Gender and Economic Policy Discussion Forum

'Public Spaces and Everyday Narratives of Violence amongst Vulnerable Gender Groups: Towards Inclusive Policy Frameworks'

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HIGHLIGHTS / KEY POINTS

- Much of the academic and policy debates about making cities inclusive focus on public space, especially safe, accessible and green public spaces.

- Public space is not homogeneous and its understandings and usages are highly gendered, both in terms of access and safety.

- A gendered understanding of public space calls for a more nuanced understanding of gender which goes beyond the normative sex-gender relations and proposes new ways of understanding urban inclusiveness.

- Multiple gender identities get played out in different public spaces generating multiple narratives of gender violence which should be taken into account while framing public policies.

- The differentiated idea of gender violence, particularly the potential or anxiety around the possibility of violence poses several challenges for policy and its implementation.

Public spaces and universal access to safe, inclusive public spaces, particularly for women and children, is a key component of the Sustainable Development Goals (Target 11.7). The very notions of what is public and what public spaces constitute have been a subject of much on-going debate. The very naming of "public" space indicates that it is meant for everyone and yet its access is restricted, particularly for women and girls. Often pitted against the private, which is equated with home and therefore with women, public spaces have come to falsely signify the outside world and thereby men (Butalia, 2012). This allows for and "encourage different understandings and usages of public spaces that are deeply gendered, both in access and right to public space" (Viswanath & Mehrotra, 2007).

The twenty-second Gender and Economic Policy (GEP) Discussion Forum organized by the Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST) with support from Heinrich Böll Foundation (HBF) was held on 2 May, 2017 on 'Public Spaces and Everyday Narratives of Violence amongst Vulnerable Gender Groups: Towards Inclusive Policy Frameworks'. The panel comprised four speakers and was chaired by Professor Saraswati Raju, retired Professor at the Centre for Regional Development, Jawaharlal Nehru University.

The session examined how 'gendered' experiences of restrictions and access to public space are negotiated with in everyday lives on the one hand, while, on the other, how it in turn shaped the uses and possibilities of creating access to safer, inclusive public spaces for all. Aparajita De from the

University of Delhi spoke on the findings of her collaborative project with Monash University, which examined the 'cartographies of fear, anxiety and violence' in spaces of public or in-vehicular transport. Syeda Jenifa Zahan from the National University of Singapore (NUS) examined the use, access and experience of public spaces and the 'vocabularies of violence' of young single migrant women in the city of Delhi. Kiran Bhairannavar of Delhi University focused his presentation on the transgendered experiences of different public spaces to relook at new ways of understanding urban inclusiveness. Kanchan Gandhi from the School and Planning and Architecture, Delhi addressed women's safety concerns, especially working and homeless women, in the city of Delhi from a planning perspective.

Urban Inclusiveness, Public Space and Gender

Urban inclusiveness, as Kiran Bhairannavar underscored, comprises urban spaces that promote social cohesion, safety, accessibility, equal rights and opportunity, sense of belongingness, and more than ever, fundamental freedoms. Much of the academic and policy debates about making cities inclusive focus on public space, especially safe, accessible and green public spaces. This calls for an understanding of the concept of public space and its importance in driving urban inclusiveness. Public space, as Aparajita De outlined, consists of places for social encounter and exchange, places for political action and participation in public life and plays an important role as places for economic activities. Citing Safer Spaces (2015), Rocio (2015) and Gundstrom (2007) she identified the various forms of public spaces, namely, *open public spaces*: beaches, parks and other natural spaces or squares; *closed public spaces*: libraries, museums or heritage sites; *other spaces of public use*: transport interchanges, sports grounds and recreational facilities; *ubiquitous and flexible public spaces*: streets, informal markets or sidewalks. Critiquing the approach of public policies to safe, inclusive cities, Aparajita De underscored that space is

not a homogeneous concept and as Butalia (2012) suggests, "its existence and its definitions are closely tied with other things, chief among which is a notion of entitlement and ownership" (Butalia, 2012). Such an understanding of public space is inherently classed and gendered. It is the gendered understanding of public space that forms the main crux of this policy brief.

