Private Bodies, Public Space:

How Women Navigate Violence in Gendered Spaces in Colombo, Sri Lanka

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May 2020

Final assignment submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for post-graduate degree in International Gender Studies at the GRÓ Gender Equality Studies and Training Programme.

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Reykjavík, Iceland, 2020

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Acknowledgements

I thank the GEST Programme and the University of Iceland for the opportunity to sink my teeth into this warm soufflé of feminist theory and activism. I've spent a lot of time in the fear that I was not academic enough, not clever enough, or not vocal enough to talk about feminism with validity. This fantastic programme and its constellation of incredible global lecturers showed me that true feminism requires simply empathy, curiosity, and a thirst for equality. I'd also like to thank the resident GEST staff and professors for being unfailingly patient and kind through the bizarre reality of pandemic life.

In particular, I thank my supervisor Randi Stebbins for her terrific, consistent guidance in coaxing this paper out of me – em dashes, warts, and all.

To the other Fellows in the GEST 2020 cohort: Your experiences and humour have taught me more than even Judith Butler ever could. I'm deeply grateful for this opportunity to learn with and from you all.

My gratitude goes out to my former boss at the IFC, Carmen Niethammer, who kindly nominated me for this programme, and was the first person who taught me how to use a "gender lens" in my work.

I'd also like to thank Sharanya Sekaram, who in the true spirit of feminist solidarity suggested this opportunity to me, and coincidentally co-wrote the excellent report that informed a lot of my research for this paper.

Finally, I thank my wonderful family. In particular, my gratitude goes out to my partner Gayan for his unconditional support, and for refusing to allow my imposter syndrome to enter our home.

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Abstract

Public space is often an obstacle course of gendered violence for Sri Lanka's women. Robust socio-economic metrics for women (maternal health, education, etc.), particularly in comparison to its sub-continental neighbours, haven't translated into gender equality. Women are largely invisible in political representation, dwindling in workforce representation, and conspicuously absent from public space and life. The purpose of this paper is to question the depth of this inequality by asking a few simple questions. Where are Colombo's women? What structural and interpersonal violence do they face in public space? How does poverty or marginalization exacerbate these issues? To answer these questions, this paper explores the social and cultural construction of gender norms, especially those that require women to stay within the private, reproductive sphere of the home and punishes women that engage with public space for enjoyment or leisure, rather than in service of the capitalist patriarchy.

Keywords: *Public Space, Gender Norms, Violence Against Women, Sri Lanka, South Asia*

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka's public spaces are heavily male dominated, excluding women from social participation, workplaces, and decision-making fora. The quickest way to understand this exclusion is to walk the streets of Colombo, particularly after dark or outside the affluent city centre. You'll soon find yourself asking: where are the women? As the sunlight dwindles, you'll see men at ease, eating, smoking, chatting, sipping tea. No women. As the country's commercial capital, Colombo is home to over 2.4 million of the country's 21 million people and is a dense hub of economic and social activity. To understand how women navigate public space in this seaside metropolis – or avoid it completely – it is necessary to acknowledge three barriers:

1. Physical – Interpersonal violence and infrastructural barriers to women's movement
2. Social – Social and cultural norms and restrictions
3. Mental – Fear and assessment of risk

These barriers inextricably interlace to create hostile environments for women and marginalized identities to traverse. A basic intersectional analysis (Crenshaw, 1991) demonstrates that while all women face some modicum of hostility in public spaces, women who are discernible as minorities, trans women, and sex workers face higher levels of fear and intimidation (Jayawardena & de Alwis, 1996). This deliberate limitation of a woman's spatial range is caused by the anxieties of real and potential violence, which illustrates that "the physical structure of a city reflects and reinforces inequalities of its social structure through not being equally accessible to both the genders" (Desai, 2007). This construction is a spatial expression of patriarchy (Valentine, 1989).

Within the Indian subcontinent, feminists and researchers such as Madhavi Desai (2007), Shilpa Phadke (2011) and Shelly Tara (2011) have long been exploring the ideas of public space and women's rights to traverse it. However, public discourse in Sri Lanka on the topic has been largely shaped by online activism and two prominent NGO reports on the ubiquity of sexual harassment on public transport (UNFPA, 2018; Butt & Sekaram, 2019). The lion's share of the online activism is reactionary, spiking after viral videos of public violence against women or women's stories of harassment. There is little sustained movement or government interest in understanding violence in Sri Lanka's public spaces, let alone women's experiences of it.

Thus, it is necessary to evaluate how public discourse and movements around women's access to public space can be influenced, using lessons from the Indian subcontinent. Analysis of the gendering of public space can be a tool for policymakers and feminists to understand and pick at the threads of

the social and cultural norms that allow violence against women, and the ways in which systemic gendered issues limit or legitimize women's use of public space in Colombo. It is also crucial to shift focus from viewing public space as a "neutral setting – an objective and inevitable backdrop against which social change happens, to articulating a mutually constitutive, dialectical relationship between social structure and space" (Ranade, 2007). Understanding this relationship helps us also understand the role of socio-spatial constructs and the spatial patriarchy (Valentine, 1989) in aiding the negotiation and production of social relations.

Inadequate evidence leaves historians divided as to the extent of the role that colonialism played in constructing these social relations in Sri Lanka, although puritanical Victorian morality certainly played a role in creating shame and social stigma around sex. Certain aspects about Sri Lanka prior to imperial rule are clear – women did experience much more relaxed norms around sexuality and sexual relations (Carbone-Lopez & Miller, 2013) and partial nudity was a normal part of tropical life (Fernando R. , 1992). Academics suggest that the historic cocktail of colonialism and civil war regressed Sri Lanka's natural trajectory of social transformation, hindering women's equality (Goonesekere, 2013) and LGBTIQ rights.

