

Gender and Urban Spaces: Understanding Female Fear of Crime in Colombo, Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Fear of crime is more prevalent than victimization, and it's crucial as it can result in stress and actions that lower one's quality of life in urban environments. This research discusses the intersection of gender and urban spaces in Colombo, Sri Lanka, to explore how these factors influence the fear of crime, particularly among females. To create safer urban environments and foster social cohesion in urbanizing settings, identifying the gendered dimensions of fear of crime is crucial. The current study sought to unravel the nature of the gendered fear of crime in Colombo as an urban setup. How female fear of crime in urban spaces appears as a result of gender is the research problem. To answer the research question, significant objectives were formed to explore the gendered perceptions of safety, recognize the role of urban space in shaping these perceptions and provide insights into how these dynamics can inform urban planning and policy. The study adopts qualitative methodology by purposive sampling of 28 participants, leading to the electoral register 2024, to select participants representing a diverse section of females in Colombo. Focus group interviews were conducted to gather data on participants' experiences and perceptions of fear in urban spaces. The data were analyzed using discourse analysis, allowing for the identification of recurring shapes and patterns related to gender, space, and fear of crime. The study revealed that gender significantly influences how urban spaces are perceived and navigated. Females reported heightened fear in poorly lit areas, isolated streets, and locations with limited public surveillance. Cultural norms and societal expectations, including inheritance, exacerbate these fears, leading to restricted mobility and altered daily routines. The study also found that female fear of crime is not rooted in actual crime rates, as reporting is considered overacting but is heavily influenced by the spatial and social environment of the city. This fear impacts their access to public spaces and contributes to a broader sense of vulnerability. The study concludes that gendered fear of crime is deeply intertwined with the design and management of urban spaces. To address these fears, urban planning must adopt a gender-sensitive approach, incorporating

better lighting, increased public surveillance, and promoting community engagement in public spaces. Additionally, public awareness campaigns aimed at challenging gender norms and promoting gender equality can play a vital role in reducing fear and enhancing women's sense of safety in urban environments. The study recommends avoiding gendered spaces as they may evoke a sense of fear, similar to the effect of a broken window. These recommendations aim to reduce the fear of crime and create more inclusive and equitable urban spaces for all residents.

Keywords: Fear of crime, Gender, Quality of life, Sustainability, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)