

Women's Safety and Freedom of Mobility: Seeing Gender Based Crime through City Planning and Design

S. Sameen¹

¹Department of Architecture, MIST, Bangladesh (shafinaz@arch.mist.ac.bd)

Abstract

Today, more and more women are participating in education and the economy besides men. However, there are also increased restrictions imposed on women's presence in 'public' in forms of religious conservatism, social deviance, etc. While the city manifests the visions of becoming a global city, the visible rise in harassment and rape incidents in the 'public' testifies that women- a majority of its users, are not 'free'. This study aims to raise before the audiences that, the issue needs addressing within the discourse of city planning and design. It attempts to explore how spatial quality influences gender-based crime and women's fear. For this purpose, a survey was conducted with 130 women to understand women's perception of fear throughout Dhaka city along with their choices of spatial elements to enhance safety. Drawing examples from around the globe, some design and planning ideas are explored. As a whole, the purpose of the study is to instigate a conversation around women's safety within planning and design field as well as advocate for an inclusive city planning and design process informed of gendered experiences.

Keywords: *Women; Dhaka city; gender-based crime; fear of crime; freedom of mobility.*

1 Introduction

Dhaka, a mega city, continues to accommodate diversity, urban complexity, daily incoming of migrants as well as advanced infrastructures and beautification of spaces. However, in this race of progress, the city is disregarding its major share of users - the women - by taking their everyday struggle of space use for granted. While today women are increasingly coming out of the houses and actively taking part in higher education and economy, they are, yet, not in much liberty of using its spaces freely. The reasons are varied and rather complex, however, sexual harassment alone is one major cause that limits women's right to use public space severely¹.

Not only the professional fields around the built environment are androcentric, the city and its spaces itself are a manifestation of our deep-seated socio-cultural beliefs that shape our spatial imaginaries and guide our everyday spatial behaviour by the prescribed gender roles and norms. Women naturally, in this process, have little voice in the decision making; and experiences particular to women are rarely recognized as significant design considerations. Thus, women are rendered invisible when their experiences are taken for granted, voices are represented, and more importantly, women's 'presence' in the public even today, although apparently normalized, is severely negotiated (Habib, et al. 2014) and consciously performed.

The aim of focusing on the specific issue of violence in particular among varied reasons that restrict women's mobility is to instigate a conversation on this very topic within the field of city planning and design, in order to advocate for an inclusive process informed of gendered experiences. The specific objectives of the study are, first,

¹ Physical, sexual and psychological violence can be a daily feature of women's interactions in their neighbourhoods, on public transport, in workplaces, schools, sports clubs, colleges, hospitals, and in social institutions. Unsafe spaces abound in cities and surrounding areas—deserted streets, dark lanes, isolated bus stops, or public toilets. See-<https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/society/news/womens-safety-public-transport-case-the-would-be-city-father-1703476>. Also, survey conducted by Action Aid says 84% of Bangladeshi women experienced at least one form of sexual harassment including staring, deliberate touching, groping, and sexual comments during travelling. See-https://actionaid.org/sites/default/files/178622_2786.pdf

to shed light on the negotiated presence of women in the public spaces primarily in terms of gender-based crime and fear; second, to uncover the spaces of Dhaka through women's eyes –as to what kind spaces women perceive as fearful or safe. For this purpose, the study primarily explores the questions of- how does gender based violence and fear of crime affect women's mobility? And how do women perceive the spaces of Dhaka city in terms of fear and safety?

This particular piece of writing is a part of a broader study that intends to look deeper into 'gendered space' in the context of Dhaka city to inform city planning and design process of inclusivity. An online questionnaire survey has been conducted with a total of 130 women, along with 10 in-depth interviews. The questionnaire survey is meant for collecting data about safe and unsafe places throughout Dhaka city based on women's experiences of abuse and fear, whereas the interviews contribute to an understanding of women's perception of public space and its use. The findings are mainly described in terms of frequency distribution (percentage of respondents) based on the questionnaire survey. The sampling is purposive, covering women belonging to the middle-income² group of the society and an age group from 20s to 40s engaged in education and economy; because it intends to show that women who are rather 'privileged' are actually entailing much effort to make each day happen throughout the city's public spaces³, in their daily commute.

