

# Safe in the City? Negotiating safety, public space and the male gaze in Kolkata, India

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## ABSTRACT

Negotiating public spaces to reach their destinations is an everyday struggle for women in India. Indian cities have witnessed a considerable increase in crimes against women, compelling women to avoid or minimize their use of public spaces. This study aims to understand how people and their actions in public spaces shape perceptions of safety amongst women, and how women negotiate public spaces to avoid such incidents of harassment. This study comprising of focus group discussions and in-depth interviews was carried out in Kolkata, India. Visual surveys were conducted to spatially contextualize the narratives from the participants. The data were thereafter transcribed, coded, and analyzed. The study finds that the following elements negatively impact women's perceptions of safety: 'male gaze'; negative personality traits, appearances, and behavior of men; presence of middle-aged men and strangers; cultural differences; and places that reported repeated occurrences of harassment. Lively spaces and busy roads on the other hand where daily commuters, hawkers, shopkeepers are engaged in purposeful activities are perceived as safe by women. Women make constant efforts to negotiate unsafe conditions in public spaces through avoidance, protection, and prevention. Most women tend to internalize the process of negotiation than to reclaim their rights to public spaces. Younger women, however, tend to step forward and confront their harassers. The findings of this study can help planners and policy makers co-create safer public spaces for women and facilitate their right to the city.

## 1. Introduction

*"Public spaces are all places publicly owned or of public use, accessible and enjoyable by all for free".*

(UN-Habitat, 2015, p. 6)

Public spaces are important for human connections and public activities. They are indicators of vitality and inclusiveness of a city. They are places to socialize, celebrate, recreate, and work. Carr et al. (1992, p. 50) defined public spaces as "open, publicly accessible places where people go for group or individual activities". Scholars from urban design and planning find public space is where "social interaction and the daily experience of urban life take place" and is "space that is not controlled by private individuals or organizations, and is hence open to general public" (Madanipour, 1996, p. 144). Public spaces play a central role in cities and have been the center of discussion amongst scholars (Carr

et al., 1992; Di Masso, 2015; Loukaitou-Sideris & Ehrenfeucht, 2009; Mehta, 2014). Sustainable development goal 11.7 mandates that by 2030 we need to "provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities" (UN DESA, 2015, p. 26).

However, ever-growing concerns about the safety of women in public spaces are causing hindrances in achieving such targets. In India, a woman faces harassment every 51 min in a public space (Bhattacharyya, 2016). According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), incidences of crime against women was 0.406 million in 2019, a 19.7% increase since 2014 (NCRB, 2016; NCRB, 2019). Incidents of harassment and fear of crime impede women's access to public spaces and in turn their 'right to the city' leading to a feeling of alienation (Beebejaun, 2017; Bhattacharyya, 2016; Harvey, 2012; Koskela, 1997; Mahadevia, Mishra, et al., 2016; Mehta, 2014). Though there is a rich

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literature on the right to the city, not many focus on how rights are gendered (Beebeejaun, 2017; Roberts & de Madariaga, 2016). Emerging literature note local contestations for access to public spaces as struggles for the right to the city (Vanka, 2014). The right to the city is a larger concept within which the right to use public space is fostered (Peake, 2020; Purcell, 2014). The concepts of the right to the city and locational experience in public spaces are integrated. The struggle for rights plays out in a spatial context (Beebeejaun, 2017; Di Masso, 2015; Spain, 2002; Vacchelli & Kofman, 2018). Despite spatial implications, the gendered dimension of urban public spaces is seldom the focus of urban planning and is yet to be articulated and integrated into urban planning (Beebeejaun, 2017; Bosman et al., 2017; Damyanovic & Zibell, 2013; Peake, 2020). There is also a mismatch between what urban planners envision and what women experience as they access and use public spaces. Little attention is given to the same except in some European countries (Greed, 2015). As David Harvey narrates, 'right to the city' is a collective right and is "to claim some kind of shaping power over the processes of urbanization, over the ways in which our cities are made and remade, and to do so in a fundamental and radical way" (Harvey, 2012, p. 5).

To claim this 'shaping power', for women as for other marginal groups, access to public spaces and the ability to participate in the activities therein is important. Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht (2009) explain the extent to which one can access and participate without the consent of others determines over time the degree of publicness of the space. As Don Mitchell (2003, p. 35) argues, "it is when, to fulfill a pressing need, some group or another, takes space and through its actions makes it public". While Habermas (1989) states that the public sphere is a space where private persons gather to discuss issues that are of public concern, Fraser (1990) points out that the public sphere is a biased one and prevents equal participation based on race, gender, and class. Public space is fundamentally contested because of the social and political inequalities (Di Masso, 2015). It is only through "concerted social struggle, demanding the right to be seen, to be heard, and to directly influence the state and society" that women gained access to public spaces (Mitchell, 2003, p. 132).

Public spaces in India house diverse activities but contestations arise when access and use by certain groups are limited who are thence compelled to negotiate (Choudhury, 2017). Public spaces are dominated by the majoritarian norms where women need to have a purpose to tread the public spaces (Paul, 2011; Singh & Kumar, 2019). They are locations of intense contestations and negotiations and the constant struggle for women in India to access public spaces is demonstrated in their everyday lives (Vanka, 2014). Studies find, it is through everyday activities that the gendered nature of public spaces is experienced, and needs more attention and further explorations (Beebeejaun, 2017; Bosman et al., 2017; Chant, 2013; Chant & McIlwaine, 2016; Moghadam & Rafeian, 2019; Vacchelli & Kofman, 2018). It is within the concept of the right to the city and the right to use public space that this study explores through the lived experiences of women, how men and their actions, and spaces and their activities, shape women's perceptions of safety and influence access to and participation in public spaces in the context of Kolkata. This paper has five broad sections. The following section discusses the concept of gender and safety in public spaces and the city profile of Kolkata and its contestations. The next section discusses the methods and techniques of this study. The results section narrates the lived experiences of women, their contestations, negotiations, and perceptions. The following section discusses the findings of this study in light of the existing literature. The final section concludes the need for cities in the global south to explore everyday experiences and integrate gendered approaches in urban planning.

