

GENDER INCLUSIVE URBAN SPACES: ISSUES AND QUESTIONS

Lecture02

Module 1.2 - Women and the Urban Transport Systems

Hello, I am Parvati Sunaina, an Associate Fellow with the Centre for Socio-Economic and Environmental Studies, Kochi. I am also the coordinator of the Urban Research Centre functioning in CSES. Today through this lecture, the research question that I would like to raise is whether the urban transport planners are responsive to the needs of women who are the users of public transport. Now, as all of you know, this lecture has been planned in accordance with the master online course with respect to addressing the SDG 11, which aims to ensure safe cities for everyone, safe and inclusive cities for everyone. And the target that I'm addressing today is with respect to target 11.2, which addresses the transport need.

Now, as all of you know, with respect to women and public transport, there are very specific patterns that are demonstrated by men and women. It is known that women depend on public transport more, they walk more, they do not have access to their own transport because of limited economic resources compared to men. They also are more likely to have children travelling with them, taking elderly to the hospitals etc. because of the caregiving responsibilities. They are also, the chances of them carrying loads with respect to shopping for home, groceries, etc. is more.

So women are also likely to be carrying loads more when compared to men. So, all these are aspects that need to be looked into when the public transport is being planned. Now, another thing that needs to be emphasized is that access to safe transport is something that liberates women and also makes them access work, education, etc., which are necessary to ensure that there is equality in the society. But, what is of concern is that there are significant security and safety reasons which make women scared of traveling out alone at night, even with respect to public transport and public spaces, they have not been able to feel safe because of the lack of security that is to be provided by the authorities.

Today, I'll be specifically talking about Kochi, which is the most urbanized region in Kerala. Kerala, like most of you know, has made excellent strides with respect to ensuring equality of girls and women across all conventional indicators - let it be

education, health, employment, etc. But, with respect to safety, when it comes to safety of women in public spaces, a study by Sakhi, which was conducted in the two other major cities in Kerala, that is Trivandrum and Kozhikode, it was seen that majority of the women have experienced some kind of sexual abuse or catcalling etc. in public spaces, transport hubs, even within public transport such as buses and trains etc. So, despite being empowered with respect to all conventional indicators, women in Kerala do have security issues in public spaces. Now, moving on to the specific case of Kochi. When we think of Kochi or when we look at the - and what I intend to speak today is that, what is the overview of public transport scenario in Kochi?

What have been the recent changes in the transport scenario? Like Kochi has been one place where there has been massive changes with respect to transport scenario with the introduction of the Kochi metro. So what have been the changes with respect to that? And definitely, something that has impacted all of us is COVID.

Now, COVID is something that has affected the transport sector significantly. So, what has been the impact of that on Kochi, and also with respect to how these particular changes, let it be the Kochi metro and also the COVID scenario, how it impacts women is something that we need to discuss separately. And finally, I would like to wrap it up with some suggestions towards the planners when talking about making cities and public transport women inclusive. Now with respect to Kochi, Kochi is the commercial, industrial and financial hub of Kerala.

Kochi is situated somewhere in the centre of Kerala and it is the most densely populated region in Kerala wherein there are around 7000 people packed into a square kilometre. Kochi is a very small place with around 98 square kilometres. It is also spread, when you look at the map of Kochi, you can see that the space is divided into the mainland and the western side of Kochi, which are spread across backwaters. Now, Kochi's urban agglomeration, when you look at the intercensal population growth, what we see is that the population growth in Kochi has kind of stagnated because there is no more scope for further residential development within the Kochi city limits. But when you look at the urban agglomeration, which is a set of other municipalities and panchayats bordering Kochi, it is seen that there is massive growth in these areas because these suburbs are growing and people from these places are coming into Kochi for their education, health, work and other requirements. So, while Kochi has been stagnant with respect to growth, the surrounding areas have been growing significantly.

So, when we think of transport, we also need to think of who are the people coming into Kochi, from where all they are coming and what are the kinds of transport facilities that they currently access. So, Now, when we talk of transport in Kochi with respect to the transport scenario in Kochi, as I said, Kochi Metro is something that has come in very recently, that is in 2017. But before that, in fact, even now, private buses are a major public transport for the population in Kochi as well as those who come into Kochi because there is an extensive network of private buses, more than 600 if I am not wrong, that are flying within the city limits from different locations around Kochi. Now, there are also public transport which is operated by the Kerala Urban Road Transport Corporation. Now, with respect to the facilities inside the public buses, what is seen is that there have been a new type of technology that has been introduced under the JNNURM which has now been taken over by the KURTC wherein air-conditioned, non air-conditioned and low floor buses are flying. These are technological changes that are very welcome because as I said before, women are likely to travel more with elderly children etc. So, such kind of ease of getting into the buses and getting down from the buses are likely to help them more, as compared to men. So, these are definitely welcome changes. And another thing as I mentioned, is with respect to the geography of Kochi. As I mentioned, there are lots of people who are residing in islands and also the western side of Kochi which is surrounded by backwaters. Boat is a very important public transport for those who are coming from these sides of area into the mainland. So in Kochi we have currently different types of transport solutions.