The study expands from the notion of 'gendered space'⁴ and locate gender-based crimes as the social production of space. Within this framework, the extent design and planning of the built environment can influence women's fear and crime are explored. The paper begins with a brief portrayal of scholarly works engaged in understanding women's spatial behavior and nature of space influencing crime and fear. In later sections, it summarizes the findings from the survey conducted as well as sheds lights on space planning and design concepts derived from the survey findings along with global experiences.

2 Violence, fear of crime, and women's negotiated presence in the public

Physical intimidation of women in public serves to confirm gender identity as 'an act for men that a woman by her nature could not do' (Goffman, 1977; cited in Frank, et al. 1989). Such acts can include a range of harassment and abusive gestures from gazing, accosting to physical assault and gang rape, however, it is the everyday nature of violence and its normalization that mark it (Viswanath, et al. 2007). Situated at the unequal gendered power relations, violence against women in public is a manifestation of masculine domination- a visible form of territorial demarcation of gendered belongingness- of men in 'public' and women in 'private'.

There is no dearth of literature about women's fear and restricted mobility in the west since the 80s. Some recent works can be found in the Indian context as well. In both cases it has been established that women's presence in the public is mainly a necessary action of commute to get essential tasks (purpose of education, work, shopping, grocery, etc.) done, a transit between one private space to another (Ranade, 2007), and they are rarely seen to loiter around without 'purpose' (Habib, 2014; Ranade, 2007; Frank, 1989;). It is also found in the Indian scholarly works that women are seen in particular places whereas men can be found anywhere (Ranade, 2007). The spatial behaviour of women in this context is largely dictated by the idioms of shame and honor, the dos and don'ts of 'good women' (Phadke, 2007; Paul, 2011; Viswanath, 2007) in addition to fear to harassment. The 'purpose-defined' movement of women is deeply connected to the notion of what good women should/should not do in public (Habib, 2014; Ranade, 2007).

Therefore, routes chosen and places preferred by women are actually governed by social legitimacy and also fear of crime; although often mistaken as autonomous choice (Paul, 2011) which, Ranade (2007) called 'spatial subconscious'. Valentine (1990) showed that women did feel fear in particular environment. However, the experience of fear can be different depending on where one lives, travels and works (Viswanath, et al. 2007). Women avoid certain locations or reduce the amount of time spent in the public space alone (Frank, 1989). As found in literature of both the west and south, women tend to avoid dark and deserted places (parking lots, alleys, subways) (Viswanath, et al. 2007; Valentine, 1990; Frank, et al. 1989;) and moving during night (Koskela, 1997; Wesley, 2004) unaccompanied (Frank, 1989;). Fear in these situations rises from the thoughts of 'violent' incidents; although, not all women have been physically attacked, however, all have felt an indescribable feeling of unease ranging from discomfort to paralyzes (Smaoun, 2000; cited in Viswanath, et al. 2007). Additionally,

² The particular study does not take differences of social class and race/ethnicity into considerations.

³The study only takes into account the outdoor public places- streets, parks (and the likes of it), open markets, bus stop, terminals.

⁴In this particular write up, detailed conversations around gendered space and segregation of private-public as discursive spaces are not drawn. Here, focus is given mainly on identifying the spatial aspects of women's fear and gender-based crime in the 'public' (physical, not discursive) spaces of Dhaka.

Women enters into a daily negotiation of space in order to avoid 'discomfort' (Habib, 2014; Ranade, 2007) rising from the incidents of verbal comments or gazing, as well as in male dominated places (Viswanath, 2007) that may appear 'unfriendly' (Paul, 2011; Ranade, 2007), where women feel 'out of place' (Paul, 2011; Ranade, 2007). The resultant precautionary behaviors restrict women's freedom of mobility severely, and curtail their right to the city (Mahadeva, 2019; Phadke, 2007; Frank, et al. 1989).