1.1 Defining Public Space

UNESCO defines public space as "an area or place that is open and accessible to all peoples, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, age or socio-economic level" (UNESCO, 2017). If we were to adhere to this description and the principles of accessibility, very few streets, pavements, or parks would actually fit the definition around the world, let alone in Sri Lanka's capital city of Colombo. In this context, it would be more accurate to view public space as an area or place that is legally intended to be open and accessible to all peoples.

The UNESCO definition of public space also acknowledges "the virtual spaces available through the internet as a new type of public space that develops interaction and social mixing" (UNESCO, 2017). This definition recognizes the fluidity between physical space and online platforms, especially when it comes to the harassment of women and the harassment of women's bodies in public. For example, women's fear of doxxing, secret videoing, or other forms of online abuse has a subsequent effect on women's engagement with physical spaces (Banerji & Shearman, 2019; Wu, 2015).

A definition of public space in this context would be incomplete without recognition of the public sphere as a space, not necessarily physical, where open discussion and ideas can be shared, versus the private sphere as the home and family life (Habermas, 1962). This division is gendered, with

societies seeing the public sphere for men to share ideas, political beliefs, etc, and the private sphere for women to exist in (Tétreault, 2001). The distinction between these spheres and the difficulties that women face in the outside world are structural and social barriers that were not birthed in a vacuum, but are rather the product of millennia of social conditioning and gender roles built in order to keep women at home and responsible for unpaid reproductive labour and care work (Armstrong, 1997).

1.2 The Right to Public Space (Beyond Neo-Liberalism)

In the neo-liberal landscape, the personal has been depoliticized, and women's agency and safety are viewed primarily in relation to their contribution to the economy (Fraser, 2013). Feminist scholars counter this by instead analysing the right of women to have full and fair access to public spaces because it is simply their right to have the same opportunities and agency as men in their city. It is the fundamental principle that women have an equal right to enjoy their living spaces and their cities as men do – not purely as harried commuters but as partakers of pleasure and leisure (Khan, 2014). Analyses of public spaces and power relations must always ask a simple question, as Dr Cynthia Enloe does: Where are the women (Enloe, 2014)?

Economist Amartya Sen's (1999) Capability Approach is another refreshing alternative to neoliberalism's restrictive method of assessing wealth or success: GDP. Sen's theory was expanded and explored further by philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2003) , and together they began to look at human capability or what people were actually capable of in order to live healthy, happy lives. This goes beyond a simple human needs analysis because, in Sen's own words, giving a physically disabled person a bicycle would not materially change the quality or capability of their life. Nussbaum expands upon the point, telling us that "Growth is a bad indicator of life quality because it fails to tell us how deprived people are doing; women figure in the argument as people who are often unable to enjoy the fruits of a nation's general prosperity" (Nussbaum, 2003). Thus, the capabilities approach is an intersectional, highly localized analysis that takes into account gender, access to opportunity, and even access to public space and fresh air.

It is crucial to mention that demanding equal rights and opportunity as men does not mean that women and other identities strive to belong in a homogeneous block with men. Feminist theory requires a thorough understanding of women's unique barriers and thus strives for unique solutions. Furthermore, the very construction of individual rights within a neoliberal reality is also gendered:

> The most obvious example of that in feminism is that the clamour for equal rights, equal protection in employment, and equal access to education and equal rights in breaking through the glass ceiling, that sort of thing, are all rights that benefit those at the top of the order more than they benefit domestic workers, childcare workers and so forth. They may get some of the trickle down from certain kinds of rights, but bourgeois rights fundamentally depoliticise the stratifications in the field where they are applied. (Brown, 2016)

Sri Lanka has a fraught history with Western concepts of human rights (Goonesekere, 2013), particularly in the context of the 30-year civil war. Mainstream or dominant race rhetoric has often positioned international human rights in direct opposition to local culture (Fisher, 2020). Thus, at this juncture it is necessary to stress that by considering women's rights as equal persons, it does not establish a false dichotomy between rights and culture. It is necessary to avoid this over-simplification, or tendency to "speak of rights as if they are culture-less at best or, at worst, born of a superior culture" (Tamale, 2011).

Some feminist critiques of the human rights discourse question the appearance of human rights prioritizing individual civil liberties (which usually focus on ownership and property), as well as "for being male-centered, and for not including as fundamental entitlements some abilities and opportunities that are fundamental to women in their struggle for sex equality" (Nussbaum, 2003). As Professor Savitri Goonesekere (2013) explains, the main limitation of this critique is the lack of recognition that "international and even national human rights norms have moved towards recognising the indivisibility and interdependence of both the traditional civil liberties of the West, and the social and economic rights that have been the focus of communitarian socialist political ideologies" (Goonesekere, 2013).

1.3 Defining Violence

In order to establish an understanding of the barriers to women accessing public space, violence can be defined within an epistemological framework, which was often used by post-colonial feminist researchers in understanding the construction of the other (Spivak, 1988). In addition to this, to truly understand the pervasive personal and structural violence women face in public spaces, it is necessary to question whether the othering of women as invisible, insignificant, and irrelevant in public policy and discourse (Beauvoir, 1949) is the cause of continued violence or whether it is part of the violence itself.

It is also necessary to accept that the threat or potential of violence is also violence (Galtung, 1990), because the threat itself causes fear and an inability to live fully (Condon, Lieber, & Maillochon, 2005). There is legal validity for this concept of a threat being violence, as the term "assault and battery" doesn't refer to one crime, but two – assault, an attempt or threat of harm, and battery, the actual harm itself (Penal Code of Sri Lanka, Ordinance 19, 1941). To add another interlaced layer of restriction, a woman's willingness to supercede this fear or threat of violence and take the risk of accessing public space regardless, especially in the South Asian context, is to risk reputational damage (Phadke, 2013). In a sexual assault in public space, the reputational damage does not fall on the male perpetrator due to the essentialist perspective that men are predisposed to violence and are thus expected to behave in a sexually aggressive manner (Murnen, Wright, & Kaluzny, 2002).

