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Safety in the Urban Outdoors: Women Negotiating Fear of Crime in the City of Kolkata

By Piyali Sur¹

Abstract

This article examines women's negotiation of potential risks in public spaces in the urban city of Kolkata. The deliberate focus on the public is to demonstrate that the city has different meanings for women than men in terms of risk so that fear of rape in the city becomes a virtual threat in the lives of women. The fear may not be linked to the actual violence but to the potential for harm that is experienced by individual women. Feminist scholars have pointed out that narratives of crime and violence have always constructed the city as the space of danger for women while intimate danger within the home have significantly been trivialized and privatized. The focus of this article is to understand women's behavioral response to the threat of crime in public spaces. This article attempts to understand the strategies used by women to avoid risk within the urban city of Kolkata. The strategies used to avoid risks of harm are informed by women's class location and educational attainment. This study demonstrates that though women compromise on their freedom of mobility, self-expression and social experience to remain safe, women also take risks to access public spaces. By taking risks like being out alone late after dark, by engaging in 'masculinized' activities such as engaging in public drinking and dressing according to one's choice that violates social codes, women resist fear, contest dominant conceptions of 'appropriate' feminine behavior and construct alternative meanings.

Key Words: Risk, Public, Fear of Crime, Avoidance, Taking Risk

Introduction

In India, in urban contexts the effects of globalization has rendered women visible as workers in public spaces but it has not done away with the patriarchal notion that the 'proper' place of women is in the private while streets are a masculine domain. This kind of labeling of spaces creates a sense of insecurity within women in terms of their experience of city life. Privatized spaces have emerged within urban landscapes like shopping malls, baristas, night clubs, lounges opening up before women spaces where they can engage in purposeless pleasure denied to them by the open streets. There has been an increasing participation of urban women from upper and middle income groups in these spaces but here too women are constantly negotiating their safety. Women are aware that their bodies are sexualized and being so are open to use and abuse in public spaces. This creates an anxiety in women, a constant monitoring, a constant need to avoid intrusive attempts onto their bodies and to remain safe. Hence the perception of risk, the feeling of fear is not related to the actual experience of violence but to its possibility. A significant part of women's identity is forged by the awareness of sexual violence which assign them a priori victim status as to be aware of the potentiality of victimization is to

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accept oneself as weak and passive. Women know that their greatest responsibility is to protect their modesty which means to engage in 'proper code of conduct' as held by masculinist culture. If criminally victimized women are more likely to be blamed for not adhering to safety guidelines and for being at the 'wrong place' at the 'wrong time'. Women are monitored not only by others but women themselves engage in self regulation and self policing, to escape potential criminal victimization in public. The strategies used to avoid risks are class based. The threat of crime produces a certain kind of femininity; social identities that are oriented towards safe-keeping as women voluntarily constrain a myriad of choices about work, recreation and transportation.

This article addresses the issue of women's response to threat of crime in public spaces in Kolkata², the capital of West Bengal, India. It attempts to understand how women produce safety for themselves as they negotiate public spaces. A focus on public in this study is not to deny women's danger within private in intimate relations but to understand women's management/coping with risks in public spaces to which heterosexual men have a more natural claim than women. Public space in this article includes sites like: streets, various modes of public transport (buses, trains, taxis), bus-stops, railway stations, market places, recreational spaces (parks, cinema halls, restaurants, coffee shops) and privatized public spaces like night clubs and malls. I have examined negotiation of risks by women who are employed and access the public on a daily basis with the purpose of earning an income. These women were situated differently in terms of age and socioeconomic background.

Scholarship on women's fear of crime and risk has singularly and exclusively focused on the public revealing women fear sexual assault from strangers, away from home, at night that restricts women's use of public spaces. A pioneering work in this area is by Gordon and Riger (1989). In their "constriction of activities" hypothesis the authors demonstrated how fear of crime "shrink the scope of women's choices about their lives by restricting their movement through time and space" (122) like keeping women off the streets at night and at home. In India, academic work on women's safety and risk has been conducted primarily from a spatial perspective investigating the connections between women's fear of violence, urban space and social exclusions (Phadke 2005, 2007; Phadke, Khan and Ranade 2011; Ranade 2007). Literature in this area highlight that women cannot lay claim to public space due to women's perceptions of risk of sexual assault from male strangers that is sometimes heightened by the urban design features (ibid). From an intersectional perspective, the affect of sites of privilege and subordination on women's feelings of safety and fear in urban spaces has been looked at. It is argued that the production of safety for women is oppressive as it disciplines women, keeps them within private boundaries, and grants 'conditional' access to public spaces, that is, only when they can manufacture a sense of purpose. Feminist scholarship (Phadke 2007; Phadke, Khan and Ranade 2011; Phadke 2012) argue that improving urban designs, making them women friendly can reduce fear in public but cannot 'design out fear' as women's fear of certain spaces in public is in reality, fear of men. The fear is socially constructed by everyday experiences of sexual harassment in public as well as by the media reports that overemphasize 'stranger danger' (Sur 2009). Parental warnings that sometimes take the form of surveillance also restrict women's access to public spaces. Women learn that they 'properly' belong to private space or home space associated with safety, familiarity and protective boundaries. Institutional discourses on women's safety, hence reinforces the public/ private split bolstering gendered power and thereby limiting

