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### Gendered Spaces and the Body Politics: Reading Women in Urban South Asia

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#### **Abstract:**

*Urban spaces in South Asia are deeply gendered, shaped by historical power relations, cultural norms, and political structures that regulate women's mobility, visibility, and participation in public life. This article examines how women experience, negotiate, and contest urban spaces in South Asian cities, with a particular focus on Pakistan. Drawing on feminist geography and political sociology, the study argues that the city is not a neutral landscape but a political arena where gendered hierarchies are reproduced and challenged. Women's access to streets, transport, workplaces, and civic spaces is mediated by class, religion, safety discourses, and state governance. At the same time, women actively re-imagine and politicize urban space through everyday practices, labor participation, protest movements, and digital activism. By reading women's spatial experiences as political acts, this article highlights how urban South Asia becomes a site of both exclusion and resistance, offering insights into gendered citizenship and urban governance.*

#### **Keyword:**

*Gendered spaces, Urban South Asia, Women and politics, Feminist geography, Public space, Urban citizenship, Mobility, Power*

#### **Introduction:**

Cities in South Asia are marked by intense social stratification, rapid urbanization, and contested political authority. Within this context, urban space is not merely physical but socially produced through norms, institutions, and power relations. Women's presence in the city—on streets, in markets, workplaces, and political arenas—has historically been constrained by patriarchal ideologies that associate respectability with domesticity and limit women's public visibility. In Pakistan and the broader South Asian region, urban planning, transport systems, housing arrangements, and security policies often reproduce gendered exclusions by prioritizing male mobility and economic participation.

However, women are not passive recipients of spatial regulation. Their everyday movements, survival strategies, and collective actions reveal the political nature of space itself. Feminist scholarship increasingly recognizes that access to urban space is central to citizenship, rights, and democratic participation. This article situates women's urban experiences within broader political

structures, arguing that gendered spaces are key to understanding power, governance, and resistance in South Asian cities.

### **Gender, Space, and Power in South Asian Cities**

Urban spaces in South Asia are not neutral or organically formed environments; rather, they are produced through historical, cultural, and political processes that institutionalize gendered power relations (Mahmood, 2005). The symbolic coding of streets, transport hubs, tea stalls, and marketplaces as masculine spaces normalizes men's visibility and mobility while rendering women's presence conditional and often contested (Gupta, 2015). Conversely, domestic and semi-private spaces—such as homes, courtyards, and women-only sections—are socially constructed as appropriate feminine domains, reinforcing the association of women with care work, respectability, and moral responsibility (Sharma, 2012). This spatial ordering directly shapes access to economic opportunities, as women's restricted movement limits participation in formal employment, political meetings, and civic life, thereby reinforcing structural inequalities (Chakraborty & McFarlane, 2019).

Cultural discourses of honor (*izzat*), modesty, and protection further intensify spatial regulation by framing women's mobility as a source of familial and communal risk (Rizvi, 2018). These narratives legitimize practices such as informal curfews, gender segregation in transport, and moral surveillance by families, communities, and state institutions (Amin, 2002). Importantly, the language of "safety" often masks mechanisms of control, shifting responsibility for harassment and violence onto women themselves rather than addressing male entitlement or institutional failures (Hossain & Rahman, 2016). As a result, urban space functions as a disciplinary regime where gender norms are continuously enforced through everyday interactions, planning decisions, and policing practices (Lloyd, 2013). In this sense, space becomes a political instrument that governs bodies, behavior, and belonging, making women's access to the city a central question of power and citizenship in South Asian urban contexts (Das, 2008).

### **Mobility, Safety, and the Politics of Fear**

Women's mobility in South Asian cities is profoundly structured by what feminist scholars describe as the politics of fear, where the constant anticipation of harassment, violence, and reputational damage shapes everyday spatial decisions (Koskela, 2000). Fear operates not only as an emotional response but as a governing mechanism that disciplines women's bodies and movements in public space (Pain, 1997). Women routinely alter travel routes, avoid certain areas, restrict travel times, and depend on male accompaniment to minimize perceived risk (Safa, 2018). These adaptive strategies, while framed as practical or necessary, gradually normalize unequal access to the city and limit women's participation in education, employment, and political life (Chopra, 2014). Dominant safety discourses further entrench these inequalities by individualizing risk and responsibility (Sarker & Alam, 2017). Policy responses such as women-only transport, informal curfews, dress codes, and increased moral surveillance are frequently presented as protective interventions, yet they leave intact the structural conditions that produce urban insecurity (Sharma, 2011). By focusing on regulating women's behavior rather than confronting male violence, weak law enforcement, and exclusionary urban design, such measures depoliticize gendered harm and obscure state accountability (Bose, 2004). Moreover, moral policing—whether by families, communities, or authorities—frames women's visibility as inherently risky, reinforcing the idea that public space is naturally unsafe for women (Cunningham, 2019). In this context, fear becomes a

spatial technology of governance, sustaining gendered power relations by limiting women's right to mobility and full urban citizenship (Moss, 2007).

