

# Access of Women to Public Spaces: Socio-Cultural Impact on Their Identity and Dignity

(Project financed under IRG by DOR of MJPRU, Bareilly)

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.905000346>

Received: 27 May 2025; Accepted: 02 June 2025; Published: 16 June 2025

## ABSTRACT

This study explores the socio-cultural implications of women's access—or lack thereof—to public spaces in India, particularly focusing on how it influences their identity and dignity. Drawing from a comparative analysis of urban and rural contexts in and around Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh, the paper highlights that both infrastructure and gender norms severely constrain women's mobility, safety, and autonomy. Through mixed methods—including a survey of 300 respondents—the study reveals stark urban-rural disparities in access to public infrastructure (transport, lighting, roads), personal security, and socio-cultural freedom. Despite urban women having better physical infrastructure, issues like harassment and male-dominated governance persist. Conversely, rural women face higher rates of sexual violence and more stringent patriarchal control, often at the cost of education and employment. Findings underscore that the denial of safe and inclusive public space erodes women's self-worth and restricts their public identities, reinforcing dependence and invisibility. The paper calls for integrated reforms—both infrastructural and cultural—to ensure that public spaces affirm women's dignity and enable them to function as equal citizens in Indian society.

## INTRODUCTION

Women's access to public spaces – streets, markets, parks, transport – is crucial for their autonomy, identity and dignity. In India, however, patriarchal social norms often restrict women's mobility and presence in the public sphere. For example, one study notes that Indian cities have very few women planners, so urban design often “ignores the necessity of women”.<sup>1</sup> In practice, women “seldom occupy the public realm” and rarely make community-level decisions.<sup>2</sup> These constraints affect how women see themselves: as Shilpa Phadke and colleagues argue, women must struggle to “create...an identity within the public space – of being a public woman” in the face of social stigma.<sup>3</sup>

This paper examines such dynamics by comparing an illustrative Indian city (e.g. Bareilly) and its rural hinterland to highlight how urban and rural women differ in access to space – in terms of safety, infrastructure, and socio-cultural norms – and how these differences shape women's sense of identity and dignity. Key questions include: How do mobility and safety in cities vs. villages differ? What roles do gender norms and policies play? How do these factors affect women's confidence, economic participation, and social standing?

**Keywords:** Women, Public Spaces, Identity and Dignity

## LITERATURE REVIEW

**Research on gendered space in India reveals a stark urban–rural divide.** In cities, overcrowding, crime, and hostile urban design shape women's experiences. Delhi, dubbed the “crime capital” for women<sup>4</sup>, exemplifies how poorly lit, male-dominated streets and labyrinthine layouts force even highly educated women to stay home<sup>5</sup>. Such unsafe, non-inclusive environments mean women rarely claim public spaces— “female gendered spaces” are nearly non-existent<sup>6</sup>. Public realms reflect class, caste, and gender hierarchies, resulting

in a pervasive “sense of fear<sup>7</sup>.” A UN Women–supported survey found that 95% of women in Delhi feel unsafe in public<sup>8</sup>.

**Rural women face similar insecurity, though in different forms.** Studies by the ICRW<sup>9</sup> show higher rates of sexual violence in villages (9.7% vs. 5.9% in urban areas)<sup>10</sup>, prompting families to restrict girls’ mobility. Many abandon school after middle grades due to unsafe travel<sup>11</sup>. Poor transport and lighting deepen these risks. In one Gujarat village, women mobilized for a school bus to ensure girls’ continued education<sup>12</sup>.

**Underlying both urban and rural contexts are restrictive socio-cultural norms.** Female mobility is constrained by notions of modesty and honour; loitering or aimless movement is taboo<sup>13</sup>. As Gupta et al. note, women must have a “purpose” to be in public. This cultural policing diminishes dignity—if a woman cannot walk or sit freely in public, her identity remains tied to the private sphere. Scholars argue that safe public spaces foster independence and economic agency; their absence stifles women’s public identities<sup>14</sup>.

**Efforts to address these gaps include government and NGO initiatives.** The Safe City Project, funded under the Nirbhaya Fund, invests in urban infrastructure like lighting and CCTV<sup>15</sup>. In rural areas, NGOs such as SWATI run programs like “know Fear” to engage communities in safety audits and advocacy<sup>16</sup>. These efforts reflect the constitutional principle that dignity—and the freedom to move safely—is essential to gender equality, echoing UN Women’s call for inclusive public safety systems<sup>17</sup>.

## METHODOLOGY

This study uses a mixed-method, mixing primary and secondary-data. We collected primary data by administering a questionnaire to 300 rural and urban respondents in Bareilly, besides also collecting relevant information through government data, academic studies and NGO reports to highlight how urban and rural women differ in access to space – in terms of safety, infrastructure, and socio-cultural norms. We drew on national surveys (NFHS-4/5, PLFS, Census), official statistics (NCRB), and published reports to quantify urban–rural gaps. For example, we used NFHS-4 (2015–16) data (via analysis from SPRF) on women’s mobility indicators<sup>18</sup>, and recent PLFS (2023–24) data on female labour participation.<sup>19</sup> Qualitative insights come from academic articles, government/NGO case studies, and media reports that document experiences of women in public spaces. We structured the analysis thematically around mobility/infrastructure, safety, socio-cultural norms, and policy initiatives.

