, bus stops, railway stations, modes of transport, promenades and parks and playgrounds, the new "hang-out" spaces of Indian metropolitan cities, like shopping malls, coffee shops, movie theatres and restaurants, are also included. The term safety includes not just the actual physical and psychological impacts of an act of aggression or violence but also



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An open urinal located in the middle of the road



Space for sidewalks used by street vendors

the fear or anxiety associated with the anticipation of violence in an urban public space.

The Pilot Study Area

Hyderabad is the capital of the state of Andhra Pradesh, in the southern part of the country. It is the administrative, financial and economic capital of the state and the sixth most populous city in India, with a population of 4 million. Hyderabad's residents are primarily Hindus and Muslims, but the state is also home to some Christians, Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists, and several languages are spoken in the state. Hyderabad has been recently recognized as a metropolitan city and with its fast economic growth, it is striving to be a world-class city. Two areas were selected for the pilot safety audit:

- Secunderabad Hub, a one-kilometer stretch covering Secunderabad Railway Station, a major inter-city rail station and a commuter rail hub; Rathfile Bus Terminal, a major inter-city bus station; and two other major bus stops in the area; and
- Osmania University, a three-kilometer stretch along University Main Street on a campus that is home to over 300,000 students from different parts of India and abroad.

Initial Findings of the Pilot Safety Audit

Although my initial findings are limited, they are nonetheless provocative and certainly indicate



directions for the larger research project to explore in more depth.

In both sites, issues of accessibility and mobility are readily apparent. Secunderabad Hub has no sidewalks, and spaces where there are provision for them are occupied by street vendors, hawkers, illegal extensions of shop fronts, municipal dumpsters and in some areas open urinals for men. As the pedestrian and vehicular movement is high in this area, the people have to compete for space on the same road.

In contrast, University Main Street has wide sidewalks, however, they are not continuous and are interrupted periodically by trees, making the sidewalks inaccessible to individuals in wheelchairs. The portion of the street in the study area also lacks public phone service, dustbins and sufficient street lighting.

The Dilemma of Public Toilets

Public toilets have an incredible influence on how women use ur-



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Left: Public toilet block designed in two levels

Right: The metal staircase

The Social Framework

In India, the patriarchal system dictates the role and responsibility of a woman—she is expected to behave, talk, walk and dress in a certain way. By doing so she maintains the respect of her family and upholds her honor. A woman who challenges this prescribed behavior may achieve a questionable position in the society and will certainly experience harassment and even violence. Women's movements through public spaces are thereby limited by societal pressure to conform, yet even when they do conform, women are likely to experience harassment.

“It gets uncomfortable when I walk in the university at night; we usually prefer walking in groups. Even then, there isn't a time when someone hasn't passed a lewd comment or tried to approach and misbehave with us. I don't even have to dress 'provocatively' for that. Ultimately, I need to take care of myself and avoid situations where I have to go out at night. Even if there is police around, they are mostly male, it doesn't make too much of a difference!”

—A female student and resident of the Osmania University Girl's Hostel

ban public spaces and how they navigate through the city. Over the last few years, many public toilets have been installed as part of the municipality's infrastructure improvement agenda. While this represents a significant improvement over not having any facilities at all, the design and management of these facilities is terribly flawed. Public toilets were apparently just an item on the infrastructure improvement checklist to be checked off, but no thought was given to anybody except the neutral user.

Secunderabad Hub has four toilet blocks in the one kilometer stretch. Two of these blocks are in two levels, with four urinals for men on the lower level and three toilets for women on the upper level. The upper level is accessed by a metal spiral staircase, making it inaccessible to disabled and elderly women. In each case, the toilet blocks are operated by a male caretaker who sits outside the block to collect a user fee. Men pay one rupee, but women have to pay four times more, with no guarantee of cleanliness.

“If it gets too late in the night my father, my brother or a friend (usually a male) picks me up from work. Yes, there is always some kind of harassment in the buses or on the streets, but what can we do about it? We have gotten used to it now.”

—A frequent bus commuter and user of the Secunderabad Hub

The constraint that women feel is evident in where and with whom women gather and even in the body language a woman displays in public. In the University Main Street audit, it was interesting to note that men were loitering outside the academic blocks either alone or in small groups, whereas very few women were doing the same. Women sat in groups mostly with other women, never alone. In their body posture, men appeared relaxed in comparison to women. Sitting on the lawn, men sat with their

arms and legs carelessly stretched out while women sat cross-legged with their backs straight.

It was startling to find that in the Secunderabad Hub, women commuters did not perceive the issue of daily harassment on streets and public transportation as a safety concern, as long as it fell short of outright molestation.

“Safety? Yes this area is very safe, but we are not out during the night. Oh! Are you talking about harassment and eve-teasing? Of course, it exists! You can’t help it now, can you?”

—A female commuter at the bus shelter in Secunderabad

Another group of women, who appeared more affluent, declined to participate in the research, saying, “We are not the right people to talk to—we don’t use public transportation at all.” Are public spaces and the use of public transporta-

tion viewed as unsafe spaces by the upper economic classes? Does one’s economic class status create a variation in the perception of safety in public spaces? Is private transportation a convenience or also a means of “escaping” the dangers in public spaces? If people in the lower economic class only commute via public transportation, is the safety not really a concern for society as a whole? Is it “okay” to be objectified and feel uncomfortable?

“After a while you get used it. Sometimes I retaliate and shout back or complain to the bus driver,” said one respondent. Another student from the university, however, felt that retaliation is perceived as encouragement, leading to more advances from men. “It’s less trouble if I bend my head down, ignore it and walk away. If something were to happen to me, my reputation would be at stake and I have to deal with the consequences in the society, not the guy.” Although saying “no” is the first step in challenging the accessibility limita-



OSMANIA UNIVERSITY

Difference in the loitering patterns of women (above) and men (at right).

tions of women, greater awareness is required before there can be a change in how a society behaves.

The Policy Framework

At the national level there are policies like the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women 2001, which aims to advance, develop and empower women through gender sensitization and by ensuring access to some fundamental rights for women in India. These rights include access to basic infrastructure and amenities. Although this policy deals with the primary concerns of women, it is still in the preliminary stages of the implementation process.

At the planning policy level, in 2005–2006 the government of India launched the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission, which requires cities to prepare development plans to address gaps in service delivery and propose better infrastructure

facilities, especially for marginalized communities. These plans, however, do not specifically address gender disparities.

The city of Hyderabad has multiple agencies responsible for policy-making and due to the overlap of responsibilities, most projects are implemented piecemeal. Currently the city's agenda is focused on developing the economy at a rapid pace to become a world-class city. But what good is a world-class city when the streets are not designed to be accessible for all residents and the city is unable to provide the safety people need?

The Way Forward

Both societal norms for behavior and the built environment affect a woman's safety in public spaces. Knowledge of women's issues might begin to make a shift in the way women are treated and respected in the society. While retaliation and rejecting the notion

that it is okay to be inappropriately treated in public is perhaps a beginning, the journey is much longer.

A crucial step is to generate more awareness about women's safety issues in public spaces. The behavior and attitudes of the society cannot be transformed overnight, but the built environment can be controlled and can be used as a medium for change. Further research needs to be done while engaging various community organizations, municipal authorities, police departments and other important stakeholders. Workshops need to be organized and future women's safety audits need to be designed and led by community members. This would help form crucial links between the community and decision-making organizations. No change can be achieved without creating a dialogue between the users and the designers of the space. Active participation is the only way to bring about a revolution in the way cities and spaces are conceived and created for residents. **P²**