Research across academic subjects has shown that women's violation of their gender role as the submissive other results in immediate and violent reactions ranging from sexual harassment, creation of discomfort, or physical violence (Halper & Rios, 2018). This demonstrates that epistemic violence allows structural violence, and both epistemic violence and structural violence encourage interpersonal violence. Or, as Galtung (1990) posits, "We can see that cultural violence makes direct and structural violence look, even feel, right – or at least not wrong. Just as political science is about two problems – the use of power and the legitimation of the use of power – violence studies are about two problems: the use of violence and the legitimation of that use" (Galtung, 1990, p. 292).

CHAPTER TWO: CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

2.1 Situating Sri Lanka in the Indian Subcontinent Context

Despite comparatively excellent socio-economic indicators for women on fronts such as education and maternal mortality (Central Bank, 2019) in comparison to its Indian subcontinent neighbours, Sri Lanka's women face extremely high barriers to robust engagement in public and economic life. For example, women's labour force participation is currently at a low of 36% (World Bank, 2020) and has been showing marginal decreases annually. One of the core reasons for this is a pervasive lack of personal safety in public (International Labour Organization, 2014).

It is also interesting to note that Sri Lanka's relatively high socio-economic indicators for women have often been used as a strawman argument for not exploring challenges and gendered issues that arise from a deeply patriarchal culture (Hyndman & de Alwis, 2004). For example, any query as to why Sri Lanka has abysmally low rates of women's political participation (barely 5% women in parliament) is met with the reminder that Sri Lanka has had two female premiers, including the world's first female head of government. The fact is, both positions were gained via the "widows, wives, and daughters" syndrome, which very much subscribes to the principles of the patriarchy (Kodikara, 2000). Sri Lanka's women are also the backbone the country's export economy, for the large tea and garment industries, and as domestic workers sending remittances back to the country (Samarasinghe, 1989). However, in all three of these roles (garment worker, tea plucker, domestic worker), women provide cheap and efficient labour that is often exploited and underpaid, but very rarely hold leadership roles that can provide agency (Hancock, 2006). For Sri Lanka's women workers, economic empowerment has not translated into social empowerment (Hancock, 2006).

Another example specific to the structuring of public space comes from the UN Habitat III Sri Lanka Country Report, which has a section titled 'Integrated Gender in Urban Development' that does not actually include a gender analysis or a pathway to mainstreaming gender in urban development, but rather establishes a laundry list of positive statistics involving women (Ministry of Housing and Sustainable Urban Development in Sri Lanka, 2015). This argument can also be seen in social discourse politically and online in response to women's complaints of sexual harassment, usually under the rallying cry of "we're not as bad as India". However, it is as yet unclear how high rates of sexual assault 800 km away in India are of any comfort to a woman who has just been groped on a Colombo street.

In a post-war era, there is also the enforcement of gratitude and trivialization of women's experiences in the victorious nation-state (Enloe, 2014), where women are told "it's not as bad as it

used to be during the war" and "there are worse things to complain about". This may stem from the false mythology around Sri Lanka's ancient culture, and a dogged adherence to masculine ethno-nationalism (Goonesekere, 2013). Both these concepts do not allow room for social transformation or criticism and narratives that go against the glorification of the nation (Enloe, 2014).

It is difficult to gauge the exact role of religion or ethnicity in causing differentials in violence against women in Colombo's public space, apart from the increased vulnerability of minorities (Jayawardena & de Alwis, 1996). For example, Muslim women in hijabs or abayas face exceptional harassment due to a mix of racism in the aftermath of the Easter Attacks (Ethirajan, 2019), as well as an assumption that they are submissive and unlikely to retaliate or report (Butt & Sekaram, 2019). In the shadow of continued militarization over the North, cities like Jaffna see more women on the streets on bicycles and scooters, in markets, and walking around.

However, this is not due to the relative safety of the North, where women are vulnerable to increased levels of sexual harassment both by the military and men in their own community (Groundviews, 2013), but rather simply highlights material necessity due to the disproportionate number of women-headed households left behind after the war (United Nations, 2015). In the South, there are quite a number of young women employed in garment factories who, despite often being the sole breadwinners in their families and propping up their communities, are subject to daily discomfort on their way home (UNFPA, 2018), to the point where employers had to begin providing transport and housing. Overall, an intersectional view of violence against women in Sri Lanka demonstrates that "the more marginalised women are in terms of ethnicity, class and status, the less access they have to justice and redress for such punishments" (Jayawardena & de Alwis, 1996).

2.2 Mapping Women's Navigation of Public Space

To unpack how private bodies navigate public space, I question whether women's bodies are actually private at all. Sri Lanka is not unique in its dogged media and social focus on women's bodies, pregnancies, and weight gain. Nor is it unique in its investment in women's bodies as culture bearers embodying the weight of culture and national/ethnic identity (Winter, 2016) across ethnicities. In fact, in the Sri Lankan post-ethnic conflict context, the need to keep women in check via prescriptions of behaviour and appearance comes from the burden women bear as cultural markers (Sirisena, 2018).