Almost all the speakers prefaced their talk on the need for a more nuanced understanding of the category of gender and the public spaces in which they manifest. Aparajita De, Syeda Jenifa Zahan and Kanchan Gandhi argued for a more nuanced understanding of the category of 'woman' in itself in mainstream policy debates. Taking a close look at young women, single migrant middle class women, and working and homeless women respectively, the speakers argued for a more inclusive policy framework that understands that the nature of violence faced by these groups of women are different in different public spaces. Aparajita De and Syeda Jenifa Zahan also argued that gendered understandings of public spaces are also tied with notions of identity and freedom. For example, public spaces are important in the construction of young women's identity as modern and dynamic women. At the same time, public spaces provide them respite from the constraints of intrusive adult gaze and controls of their homes. Public spaces have also proven to be important for young single women to organize activism and public opinion building around gender issues. Kiran Bhairannavar looked at the case of transgendered subjects, arguing for an expanded understanding of gender and city frameworks, trying to propose or relook at new ways of understanding urban inclusiveness itself.

Cartographies of Fear, Anxiety and Violence: Young Women's Access to Public Transport

Taking the category of young women as a lens of analysis, Aparajita De highlighted young women's notions of different kinds of fear or violence as they

move through public spaces. She explored the challenges and obstacles that these women need to overcome in order to have safe access to public transport. Young women are often denied access and restrictions on their mobility and movement are imposed based on notions of being unsafe and even dangerous. The everyday lives of 'young' women reflect these regulations in terms of limited spatial access, frequency, length and timings of foray into public spaces and their engagement with the larger city and civic life. Aparajita De spoke of her findings in her research project in collaboration with Monash University that highlighted young women's notions of fear and anxiety that affects their transits and access to public space and its relevance particularly to gender equality. The groups that she identified are domestic workers in Mumbai and Delhi, who use buses and young students of Delhi University, who use all modes of transport.

Aparajita De underscored that fear in public spaces is not just about the act of crime in itself but the fear of violence. This psychological fear of violence acts as the main barrier which inhibits one's access to public space and thereby access to the social, cultural and political capital that public space tends to provide. She delineated and defined the spaces of risk and aspects of violence and fear in the everyday spaces of public transport. The main sources of fear of violence included physical teasing, 'Nein Sukh Prapti' or NSP (pleasure of seeing or what may refer to as laying one open to the voyeuristic male gaze), and petty crimes such as pick pocketing and chain snatching in the public transport systems. Within in-vehicular transport systems such as the bus and auto, Aparajita De mapped the highly segregated male dominated spaces - spaces from which the voyeuristic male gaze emanate and are spaces where the incidences of fear of violence and anxiety is the highest. For example, in an auto, the seat beside the driver is a highly segregated male dominated space while, interestingly, in a bus, seats next to the driver are more preferred by the young women because of their

location next to the door from where they can exit. Such tangible and intangible ecologies of fear of violence faced by young women in the city in terms of their mobility call for target hardening measures and policies.

Single Migrant Women's Vocabularies of Violence

Focusing on two groups of single migrant women - Delhiites and women from North East India currently residing in Delhi - Syeda Jenifa Zahan contended that young single middle class women constitute a very strongly emerging group in the public spaces and are becoming visible not only in the public physical spaces but also in the spaces controlled by media. The neo-liberal, social and economic order necessitates women, younger, able-bodied and skilled to participate in economically productive roles at least until they get married. So, this change in economic scenarios make women demand for more access to public space - not just for production and reproduction - but also for their own leisure and own needs. So through their ways of dwelling in the city, these women, lead to a changing notion of gender roles and orders, albeit slowly. Nevertheless, Syeda Jenifa Zahan argued, that due to their age, young single women are mostly infantilised by the society – they are perceived to be under parental control and waiting to be married soon. They are also seen as in need of protection from the society, from the strange, hostile and gendered city. Such notions are often expressed openly by landlords, family members and also by other male and female, completely unrelated city dwellers. These discourses around how dangerous the city can be for the young and unmarried women are central to the ways in which these women organize their lives- spatially and also temporally. Syeda Jenifa Zahan highlighted that for these women, use and experience of public spaces, is governed by an intertwining system of class privilege and gendered operation. But despite having the privilege of class, they are marginalized based on their age, ethnicity, statuses of migration and marriage. From her PhD findings on

