

# **GENDER INCLUSIVE URBAN SPACES: ISSUES AND QUESTIONS**

## **Lecture01**

### **Module 1.1 - Gender Inclusive Urban Housing**

This lecture is about gender-inclusive urban housing. The question is, how can we think about housing from a gender lens? So, let me open this lecture with two rather depressing narratives. In March 2015, a woman named Kavita Pimpale died after falling through the floor of a multi-storied community toilet complex in a slum neighborhood in Mumbai, in the city of Mumbai. Second, in parts of New Delhi and other cities, we have read numerous stories of young girls and women from low-income neighborhoods

who were sexually assaulted or raped when they went out at night to use toilets or open areas for their sanitation needs. Now, these are extreme examples of how conditions of housing and infrastructure can seriously undermine the security of women and make them vulnerable to violence. But in both cases, it is not only gender but a combination or an articulation of disadvantages of gender, class, caste, space, and tenure status that intersect to turn a basic everyday activity of going to the toilet into a scene of violence. So, when we talk about gender and housing, then intersectionality, or the way that different conditions and identities interact to produce certain outcomes of disadvantage, is a very important frame to maintain. I think it is important to keep in mind that different women experience cities very differently— elderly women, lower-class women, working women such as domestic workers or construction workers, corporate working women, college girls, sex workers. Yet they all share specific gender interests that arise from two things—

One, their vulnerability to sexual violence, and second, their common roles and responsibilities typically related to social reproduction within the household. Now, Indian cities, I think, from the data, are increasingly evolving as male spaces. And this is actually against the grain of other cities in the Global South, like Latin America, where cities are becoming increasingly feminized. So, if you look at this data here, urban India has a sex ratio of only 926 females to 1,000 males. Compared to an all-India figure, that is rural and urban areas, of 944 females to 1,000 males.

And big cities are even more skewed. If you look at million-plus cities, there were only 912 females per 1,000 men. And in Greater Mumbai and Delhi urban agglomerations, the

figures are only 861 and 867, respectively. So, clearly, this reflects greater male migration into big cities, but it also speaks to some extent of sex-selective abortions, which are not uncommon even in big cities. Now, another noteworthy feature of Indian cities is the very low work participation rate among urban women, lower than that of rural women and markedly lower than in other South Asian countries such as Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. And this is actually surprising because urban areas are supposed to have women who are more active and of higher income. But this gap is ascribed to the failure of Indian cities to provide the necessary infrastructural support to women who want to work. Now, women's decision to participate in the labor force is an outcome of how they balance their need for income and their household responsibilities against the conditions of access to work. So, if work opportunities are available in proximity to the home,

And if safe, cheap transportation options are available, or if alternative or supportive facilities like childcare or food canteens are available to relieve them of their household responsibilities, it is likely that we will see a much higher rate of female labor force participation in Indian cities. So, what I want to talk about here is gender blindness in the housing sector. And this blindness, I think, operates at various levels, but I will just talk about two here. First, houses are designed for the household or for a particular notion of the family unit that policy likes to hold on to.

Despite the urgings of feminist and gender studies for decades now, we are still reluctant to take this unit apart and to seriously consider the different and conflicting interests and power relations that operate within it. So, that's one. Second, like all other hardware sectors such as water supply, electricity, public works, housing as an infrastructure sector tends to be socially blind as it assumes that its activities are technical and therefore socially neutral.

But the emerging field of critical infrastructure studies has highlighted for us now how engineering, construction, urban design, planning, and architecture can all be profoundly shaped by social and political ideologies and relations. These disciplines and practices reflect a social and gender bias actually simply by denying or by being blind to the unequal social structures that shape access to infrastructure or, for that matter, shape the infrastructures themselves. So, in short, housing policies are gender-blind because they are premised on the household unit

And because the sector assumes that engineering, construction, and design are technical and therefore gender-neutral activities. And surprisingly, little research exists on the

gender dimensions of urban housing, especially in the Indian context. So, in this short lecture, I will broadly outline these dimensions from the particular perspective of low-income urban women. I will organize my comments under three themes. The meanings of housing, then there is the question of housing adequacy, and finally, institutional and legal aspects of housing.

So first, meanings of housing. Does housing have different meanings for women than for men? The first thing to look at here is, are we talking about a house or housing? Some of you may be familiar with the architect John Turner's proposal that housing is a verb, not a noun. The noun refers to the unit of housing, the thing, the commodity.

But housing as a verb refers to an endeavor— an ongoing process of housing oneself, one's family, even one's friends or neighbors. And this imagination of housing allows us to center the contributions and the stakes of women in housing much more than the concept of the housing unit does. Housing itself is often an incremental process that may unfold over years, even decades. A very large proportion of housing in cities of the Global South is self-built, or what is now called auto-constructed.