Fear is also a result of women's perception of space (Paul, 2011). It has been commonly found that, visual access to public spaces increases women's sense of safety (Frank, 1989); women tend to use well-lit spaces or routes (Mahadeva, 2019), feel safer in the presence or visual range of others (Valentine, 1990). This aspect draws reference from the concept of Jane Jacobs' 'eyes on the street', which enhances informal surveillance. Presence of vendors and shopkeepers play important role in our contexts in this regard (Paul, 2011; Viswanath et al. 2007); however, eviction of vendors from public spaces are hence found to create lack of safety for women (Mahadeva, et. Al. 2019). Valentine (1990) showed that by facilitating a perception that a physical space is informally controlled, the design and layout of public space can increase women's confidence in going out. Hashim, et al. (2016) has also showed in their study that vegetation design and density can affect women's sense of safety in places like parks.

The particular study, by inquiring into the spaces of Dhaka city through women's perception and experiences of fear and safety, adds to the existing scholarship of women's safety in urban space from the context of Bangladesh, within the global south. The extent of academic study in the similar arena that has been made are mostly regarding transportation in our context. Therefore, this study contributes to an area very rarely addressed and enables an important agency turn to women's voices in the field of city planning and design.

3 Spatial dimensions of fear and safety: Dhaka city through women's eyes

This section summarizes the findings from the survey which was about identifying different places of Dhaka as safe or unsafe, and the spatial qualities associated with it. The purpose is also to understand women's perception of safe/unsafe space as well as uncover women's everyday negotiations. Among the surveyed women, 33.9% are married, 62.2% unmarried and the rest (3.9%) are divorced. Majority (65%) are actively involved in income, whereas 32% undergraduate students, and 5% are currently unemployed while only one participant is a homemaker. 95.5% of these women have identified 'commuting' as the main purpose of using public spaces, along with grocery (57%), physical exercise (22.7%). However, a good number of women (61.7%) among these mentioned about using different public places (Lake/park etc., also tea-stalls) for socializing and recreation- as opposed to the tasks with 'essential' purposes. These women, therefore, are 'empowered' in traditional sense.

Nonetheless, 93% of participants agreed to have carried a sense of fear while travelling through certain places in certain time within the city. Also, 87.6% participants responded to have experienced harassment of some kinds (verbal 74.3%, physical, 67.3%, offensive gesture 60.2%. etc.). Both cases have the highest mentions of Farmgate (bus stop); and common mentions such as, Gulistan, Dhaka University area, Shahbag, Mohakhali Bus stops, etc. Certain neighborhoods (Dhanmondi, Mohammadpur, Gulshan) and "dark alleys, foot overbridges, places underneath flyovers, streets with very few people" were only identified as particular places to trigger sense of fear, whereas open market places (new market, Nilkhet, Hawkers) next to the mentioned bus-stops above, were particularly mentioned as places of past harassment experiences. Additionally, male passers-by (85%) and men loitering around (54%) were identified as major sources of harassment along with bus/laguna drivers/conductors (36.3%), rickshaw pullers (35.4%), etc.

'Time' is an important dimension contributing to how a place is perceived and experienced. The highest responses (63%) about causes of fear were 'night time'. Whereas experience of occurrences shows major responses around 'afternoon' by the 'streets' (main roads, highways) as well as 'noon and afternoon' in the open market places. Other places, broadly categorized as neighborhood street, crossings (foot-over, underpass), bus stops/junctions, parks/lakeside and institutional (i.e., campus), show a balanced distribution of both 'number' and 'time' of occurrences with the least at institutional spaces. This pattern also reveals very few mentions of the time of 'late night' and of spaces such as 'parks' which can be assumed as places women encounter rarely. Furthermore, bus stops and terminals, sidewalks of highways (i.e., near airport) as well as foot-over bridges and underpasses at 'night time'-are ranked the 'most unsafe' places by majority (72%), whereas neighborhood streets with front of houses, public/lakeside parks and gated neighborhood parks (i.e., Gulshan, Baridhara) during 'daytime' are ranked 'safe' (77%). Particularly under passes and foot-over bridges in general are spaces mostly found to be 'avoided' by women due to fear of harassment.

