

Gendered Spaces: Examining Spatial Inequalities in Urban India

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Abstract:

Urban spaces are often perceived as neutral arenas of development, opportunity, and modernity. However, a closer geographical and sociological examination reveals that cities are deeply structured by gendered power relations that shape how individuals access, use, and experience space. In the context of urban India, spatial inequalities manifest through disparities in mobility, safety, employment opportunities, and access to public and private spaces. This research article critically explores the concept of gendered spaces, tracing how historical, cultural, economic, and institutional factors contribute to unequal spatial experiences for men and women. It examines the intersections of gender with class, caste, and urban form, highlighting how marginalized groups face compounded exclusions. The study further analyzes everyday practices, urban planning frameworks, and policy interventions to understand how cities can be made more inclusive and equitable. By adopting a geographical lens, the article emphasizes the need for gender-sensitive urban planning and participatory governance to transform Indian cities into spaces of equality and empowerment.

Keywords: *Gendered Spaces, Spatial Inequality, Urban India, Intersectionality, Gender-Sensitive Urban Planning.*

Introduction:

Cities are dynamic and complex spaces where social relations are continuously produced and reproduced. In India, rapid urbanization has transformed the physical and social fabric of cities, creating new opportunities while also deepening existing inequalities. Among these, gender-based spatial inequalities remain one of the most persistent and under-examined dimensions of urban life.

The notion of space is not merely physical; it is socially constructed and shaped by power relations. Gender, as a social category, plays a crucial role in defining who has access to which spaces, under what conditions, and with what degree of freedom. In Indian cities, women often encounter restrictions in mobility, limited access to public spaces, and heightened concerns about safety, particularly during certain times of the day. These constraints not only affect their physical movement but also limit their participation in economic, social, and political activities.

Objectives: This article seeks to explore how urban spaces in India are gendered, examining the patterns, processes, and implications of spatial inequalities. It also highlights the importance of integrating gender perspectives into urban planning and policy-making.

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Conceptual Framework: Understanding Gendered Spaces

The concept of gendered spaces originates from feminist geography, which challenges the notion that space is neutral and instead emphasizes that spatial arrangements are socially constructed and shaped by power relations, including gender (Massey, 1994; McDowell, 1999). Gendered spaces refer to the ways in which different environments are produced, organized, and experienced differently by individuals based on their gender, often resulting in unequal access and control (Spain, 1992).

Traditionally, the distinction between public and private spaces has been central to understanding gendered spatial relations. The private sphere—comprising homes and domestic environments—has historically been associated with women, whereas the public sphere—including workplaces, markets, and streets—has been dominated by men (Pateman, 1988). Although processes of urbanization and modernization have blurred these rigid boundaries, structural inequalities continue to persist in subtle and complex forms (Massey, 1994).

In the context of urban India, this division is reflected in everyday spatial practices. Women's presence in public spaces is often regulated by prevailing social norms, cultural expectations, and concerns about safety (Phadke et al., 2011). This leads to the creation of "invisible boundaries," wherein certain spaces become implicitly male-dominated, limiting women's freedom of movement and access to urban resources (Koskela, 1999).

Historical Context of Gendered Urban Spaces in India

The roots of gendered spatial inequalities in India are deeply embedded in historical and socio-cultural processes. Traditional social structures, including patriarchy, caste hierarchies, and religious norms, have long shaped the organization and use of space, reinforcing gender-based divisions and restrictions (Chakravarti, 2003).

During the colonial period, urban planning introduced new spatial configurations such as segregated residential zones, administrative centers, and commercial districts. However, these planning approaches largely overlooked gender considerations and often reinforced existing patriarchal norms by failing to account for women's spatial needs and lived experiences (Datta, 2006).

In the post-independence period, rapid urbanization further transformed Indian cities. Despite this expansion, planning frameworks remained largely gender-neutral in principle but gender-blind in practice (Kabeer, 1994). Consequently, urban infrastructure, housing policies, and public services often failed to address the specific requirements of women, particularly those belonging to marginalized socio-economic groups (Sen, 2001).

Gender and Mobility in Urban Spaces

Mobility is a crucial indicator of spatial access, autonomy, and participation in urban life. In Indian cities, gender disparities in mobility are pronounced and shaped by a combination of social, economic, and infrastructural factors (Uteng & Cresswell, 2008).

Women typically exhibit more complex travel patterns than men, often involving multiple short trips related to household responsibilities, caregiving, and informal economic activities (Peters, 2013). However, urban transport systems are generally designed around linear, work-based commuting patterns that align more closely with male mobility, thereby marginalizing women's travel needs (Hanson, 2010).

Safety concerns play a significant role in shaping women's mobility. The fear of harassment, violence, and poorly maintained infrastructure—such as inadequate street lighting—restricts women's movement,

particularly during early morning and late evening hours (Phadke et al., 2011). This gives rise to “time-based spatial exclusion,” where access to certain areas is limited based on time, reinforcing gendered inequalities in urban space (Koskela, 1999).