## 2. Gender and safety in public spaces

Studies narrate that one of the major factors that prompt crime against women is the mindset of men in a patriarchal and misogynist society, where women are believed to be men's property or sexual

objects for use by men (Bhattacharyya, 2016; Reddy & Acharya, 2017). Men who harass women on the streets conduct such behavior to alleviate boredom, 'have fun', and to create a sense of solidarity with other men. Many of them think their behavior is intended as compliments and not to 'hurt' anyone (Dhillon & Bakaya, 2014; Lord, 2009). Patriarchal ideology and discriminatory practices result in the exclusion of women from the public sphere affecting their right to the city (Desai et al., 2018; Fenster, 2005; Fraser, 1990; Habermas, 1989; Moghadam & Rafeian, 2019; Paul, 2011; Singh & Kumar, 2019). Various studies report that men motivated by sexual desires resort to constant gazing at women's bodies in public spaces. This 'gaze' can be penetrative and adversely impact women (Bolmont et al., 2014; Compton, 2016; Gervais et al., 2013; Hall et al., 2011; Macmillan et al., 2000). The right to the city is embedded in power relations. Through harassment, men maintain privileges of space over women and patriarchal beliefs of control over women's bodies (Ilahi, 2009; Yon & Nadimpalli, 2017). Besides, personality traits, appearances, and behaviors namely expressions, postures, and body language of the men influence women's perceptions of safety (Gardner, 1995; Zaikman & Marks, 2016). In the absence of individuating information, stereotypes are often applied while evaluating others. People with positive personality traits such as being attentive to people around and calm are perceived as more pleasing than people with negative personality traits such as untidy and aggressive (Biernat et al., 2003; Zaikman & Marks, 2016).

Spaces and people therein too shape perceptions of safety. Liveliness, crowdedness, presence of hawkers, street-facing shops, bus stops, coupled with well-lit well-maintained visible areas make women feel safer. Well maintained spaces impart a sense of order and are perceived as safe (Bhattacharyya, 2016; Garcia-Ramon et al., 2004; Jacobs, 1961; Landman, 2020; Mahadevia, Lathia, & Banerjee, 2016; Mehta, 2014; Reddy & Acharya, 2017; Tiwari, 2014). One of the studies by Unified Traffic and Transportation Infrastructure (Planning and Engineering) Centre (UTTIPEC) indicates that women are more susceptible to sexual harassment in crowded public spaces, and assaults such as rape in deserted public spaces (UTTIPEC, 2012). Male-dominated spaces such as cigarette shops, *paan* (betel leaf) shops, tea stalls, lottery shops, liquor shops, *dhabas* (small eateries) gambling joints, taxi stands, garages, truck parking, car parking, subways, alleys are perceived as unsafe. Women also fear being blamed for going out at night in these male-dominated spaces (Fairchild, 2007; Haque et al., 2019; Paul, 2011; Viswanath & Mehrotra, 2007). Presence of large groups of men and anti-social activities such as urinating in public spaces, gawking, passing rude comments increase the level of threat perceived by women (IHD, 2013; Phadke, 2007; UTTIPEC, 2012; Viswanath & Mehrotra, 2007). Studies report women feel safer in the presence of other women, college students, pedestrians going for work, middle-aged people, and families; whereas, they feel unsafe in the presence of unemployed young men, strangers, beggars, laborers, the poor, men using drugs and alcohol, and men engaged in gambling (Chhetri, 2015; Dhillon & Bakaya, 2014; IHD, 2013; Machielse, 2015; Madanipour, 2004; Mahadevia, Mishra, et al., 2016; Phadke et al., 2011; Viswanath & Mehrotra, 2007).

Cultural differences and expectations also play a major role in influencing women's experiences in public spaces (Gholamhosseini et al., 2018). Culture shapes the mindsets of people, and their behavior and interactions with others. Ignorance about cultural differences leads to stereotyping and decreases acceptability (Jaiswal, n.d.; Bardalai, 2019; Leitner, 2000; McDuie-Ra, 2012; Mukherjee & Dutta, 2017). As Fenster (2005) notes, the right to the city is fulfilled when the right to difference is also fulfilled and people of different cultures can share and use the same urban spaces. In Saudi Arabia, women's access to and use of sidewalks are shaped by gender norms, gendered regulations, and religious values, though young women challenge the gender norms through their presence, behavior, and dress (Almahmood et al., 2017). However, in European urban contexts, studies show several rich empirical evidence on gender planning; how through various processes, programs, projects, and interventions culture and gender-sensitive

public spaces are designed. They indicate a growing emphasis on urban planning and design strategies that integrate cultural dimensions, though the studies acknowledge that more context-sensitive practices are required (Duxbury, 2015; Leitner, 2000; Roberts & de Madariaga, 2016; Wood, 2009).

Studies report that the fear and risk of harassment compels women to defend their safety while accessing public spaces. This prompts behavioral changes preventing women to fully participate in social and economic opportunities. They continually engage in self-regulation, limit their mobility, avoid going to particular places, avoid wearing particular dresses, avoid going out alone at night, take family or friends along, and carry protective gadgets (Bhattacharyya, 2016; Chomiak, 2014; Dolan & Peasgood, 2007; Gopal & Shin, 2019; ISIWCD, 2017; Pain, 2001; Parikh, 2018; Phadke, 2007; Sur, 2014). Avoidance measures are often preferred over protective measures by women (Bhattacharyya, 2015; Wagner & Peters, 2014). Women in most cases resist responding to the harassments in fear of retaliation, though older women tend to challenge their harassers more often than younger girls (ISIWCD, 2017; Jagori, 2010; Viswanath & Mehrotra, 2007). However, some women resist fear and take risks by refusing not to go out alone at night for socialization or otherwise thereby asserting their confidence (Starkweather, 2007).

### 3. Kolkata: city of contested spaces

A study on public spaces of Kolkata reveals that in pre-colonial times, although the public spaces witnessed gender segregation, the concept of participation or contest was absent. In colonial Kolkata, the contestations were more in terms of exclusion of people who were not believed to be culturally and socially refined than in terms of space (Choudhury, 2017). For women, the public spaces in the neighborhoods or *paras* were not accessible. They were not allowed to participate in any activities held in public spaces (Sen & Sengupta, 2016; Sengupta, 2018). In pre-colonial times, women irrespective of class and caste had restrictions in the use of public places. Higher caste women were required to maintain '*purdah*' and lower caste women due to rules of untouchability were not allowed to access all public places. The independence struggle, social movements and reforms to empower lower castes, improved education facilities brought down many of the barriers for Bengali women to gain access to public space and public life. Over time communal festivals such as the *Durga Pujo* have provided the canvas for women to renegotiate their access to public space (De Matteis, 2018).

In Kolkata today, contested spaces such as the wholesale market of *Burrabazar*, parks, *paan* shops, tea stalls, that are populated mostly by men restrict the participation of women, while certain cultural and literary gathering spaces such as *Nandan*, *Dakshinapan* are relatively less contested but provide access to more educated and middle-class women (Choudhury, 2017; Paul, 2011). The tea stalls, strategically located to maximize participation, are the nodal points for discussions and debates by the young and the old alike, play a vital role in social, economic, and political networking, and appear as male-dominated (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2012; Paul, 2011). The public spaces of Kolkata are highly contested preventing women to participate fully (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2012; Bhattacharyya, 2016; Choudhury, 2017; Roy, 2003). Women in Kolkata resort to mostly avoidance and protective strategies and rarely gather the courage to speak up. Restricted access of women to public spaces in Kolkata is an expression of socially produced fear that is shaped by the way spaces are perceived (Paul, 2011; Sen & Sengupta, 2016).