To accommodate fear and avoid unwanted incidents, this way, women are found to negotiate by 'avoiding' primarily public transport (56.3%), certain/particular places (53.9%), not going out 'alone' at 'night' (55.6%),

longer stay in public past evening (36.7%), moving alone (33.6%), and also dressing in certain ways (41.4%) (i.e., avoid western in particular places, use scarf, etc.), etc. One of the interviewees mentioned regarding the latter, *“Whenever I am to go to places like old Dhaka, an open market or any crowded places where different kinds of people will be there, I tend not to wear western”*. From the survey, 35.2% were found to carry safety tools (i.e., pepper spray or sharp objects) as well.

Presence of people around just for the women ‘to be heard’ and to call out for help came out as an important safety notion during the discussion. Factors that also influence women’s consciousness about unsafe surroundings are- ‘being alone’ (58.1%), having only ‘men’ around (52.1%), too many people around (44.5%) and very few people around (47.9%) (see figure 01). Also, news of other’s experiences and from media affect such perceptions of women (43.7%) as well. However, past experiences of abuse have been identified mostly in places with ‘too many people around’ (60%) and also with ‘very few people around’ (43.2%), and only men around (39.2%), etc. Regarding physical characteristics of spaces, notably lighting (73.6%) and visibility (66.4%) were identified as measures to enhance safety. Additionally, increased security by formal surveillance including digital (70.4%) and policing (55.2%) were identified as measures of safety; presence of ‘female security personnel’ (38.4%) in this connection was emphasized during the group discussion as they would connect personally, while men, often, take advantages of their position to harass further.

Presence of amenities (i.e., child care, toilet) has also been identified as an important aspect to increase women’s ‘sense of belongingness’ besides provision of waiting (i.e., at bus stops) with proper infrastructure (i.e., footpath, clean streets). Dispersing ‘male’ dominated crowd (i.e., tea stalls are usually places for male to gather in groups around any stands/nodes) can also encourage women’s comfortable presence. Design ideas such as removing ‘shed’ from foot-over bridges and rethinking opaque boundary walls to increase ‘visibility’ on the ground were few more important insights developed all through the study.

In summary, places that attract many as well as diverse people such as bus-stops, terminals, open fair, open market, etc. are places women demarcate as places of ‘potential’ harassments, where also women faced the maximum abusive incidents. However, deserted places with risk of being outside of visual range of others trigger fears the most. Also, women fear for harassment during night the most, while incidents mostly happened during day time. The study also reveals that, women have greater control over surroundings in familiar places, places with proper visual access and women specific amenities. Women take precautionary measures to avoid unwanted incidents, and avoid places they fear; in short, their everyday commute is not a simple process of moving from one place to another and rather entail both conscious and subconscious choices to ensure safety.

4 Conceptualizing fear and violence prevention through city planning and design

The area of women’s safety has come into the discourse of ‘safer cities’ not before 1980s and has been expanded to include urban planning, housing design and transport design with an emphasis on women’s vulnerabilities in public spaces rising from risk of violence and insecurities. Inspired by Jane Jacob’s “Eyes on the street”, a number of theories and models⁵ contributed to the field of crime prevention in public spaces and most of it emphasized natural surveillance of spaces through people’s (balanced) presence. Across different geographies, the commonly realized important parameters of space planning and design for safety are- mix of uses and range of activities, controlled density, informal surveillance through people’s presence and visibility, sense of belongingness through interaction with other users as well as with the built environment, etc.

Today there are different models of gender conscious planning for safety⁶ among which women’s ‘safety audit’ pioneered by METRAC⁷ in Toronto, now widely acknowledged across countries, is a participatory tool that can map physical environment based on women’s fear and identify solutions to increase safety (Moser, 2012). Besides that, Frank, et al (1989) has proposed a conceptual framework of studying public space and while Moser (2012) talked about mainstreaming women’s safety in cities into gender-based policy programs. The conversations around ‘safer cities’ expanded beyond ‘design’ notions into the inclusion of users (women) in city planning process by direct ‘voice’- which stands for an eventual emancipation of women from prevalent inequality and awareness of the society about the need of it.