single migrant women in Delhi, she opined that on this course on gender and public spaces shows how violence is part and parcel of women's everyday life. The fear of extraordinary violence such as rape and living with ordinary violence, everyday violence such as the pervasive gaze, the teasing, and the inappropriate touch have become a norm for most of these women. However, for most of these women, public space serves as an "ironical space" that at once is a space of threat and freedom, insecurity and comfort, violence and assertion of identity. So their ability and desire to access and use public spaces are influenced by actual violence and their sense of safety. They calculate and take informed spatial decisions based on real life events or violence against women in the micro geographies around the city. Violence and perceptions of safety structure their life and especially at the night time, determining where they go, when, for what purpose, with whom and what kind of transport to use. Jenifa also professed that one must also pay attention to what different groups of women perceive as public violence in their experience within this broader rubric of middleclass young single women. For example, she pointed out that for the north eastern migrant women, violence start at their rented homes. So north eastern women experience how gender, class, ethnicity, migration and status of work as an interlocking system structure their everyday lives in the city. The experience of violence for them does not start after stepping into the public space but starts at their private spaces. The private spaces for the migrants, becomes not so private, but a violent public space. Thus, she argued that singleness is not a static and homogeneous gendered category, but is intersected with other identities of class, ethnicity and migration.

Transgendered Experiences of Different Public Spaces

The dichotomy of the public and private spaces into predominantly male and female spaces respectively, has been well debated over the years (Butalia, 2012). Kiran

Bhairannavar also highlighted that public space that is divided between the public and the private gets ideologically mapped between the masculine and the feminine. So the public becomes highly masculinized-dominated by the men. He argued that by looking at the gender and city framings, the focus is mostly on women's access to public space or women's access to safety because of this relationship in the production of public space. His presentation highlighted the LGBTQ's relationship with public space. In his opinion, this relationship remains a very intimate relationship. However, this intimate public space is never the centre but at the margins where majority of the people do not go. But these cases become important for the queer community because these are spaces of affirmation of community life, of work and of everyday life mobilities. And that's why public spaces become important for the transgender community. Giving a brief history of the transgender community, Kiran Bhairannavar articulated that post-independent India, which came up as a modern nation state, was a bi-gendered, heterosexualised modern nation. A brief background of the transgenders, highlighted by Kiran Bhairannavar, is given below:

Transgenders in India: A Brief Background

The transgenders mostly constituted groups like *hijras*, *jogappas* who have faced economic hardships. They were found begging at traffic junctions, or involved in sex works, or in traditional ceremonies of *badhai* giving, or in temples of northern Karnataka, as serving Goddess Yellamma. These gender identities were either highly invisibilised during this period, or hypervisibilsed or marginalised. One of the arenas in which the transgenders were also visible was in cinema, where they were used for comical effect. However, in the 1990s, the HIV Aids epidemic along with India opening its gates for international funding, the transgender group was recognized as a High Risk

group to HIV infections. This helped visibilising transgroups like Kothi, Aravani, Jogappa, Shivashakti and because of this HIV Aids advocacy a lot of community based organisations came up. Post 1990s, witnessed the rise of the LGBT movement with T referring to transgender in that political alliance which now focused on human rights, sexual health, and HIV AIDS advocacy. Since the 1990s to 2017, there have been a lot key achievements that the transcommunity has witnessed, for example, the emergence of transgender welfare boards in certain states of India; the NALSA Judgement of 2014 which recognized the transgender as third sex and asked the state to make a socio-economic programme; bills which were introduced in 2014 and passed in Rajya Sabha; the Supreme Court Judgement in 2017 on usage of toilets and many state government schemes and so on. Yet, for every milestone that the transgender community has reached, there are hundreds and thousands of transgenders who continue to face distress, confusion, violence, discrimination and stigma for their gender identities or expressions in everyday spaces of home, work, public space and so on.