And this is mostly true of low-income housing, but to some extent, it's true about middle-class housing too. In other words, most people house themselves not in ready-built units that are provided to them by professional builders already, but in structures that are slowly built up over time according to the needs and abilities of the household, built by the residents themselves or by small contractors that they hire. Now, in this incremental process, it is usually women who fill the gaps, who find ways to make the space habitable when things are incomplete or inadequate. In other words, women oil this machine of auto-construction, which is the dominant mode of housing in cities of the Global South.

So, in that sense, this concept of women as homemakers takes on many different meanings, not just this emotional, affective part that we associate with that term, but also economic, livelihood-related, and infrastructural aspects, many of which have remained invisible. For instance, the role of women as construction workers is unrecognized, undervalued, and underpaid. In construction labor, women workers are relegated almost universally to this 'helper' role, which involves hard physical labor but is considered unskilled and therefore is paid less.

Women are not allowed into the skilled sectors of construction such as masonry, carpentry, plumbing, or even painting. Now, the home itself for women also has many different meanings, different values, and different functions. It is a multi-dimensional,

multi-value space. Since women typically spend a significant amount of their time in the domestic space, this space is very important in determining their social, economic, and emotional well-being.

Depending on a host of factors, the home may be a refuge, a place of rest, privacy, and the comforts of family, but it may equally be a prison a place of oppression, subjugation and violence. It is for these reasons, as feminists have insisted for years, that the so-called privacy of the home and the question of what happens inside the household becomes matters of public concern, become political questions. For working class women, the home is also a space of work.

Here, we consider both the unpaid work of household reproduction, that is cooking, cleaning and childcare, and paid work. Large numbers of working class women because of their domestic responsibilities or because of cultural constraints in terms of going out of the house to work can only participate in the labor market through home-based occupations such as piecework, tailoring, embroidery, small assembly jobs in leather or plastic goods, soap making, etc. So, homes as workspaces bring in a whole set of new questions about the boundaries and the spillovers between women's domestic and livelihood space and time.

Then, the home is also an anchor for social networks. For many women, relationship with their neighbors are the scaffolding of their economic survival as well as their personal well-being. Exchanges of food, childcare, information, emotional support and other resources between homes thus expand the boundaries within which social reproduction occurs to encompass a wider neighborhood space. The support and solidarity that women receive from their neighbors then

Rather than from their family, it is often what can turn this house into a home. And finally, for women, as for all sections of urban society today, the house is also an asset, a piece of real estate that can be leveraged for other goods, such as loans. So, here I've tried to sketch the multiple and sometimes conflicting ways in which the home constitutes the economic, social, and psychological foundations of women's lives, particularly in low-income communities.

All these meanings and values of housing for women have important implications for the design, not only of the home space but also, very importantly, for the space of the surroundings and indeed the urban neighborhood, which I think is a very important scale to consider when you're talking about a gendered perspective on urban housing. Now we

go to the second theme that I want to look at, which is housing adequacy from a gender perspective.

And this concept of adequacy of housing has become important in housing policy, and it takes into account this multi-dimensionality of housing. The UN Habitat's definition of adequate housing, which has also been adopted by Indian policy documents, encompasses a number of things, such as security of tenure, accessible location with regard to proximity to work and other amenities,

And a number of environmental and social conditions, such as adequate lighting, space, security, and basic facilities. But according to UN-Habitat, the parameters of this adequacy have to be worked out in each context along with the people concerned. So, here we will consider the dimensions of adequacy from a women's perspective. The first thing that I want to look at is space, and here we look at three dimensions: amount, design, and quality of space. In informal settlements where homes are very small, you will find that everyday household activities like washing, cooking, sleeping, etc.,

that is, washing utensils and clothes, sleeping, etc., spill out into the street. And when such spillover spaces are absent, as in poorly designed tenement housing, living conditions become intolerably congested and constrained. Therefore, this idea of adequate housing must take into account the multiple functions that houses fulfill for women, as we outlined in the previous theme. Next is location. As we saw, the location of the home, particularly in terms of proximity to the workplace, is crucial for working-class women, both because it allows them to negotiate the balance between home responsibilities and the need to work, but also because women typically walk or use public transport to work. And in addition, since women view the city from the perspective of bringing up children and running homes, they are concerned with questions like where the food shops and markets are, where you get better prices, quality, and range of foodstuffs, where the water sources, the schools, playgrounds, clinics, etc., are located.

Since women's lives are closely entwined with children's lives, their locational concerns would take into account facilities for children. So, mobility is the next aspect. As I hinted above, women's mobility needs are very different from men's, as women rely on pedestrian and public transport modes of travel. So, while men may be concerned about the state of roads to drive their two-wheelers and autos, women care about pavements,

about crossings, about access roads to bus stops, about the frequency, reliability, and comfort of buses.