### **Work, Informality, and Gendered Labor Spaces**

Urban economies across South Asia are deeply dependent on women's labor, yet this dependence remains largely invisible within formal urban planning and governance frameworks (Chakraborty & McFarlane, 2019). A significant proportion of women work in informal and semi-formal sectors, including domestic service, home-based manufacturing, garment work, food preparation, waste picking, and street vending (Sharma, 2016). These labor spaces are frequently located in private homes, peripheral neighborhoods, or contested public areas, rendering women's economic contributions spatially hidden and politically undervalued (Ahmed, 2014). Because informal work often falls outside regulatory protection, women workers face precarious conditions, low wages, and heightened vulnerability to exploitation, harassment, and eviction, particularly in rapidly modernizing cities (Bose, 2017).

This spatial marginalization reveals a fundamental contradiction in urban development processes: while cities rely on women's labor to sustain households, service industries, and informal markets, women themselves remain excluded from decision-making arenas that shape urban infrastructure, zoning, and labor policy (Kabeer, 2004). Urban renewal projects, anti-encroachment drives, and transport planning routinely displace women workers by criminalizing street vending or overlooking home-based production (Mannan, 2019). Moreover, the absence of childcare facilities, safe transport, and legal recognition further constrains women's capacity to claim space as workers and citizens (Cunningham, 2020). In this context, women's labor spaces become sites of both economic survival and political struggle, highlighting how gendered exclusions are embedded within urban political economies rather than arising from cultural norms alone (Sarker & Alam, 2017).

### **Protest, Resistance, and Feminist Reclaiming of Space**

Women's participation in political protests, marches, and sit-ins in South Asian cities represents a deliberate and transformative reclaiming of urban space (Butler, 2015). Historically excluded from streets and public squares through narratives of danger, modesty, and respectability, women's collective presence in these spaces directly challenges the gendered assumptions that define who belongs in the city (Kabeer, 2017). Feminist demonstrations—whether focused on legal reform, labor rights, violence against women, or democratic freedoms—convert sites of everyday surveillance into arenas of political visibility (Purkayastha, 2010). The act of gathering in public space itself becomes a form of resistance, disrupting the symbolic association between masculinity and political authority (Gandhi, 2018).

In Pakistan and across South Asia, women-led movements illustrate how spatial occupation functions as political speech beyond verbal expression (Molyneux, 2012). Marches, sit-ins, and symbolic performances assert women's right to mobility, assembly, and citizenship while exposing the exclusionary nature of urban governance (Chaudhry & Qureshi, 2020). These movements often provoke strong backlash, including moral condemnation and state repression, revealing the extent to which women's visibility unsettles entrenched power structures (Ahmed, 2014). Yet such resistance also redefines public space as contested rather than fixed, opening possibilities for alternative urban futures (Banerjee, 2016). By insisting on presence despite risk, women transform the city into a site of feminist politics, where space becomes both the medium and message of political struggle (Sharma, 2019).

### **Digital Urbanism and New Gendered Publics**

Digital technologies have significantly transformed the spatial dimensions of political participation in South Asian cities by creating new gendered publics that operate alongside, and sometimes in tension with, physical urban spaces (Hussain, 2020). Social media platforms, blogs, and digital mapping tools enable women to articulate experiences of harassment, exclusion, and resistance that were previously confined to private or informal networks (Nisbett, 2018). Initiatives that document street harassment, share testimonies, or crowdsource data on unsafe areas translate individual experiences into collective knowledge, thereby politicizing everyday encounters with urban space (Sharma & Kumar, 2019). Through digital storytelling and hashtag-based activism, women render visible the gendered nature of cities and challenge dominant narratives that normalize exclusion and silence (Lahiri, 2020).