Highlighting the importance of public space in trans-life, Dr Bhairannavar highlighted how public space becomes and shapes the life direction of a trans-subject. The following vignette highlights how the gender non-conforming identity of a transgender is perceived in a social space.

"I left school because I was not happy. They teased me. When I was in sixth class three older boys passed lewd comments. When I complained to the teacher, he laughed and asked me to kiss him…I left the school and began staying home and helping my mother. I befriended a guy near my house. We used to play in the jungle, near Kishangarh. One afternoon he made a guy have sex with me. I liked it. Later as I grew, I found more men to have sex around the jungle. I started getting money for that. A man took me to a massage parlour and employed me there. I provided sexual services too. I am completing my education from open school."

(Seeta, 26, Kishangad, Kothi)

Using several narratives of different public spaces such as public transport, university campuses, streets, or more privatized/ capitalized spaces of shopping malls and the built environment, Kiran Bhairannavar underscored the public space plays central role in shaping the lives of transgenders. These include harassments, dropping out of school, introduction to sex work, community engagement, making one feel excluded. Bi-gendered organization of space makes transgendered bodies transgressive. They run the risk of being perceived as a threat to the order of space. This attracts suspicion and produce prejudice and policing. Transgender persons find it difficult to navigate especially bi-gendered spaces, and transphobic environments. Moreover, as the nature of public space changes to commoditized and re-developed spaces, trans-subjects are increasingly gender policed by barring admission to these spaces. Class plays an important role in perpetrating violence on transgenders. What is also important is, because of this aggressive public space, in a life time, trans-subjects forgo opportunities through these spaces that are inflicted on self, and affect full growth and development. Even though transgenders along with other LGBQ have come a long way in legislative and judicial interventions, however, the urban environments remain constraining producing more exclusions and alienations.

Working and Homeless Women's Safety Concerns: A Planning Perspective

Kanchan Gandhi addressed the working and the homeless women's safety concerns. Homeless women she believes are the worst affected category. Based on Action Aid's findings in 2014, she highlighted that there

are particularly 'vulnerable groups' especially women from the working class who are out in 'dangerous' work settings such as factories, on the streets begging and homeless women. Referring to Jane Jabob's concept of 'eyes on the street' Kanchan Gandhi mentioned a contested urban planning intervention – that of mixed land use - of both commercial and residential spaces. Such use of public spaces, she emphasized would ensure robust street life that could combat the unsafe nature of public spaces. In countries outside of India, in countries of the West, this concept has really caught up and the idea of a compact city is about the latest thinking on making safe and secure and environmentally sustainable cities, she stressed upon. However, 'eyes on the street' as a concept is more applicable to the experience of public spaces that are "empty" – a characteristic of public spaces in the countries of the West. In India streets are never empty and are often illegally privatised by encroachment by hawkers and so on and so forth.   Moreover, administrative bodies in cities such as Delhi oppose this mixed land use concept, arguing that it leads to encroachments, stress on infrastructure and increase in congestion and consequently crime rates.

The urban planning intervention in the Indian context has been defined in a compact manner by the organization Jagori. Drawing on Jagori's Inclusive Cities Programme that identified seven major areas of intervention that address prevention of sexual harassment in public spaces, and redressal after the occurrence of the crime, Kanchan advocated for a revival and reclamation of neglected and dead spaces in the city, such as monuments and parks, to make them more usable by different groups of people of different genders.

Policy Suggestions and Implications

- **Diverse and Heterogeneous Category of Gender**

  Almost all the speakers contended the need for a diverse and heterogeneous understanding of the category of gender. Kiran Bhairannavar argued that gender goes beyond the normative sex-gender relation. Each variance from this norm brings different set of exclusions and violence- physical, structural and verbal, affecting the experience of urban space for trans-individuals. Policy-makers must recognize the damages that such bi-gendered systems can make to trans-individuals and affect their journeys to fully realize their potential as individuals and social actors.