The study findings reveal that, city’s spaces need to be analyzed primarily from two perspectives- spaces that trigger a ‘sense of fear’ and spaces that ‘favor’ harassments. The former is based on women’s individual perception and how space informs their immediate presence, while the latter is the on potential abuser’s and how his

⁵ See Al-Ghiyadh, et al. (2021) for a summarized notion of the relevant planning and design theories.

⁶ See Viswanath, et al. (2007) for brief compilation of different models.

⁷ Metropolitan Action Committee on Violence against Women and Children. See <https://www.metrac.org/> for further information.

surroundings may provide or limit opportunities to act. In both of the cases, visibility and presence of others together play a crucial role. The findings also indicate that, fear is more constituted of the perception of violent crimes that may take place in dark deserted places⁸ as a result of the lack of people present to prevent it or offer help, even though there might not have been any incident of abuse in the past in such particular conditions. While although violence cannot be prevented by the manipulation of built environment alone as there are deeply rooted socio-cultural (also religious, political) factors at play, however, planning and design notions can greatly influence the likeliness of violence as well as women's perception of fear and safety and, hence, their willingness of going out (Valentine, 1990)

From the study findings, two broad categories, within the scope of built environment, can be identified that influence fear or crime based on immediate presence- *socio-spatial quality* (the sociological aspects of space; also, the degree of 'publicness') and *physical characteristics*. The former refers to the planning decisions of- maintaining balance between 'too many' and 'too few' people (density and diversity) by zoning and mixed-use strategies in simple terms; this should also keep in mind a balance of 'gender'. This aspect also includes a broader discourse of socially produced gendered space⁹. The latter include the detail and immediate experiences physical space (design) offer to its users through lighting, legibility, visually permeable design of 'edges' (ground floor), provision of seating/walking, maintenance and cleanliness, planned vegetation, use of signage/landmarks etc. At the heart of the notions of space 'planning' and 'design' are- increased sense of belonging, natural (informal) surveillance and presence of witness (help) to ultimately enhance women's control¹⁰ over the environment and reduce the opportunity of potential abusers by forcing accountability.

5 Conclusion

Through their everyday navigation around the city, women make considerable adjustments; even if it is of a simple choice of clothing or particular routes, the act of responding to and accommodating everyday fear and verbal comments similar to the regular act of putting clothes on- re-inscribe the invisibility of women's struggle, and reproduce the normalization of their negotiated presence. Today, planning and design with safety notions is a well-established concept in many parts of the world; it is high time that we take gender specific experiences into consideration for an inclusive future of Dhaka city.

Overall findings from the study- the spacio-temporal negotiations women make, and the spatial and physical quality of places that generate fear among women- mostly conform with the ones from global experiences. By deeply delving into the formation of 'gendered space' within our very context, the tools already in practice across geographies can provide a basis for incorporating safety planning. The Academia can pioneer in this process by advocating for the recognition of women's everyday challenges and formulating methodologies to uncover everyday gendered dynamics of public spaces. This particular study provides a preliminary (virtual) safety audit of all over Dhaka city that identifies places and also spatial qualities that women view as unsafe. This process can be expanded into area-based safety audits; initiatives can be taken with partnerships between municipalities and universities, for example (i.e., collaboration of dept. of architecture/planning and sociology/criminology). Additionally, 'safety audits' can be incorporated into any development endeavors such as neighborhood upgrading, different Transit Oriented Developments, citywide park developments etc.- that are few ongoing developments visible throughout the city. Above all, visible attempts need to be taken in no time to include women in our city planning and design; it is crucial and rather more important than any beautification projects the city is undergoing as manifests of its development. The study urges urban practitioners, decision makers and researchers to recognize the spatial aspects of gender-based violence, and more importantly, acknowledge 'women' as 'everyday participants' of the city as well as 'users' of its spaces whose experiences are not to be taken for granted

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⁸ This finding conforms with the global experiences.

⁹ Out of the scope of this particular study, however, the study acknowledges that for an egalitarian impact on women's inclusion in the decision making processes, the gendered division of space within our very context needs deeper understanding.

¹⁰ Safety is defined in terms of 'psychological and physical' safety, where psychological safety concerns with subject's control over environment (Feagan, 2011; cited in Hashim, et al. 2016).

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