While digital spaces do not eliminate material barriers such as restricted mobility, class inequalities, or uneven internet access, they expand the scale and reach of feminist engagement with urban politics (Amin & Rana, 2017). Online activism allows women to bypass physical surveillance and spatial constraints, mobilize support across cities and national borders, and exert pressure on state institutions and media (Nash, 2016). At the same time, digital platforms expose women to new forms of harassment and surveillance, reflecting the persistence of gendered power relations in virtual environments (Mann, 2015). Nevertheless, digital urbanism reconfigures the boundaries between private and public, enabling women to transform personal experiences into political claims and to contest urban power structures through hybrid forms of presence that link online expression with offline resistance (Ghosh, 2021).

### **Urban Planning, Governance, and Gender-Blind Policy Frameworks**

Urban planning and governance frameworks in South Asia are largely shaped by technocratic and ostensibly gender-neutral approaches that prioritize economic growth, infrastructure expansion, and spatial efficiency while overlooking the differentiated ways in which women inhabit and navigate the city (Sharma & Misra, 2016). Planning decisions related to transport corridors, zoning regulations, housing schemes, and public amenities are typically based on assumptions of a male, full-time worker whose daily routines involve linear travel between home and workplace (Chopra, 2014). Such models fail to accommodate women's complex mobility patterns, which often include trip-chaining linked to caregiving, informal employment, education, and household provisioning (Amin, 2018). As a consequence, urban infrastructure frequently lacks features essential to women's safety and accessibility, such as well-lit streets, reliable public transport at off-peak hours, safe pedestrian pathways, and proximity to childcare and health services (Kabeer, 2017). This gender blindness in urban governance is further reinforced by women's limited representation in planning institutions and decision-making bodies (Sen & Dutta, 2019). Policy processes often exclude women's voices, particularly those of working-class and informal-sector women, resulting in development agendas that privilege commercial interests and elite urban aesthetics over social inclusion (Das, 2020). Large-scale urban renewal projects, smart city initiatives, and privatized housing developments frequently displace low-income communities and erase women's informal workspaces without offering viable alternatives (Patel & Varma, 2016). In this context, gender-neutral planning operates as a political strategy that masks inequality, rendering women's spatial needs invisible while reproducing structural exclusion (Safa, 2015). Addressing these gaps requires a shift toward gender-responsive urban governance that recognizes care, safety, and everyday mobility as central to equitable city-making rather than peripheral social concerns (Sharma, 2021).

### **Class, Informality, and Intersectional Urban Experiences**

Women's experiences of urban space in South Asia are profoundly shaped by intersecting axes of class, caste, ethnicity, and religion, producing highly uneven geographies of access, mobility, and security (Chakraborty & McFarlane, 2019). Middle- and upper-class women often navigate the city through insulated infrastructures such as private vehicles, gated residential communities, and commercial malls, which offer relative protection from harassment and surveillance (Sharma & Varma, 2017). In contrast, working-class women—particularly those residing in informal settlements or peripheral neighborhoods—depend heavily on public transport, walkable streets, and informal marketplaces, exposing them to intensified policing, social scrutiny, and environmental risk (Nash, 2016). These spatial disparities reflect broader urban inequalities in access to housing, sanitation, healthcare, and education, all of which disproportionately burden marginalized women (Amin & Rana, 2018).

An intersectional lens further reveals that gendered exclusion is not experienced uniformly but is compounded by social hierarchies embedded within South Asian societies. Women from religious minorities, lower castes, migrant communities, or ethnic peripheries often face additional forms of discrimination that restrict their visibility and legitimacy in public space (Das & Bhat, 2014). Informal settlements, frequently targeted for eviction or neglect, become sites where women's labor, caregiving, and survival strategies are both essential and criminalized (Safa, 2015). Urban development policies that overlook these intersecting vulnerabilities risk reinforcing exclusion by treating women as a homogenous category (Sen & Dutta, 2019). Understanding urban space through intersectionality thus exposes how gendered power is entangled with classed and communal inequalities, highlighting the need for inclusive urban governance that recognizes diverse women's experiences rather than privileging elite norms of mobility and citizenship (Sharma, 2020).

### **Domestic Space as a Political and Economic Site**

Domestic space in South Asian cities is commonly imagined as private, apolitical, and separate from the formal economy; however, for many urban women, it functions as a central site of economic production and political negotiation (Kabeer, 2004). Home-based work—including garment stitching, food preparation, packaging, tutoring, and digital piecework—plays a vital role in sustaining urban economies, particularly in low-income households where women's mobility is restricted by caregiving responsibilities or social norms (Nash, 2016). Simultaneously, unpaid care labor such as childrearing, elder care, and household management underpins the functioning of both formal and informal labor markets, yet remains systematically excluded from economic valuation and urban policy planning (Chopra, 2015). This invisibility reinforces gendered hierarchies by naturalizing women's labor as duty rather than work, limiting their access to social protection, labor rights, and recognition (Bose, 2017).