Academics like Jennifer Hyndman and Malathi de Alwis (2014), who sought to map the gendering of Sri Lankan spaces also explore the idea of culture bearing:

> Sri Lankan women, be they Sinhala, Tamil, or Muslim, continue to be constructed as the reproducers, nurturers, and disseminators of 'tradition', 'culture', 'community' and 'nation'. Such perceptions have not only legitimized the surveillance and disciplining of women's bodies and minds in the name of communal/national 'morality' and 'honour' but they have also re-inscribed the expectation that whatever women may do, they are primarily mothers and wives – they have to marry and have children and the domestic burden are solely theirs. (Hyndman & de Alwis, 2004, p. 541)

The discrete ways in which gender is performed can be seen not just in choices of transport, but also in actions such as body language or ownership of space. Some actions are smaller and less discernible like differences in stride or minutes spent loitering, but others are clear gender differentiators. For example, you may never ever see a woman spitting, urinating, or even smoking on a Colombo street (the latter is possible outside an upscale bar where the rules of engagement are quite different), but all three activities are ubiquitous for men. After dark, you will be hard pressed to find women on their own. In the popular city centre parks like Galle Face Green or Viharamahadevi Park, you will see plenty of women, but always accompanied by their families or partners. The behaviour of women on their own is steeped in a nervous brew of alertness, fear, risk-management and avoidance (Scott, 2003). This can include choosing different roads depending on the number of streetlights, choosing a longer route or crossing the road in order to avoid groups of young men, carrying safety pins, etc.

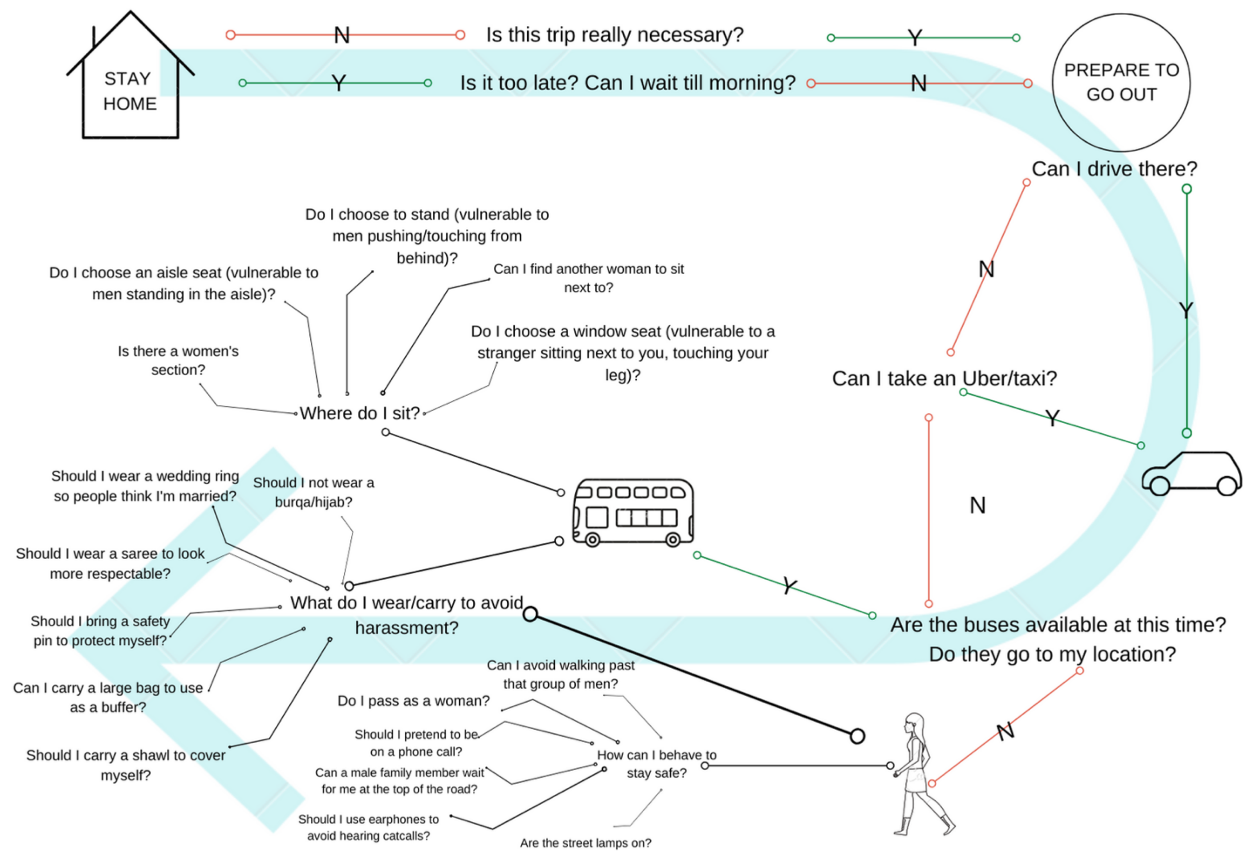

Figure 1: Representation of some, but certainly not all, of the decisions women need to make when planning to leave their homes. As displayed, wealth and other inequalities play a significant role in exposure to vulnerabilities.

Universally, women go through some variation of decision-tree mapping prior to any foray into public space (Ranade, 2007). As Figure 2 demonstrates, this can be deciding between outfits based on how revealing they are, between modes of transportation depending on how safe they are, and choosing the appropriate timing for an excursion depending on how crowded it may be. All these coping mechanisms are created by the geography of fear (Valentine, 1989).

Wealth can serve as a buffer, as women who can afford it will opt to drive, use a family car, or a ride-hailing service to complete their trips. The usage of privilege to avoid public space is a natural choice indicative of women's justified fear, but for most women in Sri Lanka, these are simply not options (UNFPA, 2018). In addition to this, sexual harassment and fear of violence in public places deepens disadvantages caused by existing socio-economic gaps, as "women who are younger, have lower incomes, less education, are single, living alone, and/or living in an urban environment will report higher levels of fear" (Scott, 2003).

Women are also disproportionately more dependent on public transport, not just because they generally have less access to private transportation due to financial constraints and inter-familial

dynamics, but also because they do higher numbers and more complex journeys than their male counterparts (UNFPA, 2018). This is because on an average day, men do a single round-trip journey between work and home, whereas women do a trip from home to drop kids off at school, to work, to the market, for general errands, to pick up kids, and head home (Ng & Acker, 2018).