### Data Analysis

**Mobility and Infrastructure:** Quantitative indicators show urban women generally have *more* formal mobility options, but serious constraints remain, especially for the poor. NFHS-4 data reveal that only about 47% of *urban* women can travel alone to all three key destinations (market, health centre, relatives), whereas only 37% of *rural* women enjoy the same freedom.<sup>20</sup> The chart below illustrates this gap. Urban women’s greater mobility is partly due to denser transport networks (buses, metros), whereas rural women often walk (45% of women nationally walk to work vs. 27% of men)<sup>21</sup> because of lack of affordable vehicles. However, overcrowding and harassment on urban buses are common; rural public transport is sparse or non-existent. However, a majority (56.3%) of respondents of this study have not reported experience of any kind of harassment or violence in public places. The percentage of those who witnessed any kind of harassment or violence in public places is also very large (43.7%).

Table No. 1		
Have you ever experienced or witnessed any kind of harassment or violence in public places?		
Response	Number of Responses	Percentage (%)
Yes	131	43.7
No	169	56.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100</b>

Beyond mobility, **infrastructure** for women is uneven. Many Indian cities still lack sufficient public toilets, streetlights, or safe bus stops – issues often worse in the urban slums. In villages, poorly maintained roads and no lighting make outdoor travel especially risky after dark. Such deficiencies physically limit where women can go. For instance, villages without paved roads effectively isolate women: in the kNOw Fear project villages, the absence of a safe school bus had prevented girls from continuing secondary education.<sup>22</sup> Due to lack of proper infrastructure in public spaces, improvements in infrastructure have been demanded by respondents (53.7%) of this study.

**Table No. 2**
**What improvements do you think can increase women's access to public spaces in your area?**

Response	Number of Responses	Percentage (%)
Safe Public Spaces	102	34
Safe Public Transport	37	12.3
Better infrastructure and Facilities	161	53.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100</b>

**Safety and Security:** Crime statistics and surveys underscore that both urban and rural women live under threat, though the nature differs. Urban areas see high-profile crimes (e.g. Delhi's national news cases), creating pervasive fear: a 2012 survey found 95% of Delhi's women feel unsafe in public places.<sup>23</sup> NCRB data (2022) also highlight large numbers of reported assaults in cities (e.g. 133 rapes in Bhopal, 152 in Jodhpur in one year).<sup>24</sup> In villages, sexual violence and harassment are often underreported, but ICRW notes prevalence of sexual violence is significantly higher than in cities (9.7% rural vs. 5.9% urban).<sup>25</sup> This rural danger means families curtail movement: many families force girls to quit school in higher grades rather than risk them traveling alone.<sup>26</sup> Thus, while city women contend with crowded unsafe streets, rural women often face isolation and vulnerability (e.g. attacks on lonely paths) that equally impede access to markets, workplaces or clinics. Majority of respondents (56.6%) of this study find public transport safe and accessible for women.

**Table No. 3**
**Do you find public transport safe and accessible for women?**

Response	Number of Responses	Percentage (%)
Yes	170	56.6
No	71	23.7
Not sure	59	19.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100</b>

**Socio-cultural Norms:** Traditional norms play a key role in limiting access. Both urban and rural societies socialize women to value modesty over mobility. Studies note that in Indian culture "loitering" or aimless wandering is simply not accepted for women.<sup>27</sup> Majority of the respondents of this study faced restrictions on their mobility imposed by family or community.

**Table No. 4**
**Have you ever faced restrictions on your mobility imposed by family or community?**

Response	Number of Responses	Percentage (%)
Yes	159	53
No	12	40.3
Not sure	20	6.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100</b>

In practice, a city woman often plans her outings down to the minute, lest she be seen unaccompanied; similarly, a village girl is expected to return home by dusk or chaperoned. This policing of space deprives women of informal social time (e.g. parks, cafés) that men freely enjoy. As noted, female public spaces provide identity outside the home.<sup>28</sup> Without them, a woman's social identity remains largely "wife" or "daughter" rather than "citizen" or "professional." Majority (66%) of respondents of this study feel that restrictions on access to public spaces affect their sense of dignity.

**Table No. 5**

**Do you feel that restrictions on access to public spaces affect your sense of dignity?**

Response	Number of Responses	Percentage (%)
Yes	198	66
No	69	23
Not Sure	33	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100</b>

Moreover, women's public roles differ by location: urban women, especially of higher class or education, often push boundaries (e.g. professional careers, political leadership). Yet they still confront male-dominated governance: one study observed that almost every West Bengal city has few or no women urban planners.<sup>29</sup> In villages, by contrast, strict patriarchal traditions linger: women's movements are monitored by elder family members, and women seldom hold formal power despite political reservations (e.g. 1/3 seats in panchayats may still be filled by male relatives as proxies).<sup>30</sup> These norms affect dignity: needing permission to step outside – whether to work, study or socialize – reinforces a sense of subordination. Indeed, an NFHS-5 analysis notes that many women "still...need permission to go out and work"<sup>31</sup> reflecting entrenched control.