Most of the streets particularly in the business and commercial precincts of Kolkata have high footfall and are active throughout the day. Every day almost 65% of the trips in Kolkata are undertaken by foot (IDFC & Superior Global, 2008). The congested streets of Kolkata are also home to nearly 70,000 homeless people, about 78% of whom are male and 80% of whom work in the informal sector (Roy & Siddique, 2018). Men are more present in public spaces throughout the day, moving, sitting, chatting, waiting; whereas women are perceived to be

only moving, that too restricted by purpose and time of the day (Fairchild, 2007; Paul, 2011).

West Bengal is one of the three states with the highest rates of crime against women according to NCRB (2016) report. Delhi Human Development Report (2013) indicates that in most major cities of India including Kolkata, crime rates against women increased considerably from 2004-06 to 2010-12. During the period 2008-12, south Kolkata reported higher incidents of rape, and central, north, and east Kolkata reported higher incidents of molestation (Dey & Modak, 2015). In light of the existing literature that discusses how spaces and people influence safety, this study explores how people and their attributes and activities in public spaces shape perceptions of safety amongst women, and how women negotiate such spaces. This study is limited to the public streets of Kolkata as current literature indicates that women in India feel most unsafe on the streets and in public transport.

### 4. Methods and techniques

For this study, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and visual surveys were conducted in the city of Kolkata in two rounds – September 2017 and January 2018. In both rounds, data were collected in two stages. First, as part of the exploratory qualitative approach, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted. Second, visual surveys noting human behavior and activities about women's safety were conducted at selected locations. The data for this study were collected by the first author under the supervision of the second author.

#### 4.1. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions

Twenty-six in-depth interviews and two focus group discussions were conducted. During the in-depth interviews, the participants narrated their personal experiences and views that enabled an in-depth understanding of the issues related to how spaces, people, and their activities shaped their perceptions of safety in public spaces. During the focus group discussions, the participants interacted amongst themselves and built their discussions on peer feedback that allowed an understanding of the broad issues related to safety. The in-depth interviews were conducted until data saturation was reached. Although current literature acknowledges that data saturation is the chief method for determining the sample size in qualitative studies, guidelines for the same are rarely there (Bowen, 2008; Hennink et al., 2017; Marshall et al., 2013). Moser and Korstjens (2018) state data saturation differs per study and suggest tentatively 15–20 interviews or three-to-four focus group discussions for descriptive studies. Marshall et al. (2013) recommend 20 to 30 interviews for achieving data saturation. In a study by Guest et al. (2006), saturation was reached at 12 interviews. Hennink et al. (2017) in their study on assessing saturation find that identification of the broad issues was reached at nine interviews and understanding of the finer issues was reached between 16 and 24 interviews. Following Hennink et al. (2017), data saturation in this study was influenced by the purpose of the study, characteristics of the study population, and data quality that focused on thick descriptions. Data saturation in this study was reached at 26 in-depth interviews and two focus group discussions which is consistent with the recommendations of the current literature. Semi-structured discussion and interview guides based on the research objectives were used. The topics covered various attributes of usage of public spaces, characteristics of the public spaces, behavior of people and activities therein, and how these elements shaped women's perceptions of safety. The topics also covered how women negotiated public spaces. Data on verbal, non-verbal, and physical harassment were collected through interviews and discussions, similar to the work of Mohamed and Stanek (2020). Though the topics for interviews and discussions were the same, the questions were formulated differently. The questions for focus group discussions were designed to broadly understand the issues and get group justifications, whereas, the questions for in-depth interviews were designed to

understand the individual in-depth issues in terms of lived experiences and the meanings derived by them. The opening questions were similar; interviews had more probing questions. The interviews were conducted in person either at their residences or workplaces, and the discussions were conducted at one of the participants' residences. One focus group discussion had four participants from north Kolkata, and the other five participants from south Kolkata. Interviews and discussions were conducted in the participants' native language by the principal investigator (PI) for about 60–90 min. Participation in the study was voluntary.

#### 4.2. Participant recruitment and profile

Participants for this study were selected based on their gender, age, residential location, and use of public spaces. The study was limited to women between 18 and 45 years of age as this group is most susceptible to crime (NCRB, 2016). Participants were selected based on their places of residence from both north and south Kolkata as most residential areas are concentrated in the northern and southern parts of Kolkata. Participants were also selected from different professions as that would influence their use of public spaces both in terms of location and time, and therefore their experiences. Participants included students and service persons who used public spaces regularly to obtain exhaustive experiences and views. Their use of public spaces was spread across the north, central, south, and east Kolkata. For this study, participants need not experience harassment on the streets, although all of them did. Purposive sampling was used for this study whereby the participants were selected based on the study purpose (Moser & Korstjens, 2018; Saunders & Townsend, 2018). Initially, few participants were recruited through direct acquaintances, and thereafter remaining participants were recruited using the snowball technique. Participants were recruited up to the point data started to repeat itself, that is data saturation was reached (Hennink et al., 2017). A total of 35 women were recruited. The profile of 26 in-depth interview participants is shown in Table 1. The nine focus group discussion participants were between 24 and 35 years of age and comprised of students, teachers, and engineers.

**Table 1**  
Profile of in-depth interview participants.

Sl. no.	Age (in years)	Occupation	Place of residence in Kolkata
1	21	Student	North
2	40	Teacher	South
3	26	Real estate; Part-time student	North
4	20	Student	North
5	21	Student	North
6	36	Engineer	South
7	45	Office administrator	South
8	37	Office administrator	South
9	30	Service personnel	South
10	21	Student	South
11	45	Doctor	South
12	45	Engineer-Draftsperson	South
13	31	Engineer	South
14	22	Student	North
15	26	Office administrator	South
16	36	Teacher	South
17	31	Saleswoman	South
18	27	Engineer-Draftsperson	South
19	28	Nurse	South
20	18	Student	South
21	45	Teacher	South
22	32	Saleswoman	North
23	25	Interior designer	North
24	29	Manager	North
25	23	Student	North
26	19	Student	North

#### 4.3. Visual surveys

Visual surveys involve understanding human behavior and activities through observation and recording of the visual information (Sanoff, 1991). Previous research applying visual surveys have examined the dimensions for activity mapping in public spaces (Mahadevia & Lathia, 2019; Mahadevia, Mishra, et al., 2016; Praliya & Garg, 2019). As part of this project, six visual surveys were conducted at *Park Street*, *Camac Street*, *Park Circus*, *Gariahat*, *Southern Avenue*, and *Deodar Street* (see Fig. 1) as these places were often referred to by the participants during in-depth interviews and discussions. In line with the current literature, these visual surveys focused on capturing the spatial context of the streets, types of people, and the activities therein. Data collection techniques are similar to those adopted by Bharucha and Khatri (2018), Grover, (2017), and Mahadevia and Lathia (2019). The surveys were conducted between 11 am–5 pm as activities are most varied during this period.