This shrinking of the self due to fear and intimidation increases for LGBTIQ or gender non-conforming people, particularly on streets and public transport. Risk of assault is also higher globally, and transwomen in Sri Lanka report feeling an additional pressure to keep quiet in order to "pass" and avoid detection (Butt & Sekaram, 2019). Respondents to the same Oxfam survey said that they would also be less likely to support/defend an openly lesbian person who had been sexually harassed in front of them. Sex workers are also extremely vulnerable to physical violence, harassment by the police, and a lack of protection in the face of interpersonal violence in public space (Jordal, Wijewardene, & Öhman, 2019).

2.3 Women's Legitimized Use of Public Space

There is a pervasive feeling of discomfort for women in public space, and public space is usually navigated quickly, nervously, as a conduit between two private spaces. While women traverse these public spaces, it is imperative that they demonstrate purpose and manufacture respectability (Khan, 2014). These social codes – written and unwritten – teach people how to treat you. This ranges from dress and body language to timing and mode of travel (Ranade, 2007).

Feminist academic Dr Shilpa Phadke (2013) establishes the importance of the right to public space beyond neo-liberalism and ideas of safety. Phadke (2013) exposes the detrimental nature of conditional safety, and how it reinforces the patriarchal model by viewing women's access to public life only via the lens of safety, rather than say enjoyment or leisure. By conditional safety, she refers to a complex code of social norms such as clothing, class, caste, time, and purpose, that need to be adhered to in order to be viewed as a good girl, and thus entitled to safety.

Phadke's (2011) work, especially in her book *Why Loiter? Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets*, details the importance of women and girls loitering as an act of rebellion and subversion of gendered norms that require women's travel or presence in public spaces to have good purpose – preferably one that either benefits her family or the economy. Thus, by simply taking up space for enjoyment, leisure, or loitering, women are subverting both patriarchy and capitalism by wilfully engaging in neither productive nor reproductive labour. This is an extremely difficult concept to try and permeate into a Sri Lankan context, as women as primarily viewed as mothers, and secondarily as

workers (Alwis, 2002). There is no space in the collective social consciousness for the childless woman seeking leisure or enjoyment for her own sake (Butt & Sekaram, 2019)– so how can there be space in the physical realm?

The purpose of women's usage of public space in Colombo is also a key factor in the performance of respectability in order to gain acceptance (Fernando & Cohen, 2013). Travel for education, work, or childcare are socially allowed but still do not afford you any protection from sexual harassment or assault. As Shilpa Ranade writes, "Flânerie as an act of engaging with public space is not available to women" (Ranade, 2007), because using public space for purposes that do not directly contribute to your family, children, or the economy is a much trickier terrain.

Figure 2 is an approximation of how the social acceptability of women's usage of public space differs depending on their purpose. As a general rule, activities that subscribe to the patriarchal dictat of women's roles to provide reproductive labour or economic gain, both benefiting the capitalist patriarchy, are allowed (Armstrong, 1997). Activities that take women away from their homes and reproductive labour responsibilities for pleasure, exploration, or self-improvement are generally frowned upon (Phadke, 2011).

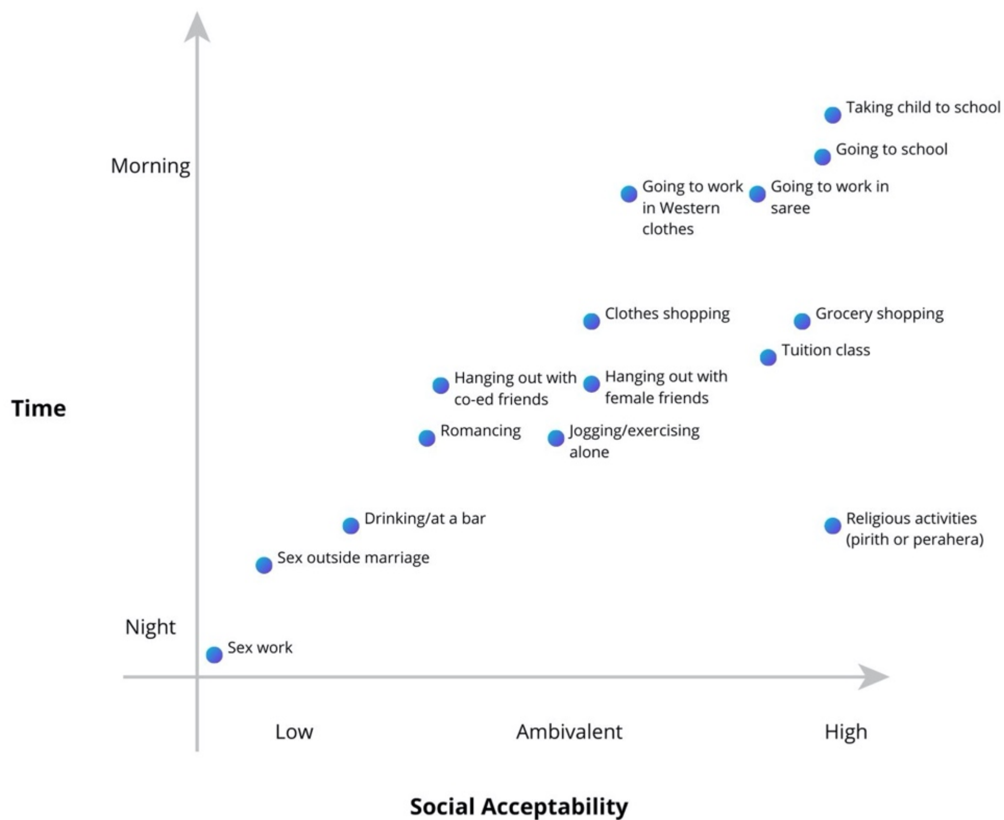

Figure 2: Graphical representation of how the social acceptability of women's usage of public space is influenced by the relationship between purpose and time, amongst other factors.