Furthermore, socio-economic factors such as income, education, and caste intersect with gender to influence mobility patterns. Women from lower-income groups often depend on overcrowded and unsafe modes of transport, which increases their vulnerability and limits their access to employment and social opportunities (Ghosh, 2013).

Safety and the Right to the City

The concept of the “right to the city,” as articulated by Lefebvre (1968), emphasizes the right of all individuals to access, use, and actively shape urban spaces. It underscores the idea that cities should be inclusive and equitable environments where all citizens can participate fully in social, economic, and cultural life. However, for many women in urban India, this right remains significantly constrained due to persistent gender-based inequalities (Harvey, 2008).

Public spaces such as streets, parks, markets, and transportation hubs frequently become sites of gender-based harassment and exclusion. The normalization of such behaviors fosters an environment of fear and insecurity, limiting women’s ability to freely navigate the city (Phadke et al., 2011). In response, women often adopt various coping mechanisms, including avoiding certain areas, altering travel routes, modifying their clothing, or restricting their movement during specific times of the day. While these strategies may enhance immediate safety, they simultaneously reinforce spatial inequalities by internalizing restrictions on women’s mobility (Koskela, 1999).

Urban design plays a crucial role in shaping both the perception and reality of safety in cities. Poorly lit streets, inadequate public infrastructure, lack of surveillance, and poorly maintained public spaces contribute to heightened vulnerability and insecurity (Jacobs, 1961). In contrast, well-designed urban environments characterized by mixed land use, active street life, proper lighting, and inclusive planning can significantly improve safety and accessibility for women (UN-Habitat, 2013). Therefore, integrating gender-sensitive principles into urban design is essential for ensuring equitable access to public spaces and realizing the broader goal of the right to the city.

Workspaces and Economic Participation

Spatial inequalities in urban areas are also reflected in differential access to employment opportunities and workplaces. Women’s participation in the urban workforce is shaped by an interplay of spatial, social, and economic constraints (Kabeer, 1994).

Formal employment opportunities are often concentrated in central business districts, industrial zones, or peri-urban areas, which may be difficult for women to access due to inadequate transportation, long travel times, and safety concerns (Hanson, 2010). These spatial barriers can discourage women from seeking or sustaining formal employment, thereby limiting their economic independence.

As a result, many women are concentrated in informal workspaces such as street vending, domestic work, or home-based enterprises. While these forms of employment offer flexibility and allow women to balance household responsibilities, they are often characterized by low wages, lack of job security, and absence of social protection (Chen, 2012). The spatial invisibility of such work further marginalizes women within the urban economy.

The spatial distribution of economic activities thus reflects and reinforces gendered divisions of labor. Women are disproportionately represented in low-paying and informal sectors, whereas men dominate



higher-paying, formal employment spaces (Sen, 2001). This spatial and occupational segregation perpetuates economic inequalities and restricts women's opportunities for upward mobility and empowerment.

Addressing these disparities requires not only improving physical access to workplaces through better transportation and infrastructure but also challenging the underlying social norms and institutional barriers that shape women's participation in the urban economy (ILO, 2018).

Intersectionality: Gender, Class, and Caste

Gendered spatial inequalities do not operate in isolation but are deeply intertwined with other axes of social stratification, particularly class and caste. The concept of intersectionality highlights how multiple forms of disadvantage overlap and reinforce one another, producing complex patterns of exclusion (Crenshaw, 1989; Chakravarti, 2003).

In the context of urban India, women from marginalized castes and low-income backgrounds experience compounded vulnerabilities. They are more likely to reside in informal settlements or slums characterized by inadequate infrastructure, overcrowding, and limited access to basic services such as water supply, sanitation, and healthcare (Kabeer, 1994; Dupont, 2008). These spatial conditions not only reflect economic deprivation but also reinforce social marginalization.

Access to sanitation facilities provides a critical example of intersectional spatial inequality. In many urban slums, the absence of private toilets compels women to rely on shared or open spaces, often during early morning or late-night hours to maintain privacy. This exposes them to heightened risks of harassment, violence, and health hazards (UN-Habitat, 2013; Joshi et al., 2011). Such conditions illustrate how spatial deprivation intersects with gender to produce distinct and severe forms of vulnerability.

An intersectional analysis thus reveals that spatial inequalities are unevenly distributed and experienced differently across social groups. Recognizing these layered inequalities is essential for designing targeted and inclusive urban policies that address the needs of the most marginalized populations (Sen, 2001).

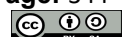
Urban Planning and Gender Blindness

Urban planning in India has historically followed a technocratic and top-down approach, prioritizing physical infrastructure, land use regulation, and economic growth, often at the expense of social inclusivity and equity (Datta, 2006). Within this framework, gender has largely remained an overlooked dimension, resulting in what is commonly described as "gender-blind" planning (Kabeer, 1994).