#### 4.4. Data management and analysis

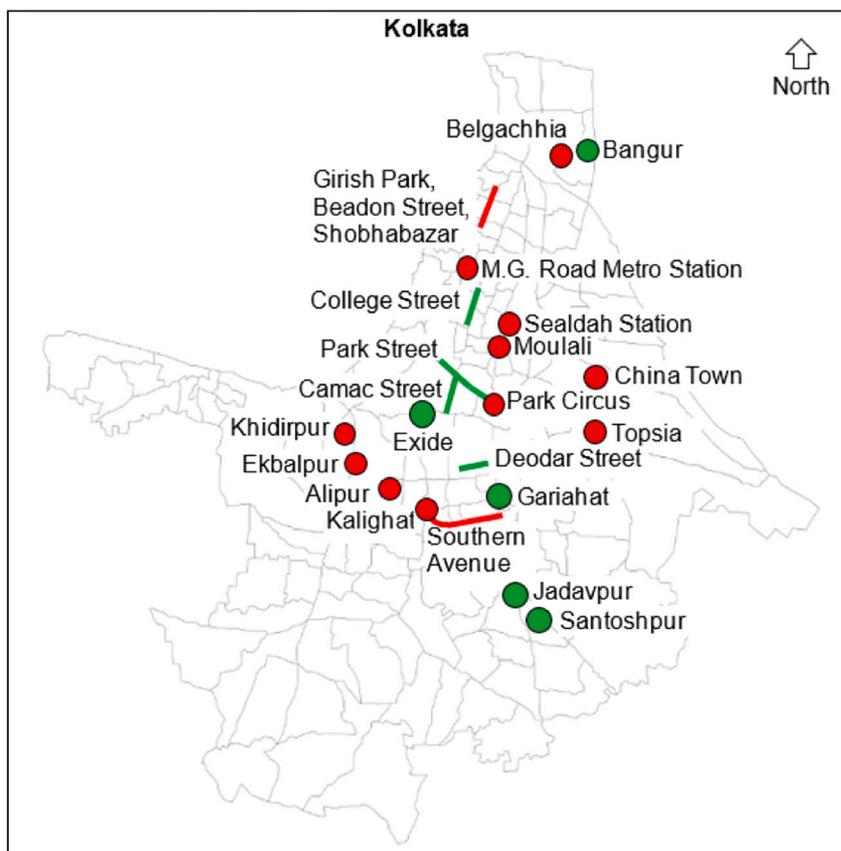
Data collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were translated and identifying features were taken out. After preparing the verbatim transcripts, data analysis was done involving two cycles of coding following (Masked for review) and Saldana (2015). In the first cycle, we looked at the text data closely to understand the identifying patterns – similarities, causations, etc., and coded the data based on the patterns using Atlas.ti. We remained close to the text data while identifying the patterns as descriptive analysis attempts to remain close to the original data (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). In the second cycle, we categorized and grouped the codes into families based on the research questions and the shared notions (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Each code and code family as listed in Table 2, was named based on the data that is represented and elaborated in the results section. Thereafter, as studies suggest, the data was triangulated based on interviews, discussions, and visual surveys to ensure data validity (Carter et al., 2014; Sargeant, 2012; Suter, 2012). The data collected through various sources - interviews, discussions, and visual surveys were found to be convergent and supported the findings of the study. The data collected from the 35 individuals aided in a comprehensive understanding of the issues being studied and suggested strong patterns specific to the context of Kolkata.

#### 4.5. Ethical consideration

Approval from the Institutional Ethics Committee, \*\*\*\*\* was obtained before the commencement of data collection. IEC number for the research project is IEC: 478/2017. Participant Information Sheet and a copy of signed Informed Consent were given to each participant before the conduct of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Data is kept safely and securely with the PI and is accessible only to PIs. All quotations mentioned in this paper are anonymized.

### 5. Results

The lived experiences provide insights into everyday contestations and negotiations, as well as participants' perceptions of safety in public spaces in the context of the streets of Kolkata. The findings of this paper indicate that personality traits, appearances, and behaviors of men, as well as the spatial characteristics of streets and the activities therein, shape women's perceptions of safety. While the presence of hawkers, shopkeepers, young men, daily commuters, and families are perceived as safe, that of strangers, middle-aged men, and laborers are perceived as unsafe. In the following sections, we discuss how appearances of men influence perceived safety, how the activities of men impart a sense of fear, how the spaces are rendered unsafe due to the types of people inhabiting the same, and finally, ways in which women negotiate unsafe



**Legend**



**Places and streets perceived as safe:**

- Presence of*
- Men with positive personality traits*
- Men engaged in activities*
- Hawkers, shopkeepers, young men, daily commuters, families*
- Known, familiar, or similar people*
- Slums and squatters*
- Gender diversity*
- Lively places*



**Places and streets perceived as unsafe:**

- Presence of*
- Men with unusual expressions, postures, body language*
- Men under the influence of alcohol*
- Men bathing or urinating openly*
- Men working in red-light areas*
- Middle-aged men, laborers, strangers*
- Male gaze*
- Cultural differences*
- Repeated occurrences of incidences*
- Prior experiences of harassment*
- Absence of people*
- Unpredictability of others' actions*

**Fig. 1.** Map of Kolkata showing the places and streets referred to by the participants as safe or unsafe.

Source: Authors.

**Table 2**

Code families and respective codes.

Code families	People	Characteristic of people	Negotiating	Spaces	Activities
Codes	Beggars	Appearance	Alertness	Crowdedness	Appropriateness
	Daily commuters	Body language	Alternate travel routes	Liveliness	Diversity
	Families	Cultural differences	Avoidance	Locality	Predictability
	Hawkers	Dress	Calming mind	Past experiences	
	Laborers	Engagement with work	Change in lifestyle	Repeated occurrences	
	Middle-aged	Familiarity	Disregard		
	Shopkeepers	Intention	Judge intentions		
	Strangers	Outlook	Positive attitude		
	Women	Personality	Protection		
	Young	Physical condition	Speak up		
		Posture			
		Similarity			

public spaces of Kolkata every day.

### 5.1. (Un)safe men: appearances

In the absence of individuating information, women feel safer in the presence of men with positive personality traits as they seem more calm and approachable. Participants reported feeling safer when men appeared less aggressive and less frightening. Appearances were also a trigger to decide whether or not to seek help.