And there is an attempt to make it integrated, but it is yet to see success with respect to integration of all these modes of transport. And also auto rickshaws are a major form of transport which is dependent upon by the public, especially for ensuring the last and first mile connectivity. So they operate a feeder transport from the bus stations and boat stations to the destinations of the persons who are travelling.

Now, when we move on to the gender dimensions of people who are usually using public transport, I would like to draw attention to a study which was done by my institute, that is CSES some years back, that is in 2014, wherein we had analyzed the patterns of persons who are commuting for work into Kochi. So, we had looked at both men and women. Since I am talking about women, I would like to point out some observations that we had made with respect to women who are commuting to work in Kochi. What is seen in the profile of the women who commute to work in Kochi has to be discussed. There are domestic workers, there are retail sector workers and there are also office goers and we

also looked at a major section of growing community in Kochi, that is IT professionals. What is seen is that the domestic workers depend solely on public transport.

The retail sector workers are also dependent. The office workers are also dependent and IT professionals have their own transport or have office transport. So, what is seen is that the domestic workers and retail workers who are coming from, as I mentioned before - the islands and the suburbs and the west side of Kochi, which also has both as a major transport option, are the major users of public transport with respect to women.

I would also like to add that school going and college going girls are also a major section of the society who uses public transport. Since I am talking only about women who are commuting to work, I will not be mentioning them here now. So, what is seen is that the one way commute for these women is more than at least an average of an hour and they do it early mornings, like these domestic workers start from their houses at around 6 a.m.

so that they reach into the city by the time for their work. And with respect to the retail workers, it is seen that they return home quite late when the shops and all close by 8, around 8, they return home very late. And what they mentioned is that they have a shortage or the sufficiency of bus, as well as boat services in these times is quite limited, which is quite difficult for them to commute and also they have overcrowding because of the limited resources that are available at these two points of time.

And also, they pointed out the issues of safety. Given that they are travelling alone and the early hours as well as the late night hours are quite unsafe, they pointed out the lack of street lights in such areas where they are coming from. It is not, especially within the city limits, it is seen in the suburbs from where they are coming that there is a shortage of street lights which adds to their concerns of safety.

So, these are aspects that are not yet addressed properly by the authorities. So, these are points that need to be looked into. And also, let's see about public sanitation facilities. It is also seen to be inadequate within Kochi which also needs to be improved when we are talking about ensuring inclusiveness and access to public facilities for women within an urban scenario.

Now, let me draw your attention to the recent changes. As I mentioned, there has been Kochi Metro which was launched in 2017 and also not only in Kochi, there has been an explosion I would say of call-taxis and call-autos that are app operated. So, this has kind of changed the transport scenario especially with respect to last mile and first mile

connectivity when you have cars and autos coming to your doorstep at the click of a button.

But who are the women? I will talk only about women here. Who are the women who are accessing Kochi Metro services and also such app-based services? As I don't need to emphasize, these are women who are from economically and socially more developed sections of the society and these are not affordable to the domestic workers and the retail sector workers who have limited access to resources.

So, these developments have not helped them as they have helped the other more economically developed sections of the society. And it is also seen that with respect to the coverage of the Kochi metro services, we can see that the west side of Kochi is completely ignored - from where this mass of women who are coming into work for Kochi city has been ignored, with respect to the planning, with respect to the Kochi metro layout. Definitely the access to land is a major issue because the west side of Kochi is much more densely populated as compared to the mainland of Kochi. So, in urban transport planning, such women have been ignored which needs to be addressed since they are still depending on the conventional modes of public transport. Now, this is where I would like to point out the impact of COVID. Now, as all of us know, we have all been affected by COVID in some way or the other.

But there are certain sections of the society, certain sectors of the economy that have been affected quite more significantly than the others. And transport is definitely one. When people got locked down in their houses, they were afraid of going out. They always preferred going out in their own transport facilities.