So, housing adequacy in terms of connectivity and mobility from a women's perspective would call for investments in pedestrian and public transport infrastructure. And then, we come to basic amenities. So again, returning to women's responsibility for social reproduction in the household. Homemaking also means a heavy reliance on various state-provided services and amenities for running the house, like water, sanitation, garbage arrangements, ration shops, and childcare. As we know in the Indian context, women are responsible for water collection and storage.

Hence, the quantity, timing, and quality of water supply are very critical aspects of this homemaking role. Time spent fetching and filling water due to a lower number of taps, irregular supplies, or low pressure, or time spent waiting for tankers, can make or break a woman's ability to participate in the workforce, to organize her working time at home, or to rest. If women have to buy water due to unreliable supplies, this impacts the household budget. Poor water quality also impacts the health of family members, thus adding to both the household's health expenditure and the care burden of women.

Sanitation, as I indicated at the start of this lecture, is one of the most pressing problems for women in informal settlements. In the absence of in-house toilets and where community toilets are too few, badly designed, poorly maintained, or lack water, it is women who suffer the most, as men find it easier to find outside spaces. Poor women undergo tremendous hardship in their search for safe spaces, which are increasingly rare in big cities, and timings, which have to be before sunrise and after sunset, in order to defecate.

Increasingly, women are rejecting the dangers and indignities of open defecation and are demanding good toilet facilities, even when, for example, they move homes to a marital home. In Mumbai, the Right to Pee movement was launched in 2011 by a consortium of about 33 NGOs to highlight the lack of clean and safe public toilets and demand action. Now, regarding garbage, women are usually responsible for waste disposal. So, solid waste management options, for example, whether there are bins close by or door-to-door collection, make a very big difference to women.

And then we come to the question of safety. So, of the many ways in which women experience cities differently, safety is one of the most significant. Safety threats to women and girls arise from numerous sources, from domestic relations within the

household to infrastructure conditions at the neighborhood level. As Shilpa Phadke has argued, the question is not only about how women can feel safe and be safe, but also about how their rights to public space can be safeguarded and expanded. In terms of domestic relations, as jobs for men have been declining in cities, many women not only shoulder a larger burden for earning for the household, but they also have to deal with all of the second-order problems of male unemployment like alcoholism, anger, abuse, control and surveillance over their bodies. So, in terms of safety arrangements for women outside the house, simple infrastructural arrangements can make all the difference, like good lighting in and around the buildings and on access roads, good public toilets, water facilities, user-friendly public spaces where people hang out. Looking at all this then in sum, thinking about housing adequacy from a woman's perspective forces us to think about housing as an assemblage of practices, infrastructures, and networks within which the housing unit is embedded.

And finally, third, I come to the infrastructural and legal aspects of housing. Due to a combination of social, cultural and legal factors, women's rights to own, use and control land, housing and property are severely constrained across the country. Large numbers of women do not own property, do not inherit property or even do not benefit from joint ownership of properties. And in the current situation where urban wealth, assets and income are closely tied to ownership or control over real estate, this puts women at a significant disadvantage. It exacerbates their dependence on men and their vulnerability to eviction, abuse, exploitation and poverty.

It is very easy for women to be pushed into homelessness in cities. Due to low levels of home ownership, women-headed households as well as single women are heavily dependent on rental housing. Yet, single women seeking to rent a house encounter all kinds of obstacles including stigma, discrimination and surveillance. For this reason, forms of collective housing like dormitories, working women's hostels, shared female rentals and other forms of women-friendly housing arrangements are very important to consider in cities. Important progress has been made recently in housing policies both at central and state levels in India where they have begun to focus on home ownership for women

And many make it mandatory that ownership documents or allotments are put in the names of women. A house title is important not just for itself or for the ownership of the property, but also for women's economic security, as it gives them access to formal credit for businesses or for their economic activity. In addition, these policies have created

special schemes that allow women to access housing loans at concessional interest rates and to receive tax benefits and waivers on stamp duties. Another important institutional innovation that is giving women access to credit is the microcredit route or self-help groups.

Since these are also organized on the basis of residential proximity and neighborhoods, they form another way of linking the neighborhood to financial support for women. Finally, what we have seen so far is that when planning and policymaking in the housing sector is done by men for men, important aspects of homemaking are overlooked. Since women's housing needs rely on a range of services that local governments, like municipalities, provide, this analysis has highlighted the need for women to have greater participation in local government. I'm going to close there with a simple statement: building gender-friendly housing based on the perspectives we have seen so far will make housing friendlier and more sensitive for all residents of cities.

(Video Story)