As displayed in Figure 2, small differences in attire (Western clothes versus saree) can also move the sliding scale of social acceptability up or down, as they are signals of virtuehood via respectable occupations (like government servant or teacher) and adherence to traditional values (Butt & Sekaram, 2019). Other small differences such whether the friend group is all-girls or is mixed also makes a difference in social perception. As a general rule, activities after dark are seen as male domain (Sirisena, 2018), with the exception of religious festivals, where women are encouraged to attend and participate late into the night, but never alone.

There is also a clear difference between the acceptability of “romancing” and “sex or sexual acts outside marriage” in Figure 2. Romancing – always in public space as private space is absolutely taboo for unmarried youth – is begrudgingly viewed as a natural form of courtship leading to marriage (Sirisena, 2018), and is usually little more than hand holding and kissing behind umbrellas. Again, as marriage is seen as a necessary part of a woman’s life and contribution to society, this activity is given a social pass. However, this social pass also extends to street harassment, benignly termed catcalling or eve-teasing, which is usually seen as a form of courtship rather than assault (Sirisena, 2018). In addition to this, the wording of the law regarding sexual harassment also speaks

of “the woman’s dignity” (Penal Code (Amendment) Act No. 22, 1995), or archaically, a matter of chastity, rather than “an infringement of women’s right to personal security and bodily integrity” (Goonesekere, 2013).

The production of gendered space is a core part of the discussion, as researcher Shelly Tara (2011) explores in her article about Delhi’s metro, and how women’s usage and access to space both within the trains via segregated compartments and on the platform via specially-demarcated waiting areas has created both a sense of legitimacy and safety. These women-only spaces are a useful safety mechanism within which women feel a sense of agency, ownership, and are afforded safe passage (Tara, 2011). However, there is valid criticism of these initiatives as simply addressing the symptoms of a deeply patriarchal structure that allows and condones violence against women, without addressing the structure itself (Tara, 2011). Women-only spaces also put the onus on women to protect themselves and take further precautions, which is part of a broader argument of victim-blaming. It also implies that the only way to keep women safe is segregation, separation, and removal from public space (Gardner, Cui, & Coiacetto, 2017).

If anything, a state’s demarcation of separate spaces on public transport and public spaces (usually less than 25% of the total) is an open admission that the entire world outside of the demarcated space, whether it’s a pink painted square on a train station platform, or a women’s bathroom, or the first two rows of a bus, belong to men. If women’s existence and right to safety within those spaces is legitimized and compartmentalized, does that mean that women’s right to safety outside of those spaces is not guaranteed?

2.4 Stranger Danger

The concept of the big bad stranger is common across the world – a violent rapist or thief who you don’t know and is an inevitable fixture of the public space. However, women are much more likely to be subject to violence by men they know, particularly in the home (domestic violence, rape, sexual abuse), and secondly at their workplace (sexual harassment) (Scott, 2003). As Shilpa Phadke puts it, “One might say that women are horribly unsafe at home, a space often of unfriendly bodies and speech and yet we do not stop women from being there. In fact we urge them to be in that very space” (Phadke, 2013). While rates of reportage for sexual violence are already extremely low, they drop even lower when it comes to abuse within the home. It is important to not to pit the two realities against each other, but understand how they intersect.

The curfews put into place due to the COVID-19 crisis saw a spike in domestic abuse cases across the world (UNFPA, 2020), Sri Lanka as no exception (Tegal & Galappatti, 2020). This demonstrates that women's lack of access to public space actually increased their exposure to violence once they were trapped inside their own homes with abusive partners. It could mean that men who were violent or sexually aggressive to women in public spaces now turned on their wives/partners, but it is more likely that these men were already abusive to their partners and exploited the entrapment of COVID-19 lockdowns. This demonstrates that it is not a few bad apples causing havoc in public space, but rather a larger and more pervasive culture of violence. Both these stages – public and private space – upon which violence against women are performed are set by patriarchy, gender roles, and oppression. However, the private sphere and women's inability or unwillingness to report are caused by interpersonal financial and familial bonds and dependencies (Scott, 2003). The violence itself is socially allowed due to cultures of shame and silence. Intimate partner violence against women is also legally condoned through laws that require adversarial "proof of fault" court cases to obtain a divorce (Goonesekere, 2013), as well as a lack of explicit criminalization of marital rape.

2.5 The Ladies Doth Protest Too Little

The relative lack of public protest in response to rampant sexual harassment in Sri Lanka boils down to two things: 1. The fear of stigma and reprisals 2. A complacency or lack of social appetite for protest.

It is natural that the quelling of private, individual protest potentially informs women's unwillingness to either repeat the protest formally to the police, or attempt to organize larger demonstrations against the violence they face routinely in public space. The backlash for those who do not accept male aggression and sexual harassment in public spaces ranges from disbelief and a lack of bystander support or engagement, to victim-blaming and even arrest. According to a recent Oxfam report, "Among the reasons for not taking any action against SGBV and not reporting incidents, women cited fear of public condemnation, hurting their families' reputation, having their mobility restricted, retaliation from the perpetrator or early marriage" (Butt & Sekaram, 2019). It is not unfathomable to suggest that women who have witnessed and experienced this deliberate silencing are unwilling to organize protest on a larger scale. Thus, it can be seen that public space in Sri Lanka is seen as an inhospitable medium for women's expression, dissent, or safety.