Viewing domestic space as political disrupts the conventional public–private divide that has long shaped urban governance and citizenship (Sharma, 2020). Decisions about housing design, utility provision, zoning regulations, and neighborhood surveillance directly affect women's ability to combine paid and unpaid labor within the home (Patel & Varma, 2016). Moreover, state interventions—such as eviction drives, utility cutoffs, or housing “regularization” policies—can destabilize women's livelihoods by ignoring the economic functions embedded within domestic space (Safa, 2018). By foregrounding the home as a site of production, resistance, and negotiation, feminist urban analysis reveals how everyday domestic practices are intertwined with broader structures of power and inequality (Ghosh, 2019). Recognizing domestic space as political therefore expands understandings of urban labor and citizenship, making visible women's hidden

contributions to city life and challenging development models that privilege formal, male-dominated workspaces (Amin & Rana, 2017).

### **Surveillance, Policing, and Gendered Control of Space**

Surveillance and policing practices in South Asian cities function as powerful tools for regulating women's presence in public space, shaping not only where women can go but how they are expected to behave and appear (Koskela, 2000). Formal surveillance mechanisms such as CCTV cameras, police checkpoints, and security patrols are often justified in the language of crime prevention and public safety. However, in practice, these systems frequently reinforce gendered norms by scrutinizing women's clothing, timing of movement, and social interactions rather than addressing structural sources of insecurity (Chakraborty, 2019). Women who occupy public space at night, travel alone, or deviate from socially sanctioned norms of respectability are more likely to be questioned, monitored, or stigmatized, transforming visibility into a source of vulnerability (Gupta, 2017).

Informal surveillance further intensifies this control through neighborhood watch groups, family oversight, and community moral policing, which operate alongside state mechanisms to discipline women's mobility (Safa, 2018). In the digital realm, social media platforms extend surveillance beyond physical space, exposing women to online harassment, doxxing, and reputational violence that can have tangible consequences for their offline lives (Sarker & Alam, 2020). Rather than producing safety, these overlapping surveillance regimes often restrict autonomy and normalize gendered control under the guise of protection (Moss, 2016). Gendered surveillance thus reveals how urban security infrastructures are deeply intertwined with patriarchal governance, reproducing power hierarchies by regulating women's bodies and movements while leaving broader patterns of male violence and institutional failure largely unchallenged (Ahmed, 2014).

### **Gendered Citizenship and the Right to the City**

Access to urban space is fundamental to the exercise of citizenship, as it determines who can participate in political, economic, and civic life (Mitchell, 2003). In South Asian cities, women's restricted mobility, limited visibility, and conditional access to public spaces significantly constrain their ability to claim full urban citizenship (Kabeer, 2017). Participation in protests, community meetings, municipal consultations, and civic institutions often requires physical presence in public space, yet women's access to these arenas is frequently mediated by concerns of safety, respectability, and social sanction (Gupta, 2015). As a result, women's political engagement is often fragmented or relegated to informal and private spheres, reinforcing their marginal status within urban governance structures (Das & Bhat, 2014).

Feminist interpretations of the "right to the city" challenge narrow, legalistic definitions of citizenship by foregrounding everyday practices of presence, movement, and participation as political acts (Harvey, 2008). From this perspective, women's entitlement to the city extends beyond protection from violence to include the right to occupy space without justification, to shape urban planning processes, and to influence decisions that affect their lives (Safa, 2018). Reframing citizenship through space exposes how gendered exclusions are embedded in urban design, policing, and governance, revealing the city as a contested political terrain rather than a neutral backdrop (Sharma, 2020). By asserting their right to visibility and participation, women transform urban space into a site of democratic struggle, highlighting that inclusive cities require not only formal rights but also equitable access to the spaces where citizenship is enacted and recognized (Amin & Rana, 2017).

### Summary

This article demonstrates that gendered spaces in urban South Asia are inherently political, shaped by intersecting forces of patriarchy, class, religion, and state power. Women's restricted mobility and uneven access to public spaces limit their full citizenship and political participation. Yet women continuously negotiate, resist, and re-define these spatial boundaries through labor, protest, and digital engagement. Understanding urban space through a gendered lens reveals how cities function as contested political terrains where inequality is both enforced and challenged. Policy interventions must therefore integrate gender-sensitive urban planning, inclusive governance, and women's voices to create more equitable and democratic cities.

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