Master plans and zoning regulations frequently fail to account for the everyday experiences and needs of women. For instance, rigid land-use zoning that separates residential, commercial, and industrial areas can increase travel distances and reduce accessibility to essential services, disproportionately affecting women who juggle multiple roles and responsibilities (Hanson, 2010). The lack of mixed-use development further limits opportunities for safe and convenient mobility.

Additionally, women's participation in urban planning and decision-making processes remains limited. Institutional structures are often male-dominated, leading to policies and designs that do not adequately reflect women's perspectives or priorities (Beall, 1996). This exclusion perpetuates spatial inequalities and reinforces existing gender hierarchies within urban environments.

In recent years, there has been growing recognition of the importance of gender-sensitive planning approaches. Initiatives such as gender budgeting, inclusive urban design, and participatory planning



frameworks aim to address these gaps (UN Women, 2018). However, their implementation remains inconsistent and fragmented across different cities and regions. Strengthening institutional capacity, ensuring community participation, and mainstreaming gender perspectives into all levels of planning are essential for achieving more equitable urban spaces.

Role of Technology and Smart Cities

The rise of smart city initiatives in India has introduced new possibilities for addressing urban challenges, including spatial inequalities. Technological innovations such as surveillance systems, mobile applications, and data analytics offer tools to enhance urban safety, efficiency, and service delivery (Kitchin, 2014).

For instance, safety-oriented mobile applications that enable women to share their real-time location or send emergency alerts have gained widespread use, contributing to a sense of security in urban environments (Phadke et al., 2011). Similarly, the application of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) allows planners to map crime-prone areas, analyze spatial patterns of insecurity, and design targeted interventions (Singh, 2015).

Moreover, smart infrastructure such as CCTV surveillance, smart lighting systems, and integrated transport networks can contribute to safer and more accessible urban spaces. These technologies, when effectively implemented, have the potential to reduce gender-based vulnerabilities and improve overall quality of life.

However, the benefits of technological advancements are not uniformly distributed. Significant disparities in digital literacy, access to smartphones, and internet connectivity persist across socio-economic groups, particularly affecting women from marginalized communities (World Bank, 2021). This “digital divide” risks excluding those who may benefit most from such innovations.

Therefore, while technology offers promising solutions, it must be complemented by inclusive policies, capacity-building initiatives, and equitable access to ensure that its benefits reach all segments of society and contribute to reducing, rather than reinforcing, existing inequalities.

Towards Inclusive and Equitable Urban Spaces

Addressing gendered spatial inequalities in urban India requires a comprehensive, multi-dimensional, and participatory approach that goes beyond the notion of gender neutrality to actively incorporate gender perspectives into planning and governance processes (UN Women, 2018; Harvey, 2008). Recognizing that urban spaces are socially constructed and often reflect existing power hierarchies, it is essential to design interventions that promote inclusivity, accessibility, and equity for all genders.

A key strategy involves the adoption of **gender-sensitive urban design**, which prioritizes safety, accessibility, and usability of public spaces. This includes the provision of well-lit streets, reliable and secure public transportation systems, pedestrian-friendly infrastructure, and inclusive public amenities. Such design principles can significantly reduce vulnerability and enhance women’s confidence in navigating urban environments (Jacobs, 1961; UN-Habitat, 2013).

Participatory planning is another crucial component in fostering equitable urban spaces. Actively involving women in decision-making processes at local, regional, and national levels ensures that their experiences, needs, and priorities are adequately represented in planning outcomes (Beall, 1996). Community engagement and grassroots participation can also strengthen accountability and improve the effectiveness of urban interventions.

The integration of gender perspectives into **urban policies and programs** is equally important. Gender mainstreaming—through tools such as gender budgeting and policy audits—can help ensure that



development initiatives address the specific needs of women and other marginalized groups (Kabeer, 1994; UN Women, 2018). This approach promotes a more equitable allocation of resources and enhances the overall impact of urban development policies.

Efforts to promote **awareness and education** are essential for challenging deeply entrenched societal norms and cultural practices that restrict women's mobility and access to space. Public campaigns, educational programs, and community-based initiatives can play a vital role in transforming attitudes and fostering a more inclusive urban culture (Phadke et al., 2011).

Finally, the use of **data-driven approaches** is critical for informed decision-making. The collection and analysis of gender-disaggregated data enable planners and policymakers to identify spatial inequalities, monitor progress, and design targeted interventions (World Bank, 2021). Incorporating such data into urban planning processes ensures that policies are evidence-based and responsive to the diverse needs of urban populations.

Conclusion

Gendered spatial inequalities remain a critical challenge in urban India, reflecting deeper social, cultural, and economic structures. While cities offer opportunities for empowerment and transformation, they also reproduce existing inequalities if not carefully managed. This research highlights that space is not neutral but deeply embedded with power relations that shape everyday experiences. Women's access to urban spaces is influenced by a complex interplay of factors, including safety, mobility, economic opportunities, and social norms. Creating inclusive cities requires a fundamental shift in how urban spaces are conceptualized, designed, and governed. By adopting a gender-sensitive and participatory approach, it is possible to transform urban environments into spaces of equality, dignity, and opportunity for all.

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