So, public transport has reduced quite significantly. And this has affected the women who were using public transport. Even with respect to the past one, one and a half years, we can see that the kind of transport that has come out on the roads newly or freshly, let it be cars, let it be bikes, there has been more male presence.

It was already, there was a male dominance with respect to usage of private transport, which has now increased with the fear of COVID and all that. So again, women are now facing a double whammy wherein they are at the risk of losing jobs because retail sector has been one sector that has been affected significantly and women who are not considered as primary breadwinners like- we recently have a study on gender issues among journalists.

What women journalists pointed out is that there is a lack of public transport during the night times, which makes it difficult for them to travel for work. And especially with respect to COVID, it was also pointed out - when there are layoffs, women are more susceptible to be laid off because they are not looked at as the primary breadwinner of the family. So, when there is a man who is the primary breadwinner, the chance of him being shown the door is lesser as compared to women. So, the women are at the risk of losing job because they are not able to go to work because of lack of transport facilities.

A recent study - a quick assessment of the COVID situation in Kerala that CSES had done through an online survey showed very clear differences with respect to availability to own transport, work from home and also fear of infection etc. which was clearly showing that while women are working more from home because of lack of transport and also the additional responsibilities at home, men who have access to private transport are venturing out more. Technically, this scenario is changing now with respect to COVID and lockdown restrictions.

But, it is seen that women have been affected more and the lack of transport is one of the major reasons why women have had to take a backstep. Now, as I mentioned, the research question at the beginning of the lecture, the research question that I wanted to raise is that whether the urban transport planners are addressing the needs of those sections of women who are accessing public transport. I am not talking about women as a homogeneous group.

I am talking about women who are currently using public transport despite there being significant advances in the transport scenario in Kochi. Let it be Kochi Metro, app-based services, everything which has significantly improved the quality of life for a section of society. Like, a usership survey among Kochi Metro users have shown that the average income of a metro rider is around twenty to forty thousand, which is unimaginable for the section of the society that I am talking about. The non-users' average income is around 6,000 to 2,000 which is where the domestic workers and the retail sector workers are coming in.

So, these are issues that need to be addressed by the authorities. Let it be the local government. As I mentioned, Kochi is an urban agglomeration and it is not only Kochi Municipal Corporation that needs to take steps. All the municipal areas, panchayats and all other bodies which are part of the urban agglomeration must take integrated and coordinated steps towards ensuring access to safe and inclusive and secure public

transport for women for which there needs to be an interaction among different segments of the population. Let it be students, let it be domestic workers, let it be retail workers, let it be office staff. The authorities need to engage with these different segments of the society to understand their issues and bring up sustainable solutions for these issues that they are pointing out. While I completely acknowledge the stride that has been made with the coming of Kochi Metro, we have a reduction in traffic, we have reduction in pollution and all that but, this should not only be the base for urban transport planning. We need to ensure that the vulnerable segments of the society who are already marginalized are not having a double disadvantage. With respect to women, the double disadvantage is now multiplying, I would say. There is a disadvantage of being a woman who has limited access to transport. Now, with the COVID and all that, the issues have doubled and with no access to the advancements made in the transport planning in the society, these women from the vulnerable sections are being made more vulnerable or sidelined. This should not happen.

And also with respect to, as I mentioned, the safety and security issues, we need to have street lights for which safety audits need to be done by the authorities - vulnerable areas wherein there are repeated reports of abuse, there are no street lights, there are issues of social misconduct, etc. Such areas need to be marked and punishments doled out, and also street lights ensured and all kind of safety precautions taken for women. Two initiatives that I would like to point out which I found impressive was the She Taxi initiative by the government of Kerala wherein women cab drivers were encouraged. It had taken a back step before COVID but it is also observed that with COVID women and elderly have come up and are accessing the services of She Taxi more, because it was given free of cost during the lockdown and all that.

So, such initiatives wherein there are women drivers who might be able to make the women feel more secure - such initiatives must be encouraged. And another public initiative that was taken by the Department of Women and Child Development was the "Pothu Idam Entethum" (Public Space is Mine Too) which was done on the Nirbhaya day on December 29th where women were welcomed or encouraged to come out and step out in the night and embrace the city and the public spaces as their own. Though, these are I would say one-off incidents but such incidents need to take place so that women have the confidence of embracing the public space and also adopting public transport as a safe means of transportation. So, with this, I would like to wrap up my lecture. I hope whoever is attending this course has got an idea of how the transport scenario in Kochi

has been and has evolved and how the women's issues need to be addressed more sincerely. Thank you.

(Women In Urban Transport - Video Story)