*If people do not appear to be scary you feel safer. If I am traveling and all the people around are male, may or may not feel unsafe, depends on their attitude, their body language, their looks.*

(Teacher, 40 years, from north Kolkata)

Women apply stereotypes to evaluate strangers (Biernat et al., 2003). Participants residing in Belgachhia located in north Kolkata as shown in Fig. 1, attributed negative characteristics to men who appeared different from them or unpleasant. Their presence caused a sense of fear amongst them.

*I usually do not go out here in Belgachhia, if you walk on the other side of the street, some small shacks are there, I avoid that area. I don't think the people sitting there are good, their looks are very bad.*

(Student, 19 years, from south Kolkata)

Expressions, postures, and body language when inappropriate trigger in women a deep sense of fear that intensifies at night (Macmillan et al., 2000). Angular postures communicate threat and anger (Coulson, 2004). One of the younger participants observed that despite her familiarity with the street because of her daily commute, she was scared at the sight of a man standing with his head slanted at an unusual angle, and decided to choose another route to reach her home.

*There is a shortcut from the metro station...that day, around 7/7:30 pm, a person was standing there with an awkward angle of the head, he was just standing, and look at our instinct, we just ran back. We preferred 15 min of the extra journey.*

(Engineer, 25 years, from north Kolkata)

Women perceive different postures as an attempt by men to make personal contacts (Fitzgerald et al., 1997). Postures reflect one's emotions, intentions, and possible future action (Azarian et al., 2016; Coulson, 2004). Participants expressed fear when appearances were different from the usual. They felt extremely unsafe when in the proximity of men who were under the influence of alcohol or were not fully dressed.

*Sometimes when it gets late, rickshawala, sabziwala, some of them will be drunk. Their body language, the way they look, you can feel something.*

(Draftsperson, 27 years, from south Kolkata)

As another participant who often travels alone recalls,

*The train reached Kolkata at 10 pm. It was taking longer to get the taxi, body languages of the taxi drivers were not good, they were not willing to go, somehow I managed to get one, felt tensed during that time, felt like the driver is purposely causing the delay, so while in the taxi, the entire journey I kept talking (on the phone) to one of my friends to feel safe.*

(Teacher, 40 years, from north Kolkata)

'Male gaze' directed at women's bodies and objectifying them for sexual pleasures, activate shame, fright, and anxiety in the minds of women, so much so that they not only become more cautious on the streets, but are also forced to limit their use of public spaces, or even alter their travel routes. In certain localities such as Belgachhia, women reported that they cannot even stand or wait on the streets for 5 min

without being gazed at. While few participants mentioned that well-dressed people make them feel safer, they also acknowledged that appearances could be deceptive.

*If you go down here (Belgachhia) and stand downstairs, it will be difficult for you to stand even for 5 min. Nobody will say anything but will express their intentions through their eyes, you would understand what they are thinking (Student, 21 years, from north Kolkata) (...) A tall well-dressed, decent-looking man, how can you possibly guess that he may do something? He came, hit me hard, purposely, and went off.*

(Student, 21 years, from north Kolkata)

Despite the best efforts by women to assess the intentions of men in their proximity in public spaces based on their appearances, looks, expressions, postures, and body language, they had to face sexual harassment regularly. The participants irrespective of their age, occupation, and the extent and degree of their use of public spaces shared similar concerns. During the focus group discussions as well the participants echoed similar experiences.

### 5.2. (Un)safe men: activities

Women feel safer in public spaces that house diverse groups of people and a variety of activities bringing liveliness to the spaces as lively spaces have fewer chances of crimes against women. Places such as Bangur, Gariahat, Jadavpur, Exide, Park Street, as shown in Fig. 1, were perceived as safe because of the presence of people, men and women of different ages and various backgrounds, as well as shops and hawkers, ensuring activities throughout the day. Participants felt safer because the presence of people implied increased chances of receiving help. As a young participant narrates,

*Safest is Exide, very safe. Where to go – Exide, where to eat – Exide, where to loiter – Exide, everything Exide. In Ruby area, Gariahat is the safest. These are lively places. In Gariahat people play chess on the streets, sell golgappas (savory snack), autos move around, connectivity is high. There is not a single moment I feel scared. Agree there are encroachments, muri (puffed rice) shops, roll shops, meal shops, people having dinner, but very lively, something or the other is going on.*

(Student, 22 years, from north Kolkata)

Participants perceived men engaged in activities – be it going to work, college, recreation, selling goods, reading newspapers, or talking to friends over a cup of tea – to be exceedingly safe as they did not infringe upon their personal spaces, gaze, or attempt to touch. As one participant points out in Hindi "Khali dimak shaitan ka ghar" (An idle mind is the devil's workshop).

*If one is busy with their work, no problem. But people not engaged in any work loitering aimlessly can be a problem. Those who are busy do not have the time to look around. They remain engrossed with their work-related thoughts only.*

(Teacher, 36 years, from north Kolkata)

However, participants' views and experiences highlight that no place is perceived to be safe at all times. Safety, they felt, can never be guaranteed as most times people and related activities in a given space change. Anything can go wrong for anyone, anytime, anywhere, they felt.

*There is no particular safe or unsafe area, it depends on the time, on the activities people are doing. Places that once made me feel safe, another day it can make me feel unsafe. We cannot say that this particular street is always safe. Because people don't remain the same.*

(Student, 20 years, from north Kolkata)

At times they felt unsafe even in their neighborhoods which otherwise are considered as safe by most participants. As one of the older participants residing in Santoshpur shown in Fig. 1 for a long time narrates,

*I was walking along the pond, one person was coming on a bicycle, he came so close that I thought of jumping into the pond. So how can I say that it happens in Sealdah and not in Santoshpur? Maybe the frequency there is more so everyone feels it, but it is not that it is not happening here.*

(Teacher, 35 years, from South Kolkata)

In some instances, participants felt unsafe because of the absence of people, while in other instances they felt unsafe because of the presence of certain types of people. Middle-aged men participants narrated, did not respect boundaries, and had the obsession to 'touch'. The participants could feel their sense of desperation – the desperation to touch, the desperation to harass. Regular occurrences of men bathing and urinating openly in public spaces caused participants great discomfort and a sense of unsafety. Similar discomforts were felt while passing by theatres screening adult movies that attracted people who often abused themselves in public. On the other hand, participants felt safe in the presence of the poor living in slums and squatters as they led an open life, remained busy with their works, and were neither interfering nor judgmental.