It is also possible that the façade of Sri Lanka's socio-economic gender successes has also caused a social complacency when it comes to gender issues in the country reminiscent of the Nordic Paradox

(Sanandaji, 2016). For example, Sri Lanka has had virtually no widespread physical public protest for gendered crimes as its neighbours have. While the brutal Nirbhaya rape and murder brought thousands of Indian women to the streets (Timmons, Harris, & Mandhana, 2012), and the Aurat March in Pakistan saw widespread feminist organization (Chughtai, 2020), Sri Lanka has never really had any large-scale women's demonstration barring that of the Jaffna Mothers' Front protesting for over 1000 days for information and return of their loved ones who seemingly disappeared in Government custody during and after the 30 year civil war (Amnesty International, 2017). In interviews with the Mothers' Fronts, a similar refrain of "we have nothing left" came up, demonstrating the hopelessness and severance from social norms and ties that gave these women the impetus to protest publicly in order to get answers about their lost land and the disappearances of their menfolk.

In Colombo, protests are usually seen as the fiefdom of angry, unemployed young public university students – predominantly male, and predominantly viewed with little sympathy by the urban commuters whose lives they disrupt (News1st, 2019). This general lack of sympathy in addition to an authoritarian government's desire for order has now led to a specific, cordoned-off area for protests called an "agitation site" (Perera, 2020). While this isn't an overtly gendered move, it is emblematic of how the government controls usage of public space for dissent or purposes outside the ideal, productive, and ordered allowed usages. It is also a sobering reminder that Sri Lankans' "claim to public space is tenuous and shaky at best" (Perera, 2020). Even though most countries tout equality for men and women in the eyes of the law, the easiest way to see where the fault lines lay is by seeing whose rights or freedoms are taken away in times of crisis – economic or otherwise (Armstrong, 1997).

A clear example of this fragile claim on the right to public space, was shown in the racially-charged aftermath of the Easter Attacks in 2019 at the hands of ISIS-inspired terrorists. One of the first moves the government made after establishing curfew and blocking social media was to ban the wearing of burqa in public places (Ethirajan, 2019)– a bizarre law was maintained for four months, even though no women or people wearing burqas were involved in the bombing (Doulatramani, 2019). It's clear that this already fragile claim is made even more precarious for women and minorities, the fruit hanging lowest on the social hierarchy and thus the easiest to attack.

Public protest is an essential tenet of democratic expression, and women the world over have used it as a medium for demanding their voices be heard by patriarchal, often violent, governments. Three dynamic examples that come to mind are the Mothers of Liberia, who successfully protested the civil war; the women of Shaheen Bagh, who set up camp in New Delhi following Prime Minister Modi's

racist CAA laws curbing the rights and citizenry of Muslims; and the protests against femicide in Mexico. It is interesting to note that each of these three womens movements, just like Sri Lanka's "Mothers Fronts" (both in the South during the JVP insurrection and in North and East in the aftermath of the civil war) also drew legitimacy from the centring of aggrieved motherhood (Hyndman & de Alwis, 2004).

2.6 What's the (Urban) Plan?

Every so often, the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs, often in partnership with UNDP or UNFPA produce a report as to the status of women in the country. However, the realm of public space is firmly under the jurisdiction of the Urban Development Authority, which itself falls under the Ministry of Defence. This in itself is a fantastic metaphor for Sri Lanka's militarization of public space and a sense of "civic obedience" and order. In April 2018, the Urban Development Authority of the Sri Lankan Government released a four-year strategy for the development of public space in urban areas, specifically the country's commercial capital, Colombo (Urban Development Authority, 2018).

The UDA Strategy highlights the importance of public well-being, health and most of all safety. However, in order to conduct this gender analysis, it is necessary to question – who is this policy for? Who does it address and who does it benefit? This line of questioning explores the beneficiaries of the way that public space is currently gendered, who is completely left out, and who is excluded from the very production of discourse (Spivak, 1988). It's fairly easy to answer these questions, because at no point does the document ever mention or take into account the heterogenous nature of people accessing these spaces. In fact, a quick scan of the 39-page document shows that there is no mention of the words "women", "girls", "woman", "gender", "trans", "disabled", or "accessibility". The focus of safety is, as such, hollow without addressing the unique systemic barriers and lack of safety that the country's women face, and the social norms and structures that cause it.

In fact, even the section of the strategy that refers to safety speaks only of a homogenous block of "people", "population", or "users":

> The need for more comfort and safety in living is of paramount importance for urban and suburban population. The comfort of people will lead to reduction of stress built up due to working environment in places. Further, comfort in living increases the efficiency of work and life. Thus, safety cannot be considered a second thought in people's life. Provision of proper safety for users of the facilities will create an environment of trust which will lead to a better work performance. (Urban Development Authority, 2018, p. 17)

In terms of disability inclusion, there has been some political discourse, but this hasn't been followed up with physical implementation. For example, the UDA strategy does not make any reference to the last published National Policy on Disability for Sri Lanka, that clearly states in its plan, "People who have disability, especially wheelchair users and those who have no sight, will have increased freedom of movement and be able to use more services through accessibility to public buildings, barrier-free public pathways, parks, restrooms, lifts and stairs and other facilities" (Ministry of Social Welfare, 2003).

Despite being a signatory to every significant international policy on gender such as CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action, and the Sustainable Development Goals, Sri Lanka has not implemented comprehensive policy changes to ensure safer spaces, justice, social or political equality for women. In particular, SDG 5 that pertains to gender equality and SDG 11 that calls for "universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular, for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities" by 2030.

The UDA's strategy would have vastly benefited from conducting a needs assessment, or at the very least a behaviour analysis or daily transport survey to understand mobility and leisure in the city's public spaces – i.e. where are people going? What are their barriers? When are they using public spaces? How will relocation or beautification affect people's lives differently? Basic participatory methodology would have been beneficial, but it would also open up uncomfortable dialogue about the human toll the beautification projects would take, especially on women, the poor, the homeless, and the elderly. There has been significant civil discourse amongst activists and academics about the effects of "beautification" and "globalization" and how they affect Colombo's poor. It's interesting that all UDA policies focus on the importance of "safety", but this construction of this safety comes at the cost of the safety of families whose homes and dwellings are razed without adequate compensation (Perera I. , 2014). In this case, structural violence in the name of public space performs physical violence on people's private space.