- **Breaking Normative Boundaries**

  Kiran Bhairannavar suggested that for cities to be inclusive, interventions should be made based on the recognition of variances in human expressions. He believes that breaking of normative boundaries of sex-gender links that are associated with strong gender roles and compartments, actions and roles, breaking links of gender to the sexed bodies, are required in order to accept those fluidities, silences and dark corners, which have been foregone to become normative men and women. Moreover, cities and urban actors must recognize their power to break normative boundaries of subject formation and these need to be written and scripted through urban public spaces. Given that gender identities are created from certain types of traditions, there is a need to recognize that cities are the ones who break traditions and that is where these scripts need to be rewritten for a more inclusive urban policy through urban public spaces.

- **Multiple Public Spaces, Multiple Gender Identities and Multiple Narratives of Violence**

  Syeda Jenifa Zahan opined that as a policy perspective there is a need to recognize that there are multiple public spaces, multiple gender identities, and also there are multiple narratives of violence. Drawing on The Delhi Masterplan 2021 as an example, which only talks about roads, streets, and marketplaces as spaces of consumption, she argued for the need for a discourse on public space

within policy frameworks. She underscored that there are ample spaces in Delhi which can be developed into inclusive public spaces not only for young women but also for disabled, lower class, aged and for the children. So instead of focussing solely on public spaces, focus should be given on how women use and dwell in public spaces, to find answers to how these spaces can be mixed and made inclusive for women with different needs.

- **Strict Regulation, Zero- tolerance and Target Hardening Policy**

  Aparajita De realized the need to tackle both petty and serious crimes so that they act as a deterrent to women's fear of violence in public spaces. She also suggested measures like the need for pre-paid auto stands/booths, prominent display of auto driver's identity and registration plates inside the auto, rigorous implementation of installation of GPS for autos. For buses and bus stands she recommended the installation of CCTV cameras inside buses both at exists and entry points, driver's sitting area to be separate and made inaccessible to other passengers, driver and bus conductor to be trained for emergency situations, frequency of buses to be increased in peak hours. She also voiced the need for an increase in ladies special buses, change in ticketing systems – either swipe cards or special ladies tickets and more importantly sensitizing of police. She also suggested the need for increased street lighting and CCTV cameras to monitor bus stops as strict measures of regulation and target hardening policies to make women in transit to feel secure and for cities to be more inclusive of young women.

- **Integration of Urban and Regional Planning**

  Kanchan Gandhi suggested, the creation of job opportunities in the villages, water management and other strategies to address rural urban distress migration, education and health improvements in villages, and active measures to discourage migration towards the cities (to tackle problems of homelessness) as some of the measures to integrate urban and regional planning to bring about safer and inclusive public spaces.

The Way Forward

In recent years there have been considerable policy discussions and interventions on safe and inclusive public spaces in India which has led to more visibilisation of women and other vulnerable gender groups in these spaces. However, these mainstream policy debates tend to focus more on institutional public spaces, often neglecting everyday experiences and social narratives of fear and violence. Moreover, these public policies tend to consider women as a homogeneous category often leaving out the nuanced categories of single women, young women and the elderly women. Thus, the full potential of urban governance and policy frameworks with a more nuanced understanding of gendered subjectivities and their use of and access to safe and inclusive public spaces is yet to be achieved. Moreover, promoting women's voices in policy decisions will better inform gender based strategies through data and experience.

The panel explored and emphasized not just access or safety but the experience of potential threat of violence and its normalisation in public spaces that continue to act as a major deterrent to safe and inclusive public spaces. The panel also argued for a more diverse and heterogeneous category of gender having specific sets of experiences and problems when looking at access to public spaces. In doing so, it reflected on the differentiated idea of violence, particularly the potential or anxiety around the possibility of violence and the challenge it poses for policy and its implementation.

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Speakers at the Forum

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Kiran Bhairannavar, University of Delhi

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