Participants felt unpredictability of others' actions is another factor that made women feel unsafe, as they never knew for sure what the other person is thinking, and when things may go wrong. One of the participants who is in pharmaceutical sales and is required to visit doctors' clinic and residences during evening hours narrates,

*I always try to take my manager along with me when I go to doctors' residences. The residence is not mine, it is his, he knows everything in his residence, which door to close if you do not want others to hear, which window to close if you do not want others to see, which door will allow her to come in easily but others will not get to know; in such places always take someone with you because that area belongs to him. Even if he is a renowned cardiologist, I will feel scared if nobody else is in the house. Because after all, he is a man, he can feel otherwise anytime, he can pull me by my hand, he can do anything.*

(Saleswoman, 31 years, from south Kolkata)

Participants also noted that men and even elderly women tend to judge, gaze, and abuse when women do things differently from societal norms such as wearing shorts or going out at night. Such behaviors not only made the participants feel unsafe but also disrespected preventing them from exercising their rights. Participants described the stark inequality that exists in public spaces. They recalled when men loiter at night or wear shorts – no one judges, no one gazes, no one abuses. Even one of the focus group discussions revealed that the younger participants did not govern their actions by the societal norms as much as the older participants did. Older participants being wary of societal norms, tend to be more adjusting to avoid unpleasant incidents.

### 5.3. (Un)safe spaces

Over time, places get characterized as unsafe because of the repeated occurrences of incidents. As people become aware of such incidents, they associate negative meanings with these places. As studies show, prior experiences shape women's perceptions of safety and allow them to make informed choices. Places such as Belgachhia, Girish Park, Moulali, China Town, Park Circus, Topsia, Khidirpur, Ekbalpur, Alipur, highlighted in Fig. 1, created a sense of fear amongst the participants even when they were familiar with these places because of their daily commute for work, tuition, or other purposes. Almost all the participants who had been to these places faced harassment.

Girish Park area is feared for its proximity to the largest red-light area

in India. Men and women working for the red-light area flood the streets of Girish Park-Shobhabazar-Beadon Street area eyeing for girls. Participants felt more unsafe in their presence than in the presence of sex workers. Another participant who used to work in an NGO and had to visit Khidirpur red-light area reiterated how terrified she used to be because of the men and not because of the sex workers. Few young participants expressed, sex workers tend to protect other women, particularly in the Kalighat Bridge area.

*When I used to work in an NGO Destiny Foundation, I used to go to Khidirpur red-light area to teach them (children), I had to walk there, felt very unsafe not from the women but the men there, girls treated me with respect, they were very nice.*

(Student, 23 years, from north Kolkata)

Another factor that made participants feel unsafe in public spaces is cultural differences. Lack of awareness about others' values and ethos, resulted in decreased acceptability. As one participant whose hometown is in the north-east narrated that young women from the north-eastern states of India faced harassment more often than the others. The distinctive Mongoloid physical appearance of the people from the north-east is one of the prime reasons for being stereotyped, discriminated against, and harassed (Jaiswal, n.d.; McDuie-Ra, 2012). She recalled, such incidents caused fear, stress, and insecurity; preventing her from being confident which in turn prompted further harassment. Several studies endorse the fears and perceptions she shared (Bardalai, 2019; Mukherjee & Dutta, 2017).

Participants faced harassment from strangers, people from other neighborhoods, mostly in less crowded areas, and during the night. Even more than a decade later, a participant recalls,

*When I used to go for tuition, most of the time father used to drop me and pick me up, but sometimes I had to walk alone, a few times people riding bicycles touched and went off. There was a group of people who used to do these. It was not that the street was empty, nor it was too late at night, it was about 7:30–8:30 pm in a known neighborhood but unknown people used to come and roam around in cycles or bikes, unknown people used to do such things, not known people.*

(Teacher, 40 years, from south Kolkata)

There were few occasions though when participants received help from strangers and that made them feel safer.

There were, however, mixed perceptions about the presence of unknown women in public spaces. Few participants felt safer in the presence of other women as they gave them a sense of comfort and safety particularly at night and in unfamiliar localities. Groups of women sitting near tea-stalls as seen in Fig. 2 made participants feel safer. The visual surveys of the streets in residential, retail, and institutional areas conducted as part of this study revealed that women not only socialized at the tea stalls, they owned and ran them as well, and these made participants feel very safe. Besides, participants felt women tend to stand up for others more often than men.

Women feel safer in the presence of the people known to them, familiar to them, or similar to them – culturally, demographically, or otherwise (Mahadevia, Lathia, & Banerjee, 2016). Participants preferred to be around familiar people as they then knew who to approach at times of need.

*In residential areas, there are no problems, because people are staying there for a long time, they know others living there, no issues in walking even at 11 pm or midnight. Every day, people sit there, talk, we know their nature, their thoughts.*

(Works in real estate, also part-time student, 26 years, from north Kolkata)

The focus group participants too narrated how familiar places



**Fig. 2.** A group of women sitting in front of Vardaan Market in Camac Street, Kolkata.  
Source: Authors.

imparted a sense of safety amongst them. As one of the participants residing in *Santoshpur* said,

*When I cross Sukanta Setu, I get a sense of relief that it's a place known to me. This is a comfort zone; it is a feeling. Familiarity is not because of people, but because of the environment.*

(Student, 28 years, from south Kolkata)

Even the sight of unknown families and people similar to them, made them feel safe as they could relate to them better and were hence deemed as less unpredictable. Most student participants felt overwhelmingly safe in *College Street* shown in [Fig. 1](#), because it has several institutions, the world's largest second-hand book market, and is bustling with people, particularly students, at all times. They strongly felt chances of getting help are higher when people can relate to each other.

#### 5.4. Negotiating safety

Fear and incidents of sexual harassment on the streets influence the behavior and everyday life of women. Most if not all participants strongly felt that they needed to take charge of their safety to avoid unsafe situations. Self-surveillance by time and space avoidance, and preventive and protective measures were the only ways to minimize risks they felt.

Women take various preventive measures. Participants preferred being accompanied by family members and friends while using the streets. That gave them a strong sense of security even though it did not necessarily prevent harassment. Participants also chose to wear only certain types of clothes, ones that are not too tight, not too revealing, cover most parts of the body, preferably full-sleeve, preferably *salwar-kameez* (an outfit for women), to avoid undue attention or situations as they felt our society has a long way to go in terms of freedom of expression for women. In certain areas in south Kolkata, participants were compelled to even cover their heads to avoid being gazed at.

*It is not that I do not dare to wear, I can wear, but they give such dirty looks that you will not feel like wearing them next time you go there...their looks will force you to change your dressing sense. Saturdays we do not have dress codes, we used to wear jeans, but later I stopped wearing jeans. The way they look I did not feel like wearing jeans.*

(Engineer, 31 years, from south Kolkata)

Avoidance is one of the key behavioral changes that women assume. Participants avoided going out alone, avoided staying out late at night,

avoided 'unsafe' streets, avoided unknown places even if it meant limiting access to educational and other opportunities. One of the participants, a young college student, recounted the experience of and the caution by her friend who faced groping while returning from tuition in *Girish Park* in the evening.