As Shilpa Phadke (2013) argues, perhaps the goal is not a "sanitized, deodorized" space free of undesirables, which to authoritarian governments could mean the poor, the minorities, anyone not fitting the Photoshopped utopian images on the cover of growth prospectuses. Perhaps the goal is to allow for all identities and people to feel a sense of belonging and ownership over the city, and be permitted to negotiate violence as they do in their own homes (Phadke, 2013). This castle in the sky cannot be built by using military or police to construct safety, but rather by breaking down the class structures that cause discomfort and violence.

While comparing other examples of gender mainstreaming and anti-violence mechanisms in public space, it is certainly tempting to fully explore the example of Vienna's decades-long gender mainstreamed city planning project, 'Frauen-Werk-Stadt' (Foran, 2013). However, it is facile to try and compare such disparate countries. What could be more useful for the localized purpose of this analysis is to assess the work and plans of development authorities in other South Asian cities. An excellent report titled 'Localising the Gender Equality Goal Through Urban Planning Tools in South Asia' did the groundwork for this analysis with an extensive exploration of how India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka have approached urban planning and gender (Bhattacharya, Patro, Vaidyanathan, & Rathi, 2016). Another recommendation for the UDA's plans is SIDA's 'Urbanisation and Urban Poverty: A Gender Analysis' report, which despite being over twenty-three years old, is a useful resource for assessing the gendered impact of urbanization policies, particularly in relation to poverty, violence, access to resources, and transport (Masika, de Haan, & Baden, 1997).

2.6.1 Good Laws vs Bad Implementation

Research shows that over 90% of women in Sri Lanka have been sexually harassed at least once on public transport, but only an estimated 4% of these women actually complain to the authorities (UNFPA, 2018). Sri Lanka's legal framework, in particular Section 345 of the Penal Code of 1995, affords victims of sexual harassment comprehensive protection, stating:

> Whoever, by assault or use of criminal force, sexually harasses another person, or by the use of words or actions, causes sexual annoyance or harassment to such other person commits the offence of sexual harassment and shall on conviction be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to five years or with fine or with both and may also be ordered to pay compensation of an amount determined by court to the person in respect of whom the offence was committed for the injuries caused to such person. (Penal Code (Amendment) Act No. 22, 1995)

Despite the clarity and scope of the act, low trust levels in the police and the courts coupled with apprehension about slow and socially-damaging legal proceedings are serious deterrents to reporting (Faizal & Rajagopalan, 2005). In addition to this, some 60% of women were not aware that there was a penalty for sexual harassment (UNFPA, 2018). This is disheartening because laws are only as good as their enforcement, and the absolute lack of enforcement of the sexual harassment law in Sri Lanka render it useless.

CHAPTER THREE: CONCLUSION

The fear of gendered violence – both structural and interpersonal – causes women to make daily decisions about whether engagement with the public sphere is worth it. This is just one of the ways in which systematic gendered issues limit women's use of public space in Colombo. A pervasive lack of safety coupled with strict patriarchal gender norms means that women's interactions with the public sphere are heavily policed and subject to punitive measures ranging from gossip to assault. There are multiple variables steeped in social and cultural codes that either give women more legitimacy to use public space (such as performing roles of a mother), and variables that give women higher vulnerability or social disapproval (minority status, sex work, late timing, leisure/pleasure activities). This gendered divide between public and private spheres is not accidental or natural. The divide is deliberately constructed in support of the capitalist patriarchy, ensuring that women fulfil their culturally-prescribed gender roles of unpaid reproductive labour in the home, and are punished either via violence, sexual harassment, or social disapproval if they choose to engage in public space for their own leisure or pleasure.

A neoliberal approach would investigate how to improve women's low economic and political participation in order to benefit the overall economy. In sharp contrast, this paper functions under the premise that women have a fundamental and equal right to engage with public space, and should be afforded every opportunity and metric of safety to do so in order to live a full life. The discussion explores Shilpa Phadke's idea of loitering as an act to subvert the idea that people – women in particular – must only engage with public space in service of their roles as mothers, wives, and daughters, or in service of capitalist interests.

Using an intersectional lens to view the way in which violence against women in public spaces is constructed highlights the heightened vulnerability of marginalized identities, in particular the poor, minorities, and LGBTIQ communities. Government policies and urban planning only deepen these existing fissures, by not considering the needs of intersecting identities, and by viewing moneyed, abled, majority race men as the norm. This is largely demonstrated in the post-war ethno-nationalist rhetoric of militarized masculinity. In order to truly build a sustainable, inclusive city that all residents (regardless of gender, wealth, or race) feel a sense of ownership and belonging to, the Government's urban planning could benefit from an intersectional gender analysis, and the usage of participatory research methodology to conduct a needs analysis.

This paper considers the complex barriers between women and robust participation in public life while also exploring the irony that women are most likely to face violence (physical, sexual, or verbal) in the privacy of their own homes. However, the discussion aims not to focus on one sphere in

comparison to the other, but rather to understand that it is the same cultural and social gender norms that allow, and even encourage these forms of violence to continue. Given that the suppression of women flows through both spheres, it is unsurprising that this constant policing has made honest discourse about the issues women face difficult, and made organized protests against violence near impossible.

Government policies and society would both benefit from accepting and understanding the role that social norms play in the subjugation of women in daily, public life. This is the only way to ensure full and fair participation of women, minorities, LGBTIQ people, and marginalized identities in Colombo's public sphere. It is crucial for society and policy-makers to accept that all women's use of public space is legitimate use of public space. Whether that is to travel, to work, to enjoy nature, to do nothing, to loiter, to smoke, to romance, to dance, or to protest.

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