**Education and Economic Participation:** Access to education and work is a vital facet of public-space access. In cities, more women attend college than ever before, yet workforce participation has stagnated: only ~25.6% of women were paid workers nationally.<sup>32</sup> The urban female labour force saw even declines after age 35 as women often withdraw into unpaid domestic roles. Rural women historically had higher labour participation, but much of it is informal or agricultural. Recent data show a dramatic rise in rural female workforce participation: PLFS reports rural female LFPR jumped from 24.6% (2017–18) to 47.6% (2023–24).<sup>33</sup> This may indicate either real empowerment or economic distress, but it also means more women are moving about in public. Yet that mobility may be compelled, not voluntary. In either setting, having a public role (worker, voter, community leader) reinforces dignity. Conversely, exclusion from these roles – due to unsafe travel or social restrictions – keeps women in the private sphere, curbing their sense of agency. Most (83%) of the respondents of this study accept that that access to public spaces has influenced their economic opportunities and financial independence; though they also accept facing gender-based inequalities in economic opportunities while accessing public spaces.

**Table No. 6**

**To what extent do you believe that access to public spaces has influenced your economic opportunities and financial independence?**

Response	Number of Responses	Percentage (%)
Strongly Positive	111	37
Somewhat Positive	138	46
Neutral	33	11
Somewhat Negative	13	4.3
Strongly Negative	05	1.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table No. 7**

**Have you faced gender-based inequalities in economic opportunities while accessing public spaces?**

Response	Number of Responses	Percentage (%)
Yes	132	44
No	138	46
Not Sure	30	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100</b>

## DISCUSSION

The above findings highlight a complex picture of difference and similarity. Urban women generally have more physical infrastructure (buses, sidewalks, streetlights) than rural women, but they also face severe crowding and harassment in those spaces. Rural women lack infrastructure but often have tighter-knit communities that can offer some protection – though this protection comes at the cost of confinement. In both settings, patriarchal norms impose an unequal “double standard”: a city girl may wear modern clothes but still must uphold family honour; a village girl may be kept from school to avoid rumours. Both experiences chip away at dignity: whether through being groped in a city bus or being scolded for staying out late in a village, women are reminded that public space is “not really for them.”

These access differences have real impacts on identity. Sociologically, occupying public space helps women see themselves as citizens, not just dependents. As one study puts it, “female gendered spaces...give women an identity outside the family”.<sup>34</sup> In India today, such spaces are rare. In cities, most parks, cafés or offices remain male-dominated or unsafe; in villages, public forums (schools, local markets, panchayat halls) often exclude women socially. When women do break into these spaces – by working, protesting, or simply loitering – they expand their self-definition. For example, the #WomenSpatialActivism project in Delhi empowered local women to re-design a park, consciously carving out “girls’ street” and “front door” zones as symbols of ownership. This reappropriation not only improved safety but signalled to women that “this city is ours”.<sup>35</sup> By contrast, a lack of such agency erodes dignity. Surveillances (cameras, policing) and moral policing (questions about where they’re going) send a message that women do not fully belong outside home.

The data reflect these dynamics. Urban–rural mobility gaps show rural women have less freedom, reinforcing traditional identities of wife/daughter rather than worker or student. Safety data show that whenever women are pushed out of public life, their socioeconomic potential suffers. The recent rise in rural female labour participation may indicate more women engaging in public work – a possible positive sign – but only if accompanied by true choice and security.

Cultural initiatives must complement infrastructure. Policies need to go beyond urban CCTV and address norms

change. Programs like community workshops and male ally engagement begin to challenge the “behavioural code” that keeps women in private. Education is key: villages where parents see daughters succeed (with support like a school bus) start to redefine expectations. Urban planners too must include women’s perspectives.

## CONCLUSION

Over the last decade, India’s women have made strides, but access to public space remains unequal and deeply gendered. Urban women enjoy some amenities but still confront pervasive insecurity and ingrained bias that limit their freedom and self-image. Rural women are often even more restricted by lack of transport, roads, and conservative norms, sacrificing education and employment for safety. These differences manifest in identity and dignity: a woman who can move, work, and socialize on her own terms, gains confidence and status, while one who cannot, is kept in a constrained role.



Policies and society must bridge this gap. Crucially, both urban and rural programs must empower women's voices: safe public space is as much about infrastructure as it is about ending harassment and stigma. When women are visibly present in parks, buses, markets and planning rooms, it not only makes cities and villages more egalitarian, it affirms women's dignity as full citizens. Only by ensuring that women – in city and countryside alike – can safely occupy shared spaces will India move toward genuine gender equality.

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