*She says safety is in our hands and it is better not to stay out late at night. Nowadays, whenever she goes out she goes with her friends, a sense of fear is certainly there, she never goes alone, she tells us also not to come walking along that street as it is not safe and better to avoid tuitions that continue till night so that whatever has happened to her doesn't happen to anyone else.*

(Student, 21 years, from north Kolkata)

Participants avoided sitting on the passenger seat to evade the protruding arms of male co-passengers and preferred sitting next to the autorickshaw drivers while traveling in shared autos. They avoided crowded buses and metros, and waited for less crowded ones to avoid harassment. This implies restricted mobility, loss of productive time, and reduced access to opportunities for women.

Women resort to protective measures as well. Most participants equipped themselves with protective measures such as pepper spray, pens, bags, and other items to negotiate public spaces. As one of the focus group discussion participants narrates and others agree,

*People tell when a crowd is there, no one is in danger. But actually, Sealdah station is just the opposite. People walk past just to touch you. So I put my elbow like this (demonstrates) and walk. I always carry a pen with me. We carry pepper spray because we cannot take down two people if they attack, but we can stop them to some extent.*

(Engineer, 25 years, from north Kolkata)

Participants expressed they constantly remained alert of the surroundings they were in, particularly in unknown areas and during odd hours when the density of people and activities were less.

*Our safety is in our own hands. Before you enter a street, check the stretch to be covered, whether it is too empty, lights are working, people are there, scan to see how they are looking at you.*

(Office Administrator, 37 years, from south Kolkata)

However, few younger participants believed that their faith in God helped them build a positive mindset, and allowed them to negotiate public spaces with confidence. As a participant narrates,

*People have asked me to carry pepper spray but I don't do it. I would rather pray that I have a safe day and things will be fine and I will reach back home and I will see my parents. I would rather go with a positive mindset than have a pepper spray in my bag and doubt every single person I see.*

(Office Administrator, 26 years, from south Kolkata)

Another young participant who believed in overcoming fear, felt techniques such as writing diaries, yoga, meditation, sports, helped her feel stronger and enabled her to handle stressful situations.

Women are hesitant to protest or respond in fear of harmful retaliation from harassers as the literature suggests. Even during the focus group discussions, participants shared mixed perceptions about negotiating safety. However, they were all wary about the repercussions and were in general hesitant to protest or respond in fear of harmful retaliation.

*Where is the guarantee that he will not do something tomorrow or he will not bring a few more people along with him, then what can I do? Before I say anything, I always think what will happen later, what if he targets me later, what if the next day he attacks me with acid?*

(Teacher, 35 years, from South Kolkata)

Fear of harassment influenced their travel behavior and access to opportunities. A participant described how her spouse decided to work from home so that he could accompany their daughter to school every day. Their decision, she expressed, was out of immense fear of incidents where infants and children were also raped, even murdered. Another participant even quit her job because of the harassment she faced.

*Empty streets are not safe, my friend was coming back from duty, the guards were not there, a boy harassed her very much, she came back to the hostel, later she resigned (from the job) because that boy was from that locality, she was kind of forced to resign. After seeing her experience, I have developed a fear of empty streets, she has gone through a lot of mental stress. She was doing well in the hospital, in her job.*

(Nurse, 28 years, from south Kolkata)

However, some of the young participants, who use public spaces extensively, felt very strongly about speaking up against abuse and expressed the need for women to claim their right to public spaces, their right to the city – a finding that resonates in other global south countries (Almahmood et al., 2017).

*We should speak up more often. Yes, we should but we all think only about ourselves, we do not have the urge to do something that will help society, we always step back so that we don't fall into any trouble. We start thinking of consequences before we even do anything, we assume things that may not necessarily be true. We do not want to get involved in any case as we have less faith in the law.*

(Interior Designer, 23 years, from north Kolkata)

## 6. Discussion

The streets of Kolkata have a strong and distinct character. They are lively with diverse people and countless activities. They are places for discussions, debates, socialization, and relaxation; yet, they are male-dominated and highly contested. They compel women to access the streets with great caution, remain vigilant, and 'plan' to protect themselves from the 'gaze' and other forms of verbal and physical harassment.

Narratives of the participants indicate that women in public spaces instinctively evaluate the intentions of men in their proximity based on their personality traits and appearances to avoid any risk of sexual harassment. Such evaluations help women evaluate the intent of men

and negotiate accordingly. 'Male gaze' that is largely the fallout of a patriarchal society, has negative impacts on women, making spaces extremely contested. It prohibits participation and the right to public spaces. Women irrespective of their socio-cultural backgrounds, or spatial and temporal conditions feel unsafe because of the 'male gaze'. However, the absence of these conditions does not necessarily guarantee safety. We have found that the appearances of men largely prompt time and space avoidance by women. The results are in line with the literature that says women heavily base their evaluations of men on stereotypes in the absence of individuating information (Biernat et al., 2003; Zaikman & Marks, 2016). The results are consistent with the literature that states the presence of men with negative behavioral traits such as aggression, untidiness, angular postures, and 'gaze' that are highly prevalent in the public spaces of India, can trigger in women a deep sense of fear of imminent harassment (Chant & McIlwaine, 2016; Macmillan et al., 2000; Zaikman & Marks, 2016). Unlike the disciplines of geography and urban sociology, in the domain of city planning in India, there is scant literature that focuses on the nexus between appearance and perceptions of safety amongst women in public spaces. This study brings a new dimension to understand contestations and participation in the public spaces in India.

Streets of Kolkata as we know and as narratives and visual surveys capture are dotted with activities - vending, eating, shopping, sitting, chatting, playing, sleeping, reading, and many more. We have found that diverse activities make women feel safer. Women believe that hawkers, shopkeepers, and older adults play a vital role in generating activities and keeping the streets safe. This is consistent with the literature that associate the presence of hawkers, shops, liveliness, crowdedness with increased perceived safety (Bhattacharyya, 2016; Dhar, 2013; Garcia-Ramon et al., 2004; Jacobs, 1961; Reddy & Acharya, 2017; Tiwari, 2014) and reports that suggest promotion of hawking and provision of late-night eateries at major transport nodes improve safety in public spaces (Deore & Lathia, 2019; Jagori & UN Women, 2015). However, participants describe women feel unsafe around men who are idle and not occupied in purposeful activities. They objectify and gaze at women causing a deep sense of shame, fear, and anxiety. Women are alarmed by the unpredictability of people's actions, hence perceive strangers and men in drunken conditions as unsafe. The results are in line with the literature which finds, while familiarity and familial environment (Mahadevia, Lathia, & Banerjee, 2016; Viswanath & Mehrotra, 2007) impact perceptions of safety positively, antisocial activities do so negatively (Chhetri, 2015; Dhillon & Bakaya, 2014; IHD, 2013; Machielse, 2015; Phadke et al., 2011). A manifestation of violation of societal norms too decreases perceptions of safety (Mouratidis, 2019), and constricts their mobility (Chant & McIlwaine, 2016). Compared to previous studies (IHD, 2013; Viswanath & Mehrotra, 2007), our study reports a new finding that women perceive young men as safe and middle-aged as unsafe. Narratives reiterate that the young remain engaged with themselves, do not interfere, and are proactive and helpful. The middle-aged on the contrary are involved in touching and groping most if not all the time. They do not respect boundaries and have an obsession with 'touch'. Their mindsets and behavioral traits are reflected in their actions, yet again curbing women's right to public spaces.

Narratives portray spaces and activities therein greatly influences the ability of women to access and use public spaces, and exercise their rights to the city. We have found that familiarity with spaces renders a sense of safety, while repeated occurrences of violence and prior experiences of incidents characterize spaces as unsafe. Spaces that habitually accommodate antisocial activities too are deemed as unsafe and these results are in line with the current literature (Machielse, 2015; Mahadevia & Lathia, 2019; Mouratidis, 2019). The results are also in line with literature that says women perceive male-dominated spaces as unsafe and frightening due to the fear of being harassed and blamed for having been assaulted (Haque et al., 2019; Paul, 2011). We have found that while the presence of strangers makes women feel unsafe (Fairchild,

2007), the presence of other women, families, and people similar to oneself makes them feel safe (Viswanath & Mehrotra, 2007). Cultural differences too as this study reports add to the feeling of unsafety due to lack of understanding of others' values and ethos, resulting in decreased acceptability. This too is in line with the current literature that finds cultural differences lead to stereotyping, discrimination, and harassment (Jaiswal, n.d.; Bardalai, 2019; Leitner, 2000; McDuie-Ra, 2012; Mukherjee & Dutta, 2017) except for the literature in the European context which has rich empirical evidence on gender planning (Duxbury, 2015; Leitner, 2000; Roberts & de Madariaga, 2016; Wood, 2009).

Fear and incidents of crime cause behavioral and even lifestyle changes in women. They resort to time and space avoidance imposing restrictions on their mobility. They also embrace preventive and protective measures. We have found that most women feel the need to ensure their safety. They avoid certain places and certain times of the day. They become alert and keep a vigilant eye on their surroundings so that even the slightest hint of danger can activate action from their end. We have found that they prefer being accompanied, occupy certain seats over others in autorickshaws, wait for crowded conditions in public transport to subside, and wear certain types of dresses. This is in line with the literature that details various coping strategies (Bhattacharyya, 2016; Devereux, 2016; Mahadevia, Mishra, et al., 2016; Sur, 2014). Some previous studies state that women prefer avoidance and protective strategies (Bhattacharyya, 2015; Gopal & Shin, 2019; Parikh, 2018; Paul, 2011); however, our study reports that women prefer preventive strategies as well. Our study is in line with the literature that finds women mostly negotiate unsafe situations by walking away in the apprehension of aggravations and retaliations (ISIWCD, 2017). Though the fear associated with negotiating unsafe men and spaces runs deep, it reports a new finding that the younger women acknowledge the necessity to stay positive, master emotions, face fears, take risks, challenge harassers, and claim their rights more often than the older women (Jagori, 2010; Starkweather, 2007; Wagner & Peters, 2014). As Natarajan (2016) notes, the ability to notice situations, identify the criticality of situations, take responsibility for interventions, shun inhibitions, and develop skills to handle situations are critical to prevent occurrences of sexual harassment.

The nexus between space, people, and safety is evident. Time and again, urban professionals have advocated for mixed-use development, adequate well-lit well-maintained infrastructure that support diverse activities, visibility, and natural surveillance (Jagori & UN Women, 2015; Mahadevia & Lathia, 2019). Furthermore, across India, increased facilities for and participation of women in the transport sector such as the increase of women police force, women taxi services, women-only buses, toll-free helpline for women, GPS tracker, safety applications on mobile phones are a step forward towards making public spaces safer (Bhattacharyya, 2016; Mahadevia & Lathia, 2019). These are significant interventions, but much more needs to be done in a concerted and comprehensive manner. The cities in the global south are yet to internalize and integrate gendered approaches in urban planning and empirical studies are powerful tools in achieving the same.

## 7. Conclusions

This study is significant in the light of the United Nation's sustainable development goals specifically SDG# 11.7 that aims to provide universal access to safe inclusive and accessible public spaces for women. It is also significant in the light of Smart Cities and AMRUT (Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation) missions initiated by the Government of India that emphasize creating inclusive and sustainable cities. Much of the existing knowledge on the gendered nature of public spaces and the right to the city is in the context of the global north. It is therefore important to look at the cities from the global south as the contexts are different and so are the contestations. This study is significant as it takes the discourse on gendered spaces further and adds to the emerging body of knowledge in the global south on the gendered right to

the city. It brings in a new dimension of how non-verbal communications such as personality traits and appearances influence perceptions of safety. It adds how unsafe men and their attributes influence contestations and negotiations in public spaces. The empirical study on Kolkata is unique, yet it resonates and furthers the understandings from other empirical studies and theories developing in the global south.

Although gender issues are gaining prominence, urban planners and policymakers are yet to integrate the gender dimension into planning particularly in India. This is largely due to the absence of adequate contextualized studies that capture the trails of everyday life of women in public spaces. The contestations, negotiations, and perceptions of women need to be understood and acknowledged before strategies and interventions can be formulated. The lived experiences of women in this study provide insights into their everyday struggles in public spaces. They bring forth the nature of contestations and negotiations they go through even to just walk, let alone use or loiter. They narrate the gendered processes and their spatial implications, and how the right to the city is either extended or denied to women. The planning process in India is decentralized, and urban local bodies can bring about positive changes with the help of contextual information arising out of empirical studies. The diverse narratives in this study bring to light the finer aspects of gendered spaces that can help planners and policymakers co-create safe public spaces through various planning and design interventions, and facilitate women's right to the city.

## 8. Further studies

Perceptions of safety amongst women are shaped by several factors. This study focuses on people, their appearances, activities, and behaviors. Further studies can explore how perceptions of safety amongst women are shaped by other factors such as the spatial context, visual connectivity, or surveillance. Further studies can also focus on how urban policies and programs make public spaces safer and inclusive. The issue of safe public spaces and the right to the city can then be holistically dealt with leading to the formulation of working strategies.

## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Sanghmitra Roy:** Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Funding acquisition; Investigation; Methodology; Project administration; Resources; Software; Supervision; Roles/Writing - original draft; Writing - review & editing.

**Ajay Bailey:** Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Funding acquisition; Methodology; Resources; Software; Supervision; Writing - review & editing.

## Transparency document

The [Transparency document](#) associated with this article can be found, in online version.

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