² Kolkata is the capital of Indian state of West Bengal. It is located in the eastern part of India on the east bank of river Hooghly.

the threat of crime to the outsider while protection from the insider is not only unavailable but is considered irrelevant (Phadke 2007).

A Note on the Use of Primary Data

The empirical research was carried out among 50 women working in both organized and unorganized sectors in the urban city of Kolkata. This paper is based mainly on qualitative in-depth interviews with women chosen on the basis of snowball sampling³. The sample was diverse where age, education and income are considered. The average age of the respondents was 35 years. The youngest participant was 20 and the oldest was 55. 12 participants were unmarried, 33 were married, 2 were deserted and 3 were divorced. The education of the participants ranged from high levels of education to illiteracy. 1 participant had a doctorate degree, 18 had post-graduation degree, 18 participants had acquired bachelors degree, 3 participants had studied till secondary and higher secondary, 5 participants had received some amount of formal education, 5 had received no formal education. The participants had a monthly household income of less than rupees 6000 to more than rupees 100,000. The interviews were extremely informal, more aptly described as conversations, a topic specific narrative with an assumption that data collection is an interactional process (Radar 2005). Although the interview had predetermined questions, I allowed the participant the freedom to discuss what they felt was important to them. I acted as flexibly and sensitively as possible, responding to women's preferences. I felt identifying with the women participants' experiences gave them the confidence to talk openly. Intersubjectivity, McDowell argues (as cited in Warrington, 2001:367) "characterizes the ideal relation between a qualitative researcher and her subjects." I found that as women talked about their perceptions of risks in public spaces and how they negotiated those risks, listening helped them to articulate and think through their anxieties. I sought permission to use a tape recorder, though on many occasions that seemed inappropriate. After the interviews were completed I transcribed them verbatim. I followed thematic⁴ approach and coded them. I grouped the participants' answers by questions and then developed both descriptive and analytic codes so that themes could emerge from the data. Coding and re-coding enabled me to identify themes (Gibbs 2007). The themes form the core of the empirical sections that will now follow.

Findings

Avoidance: 'Knowing the Limits'

In public, avoidance was the most prominent negotiation with the risk of sexual harm documented by most women regardless of their age and socioeconomic background. Fear of crime was profoundly felt after dark leading women to withdraw from public spaces after dark. Darkness represented the possibilities of danger and to be out alone after dark was risk-taking that violated proper code of respectable feminine behavior. For women, the potential negative

³ This refers to a form of sampling in which, first, a few subjects are found who have the required qualities. After finishing their interview, they are asked to recommend the names of other people whom they know to have the same relevant qualities. In this manner, the researcher accumulates more and more respondents by using each respondent as a source of new names for the sample.

⁴ Gibbs defines themes as a recurring issue or an idea either derived from prior theory or from participants' experiences that emerges during analysis of qualitative data. It can be used to establish a code with which text can be coded.

outcome of courting risk lay not only in the threat of sexual assault but also the risk of being labeled as a 'bad' woman inviting such behavior.

Unmarried women of lower and middle income groups were more likely to withdraw from public spaces after dark. It was not only the external threat of crime but also concerns over reputation and honor within their communities and localities that made them withdraw. These women lived in localities where the activities of each were visible to the other and they wanted to conform to norms of respectability by limiting their access to the public. The acts of self-policing by these women through total withdrawal from public spaces after dark demonstrate that the right to use public spaces at night challenges "the boundaries between respectable and non-respectable women" (Phadke, Khan, Ranade 2011:60). Usha working in a beauty parlor expressed,

I don't return home after 9 p.m. If I ever go to my friend's place it's only on holidays and in the afternoons. I do not keep any work after 8 p.m. I fix appointments with my clients in a manner that everything gets over by 8 p.m., otherwise tongues in my neighborhood will wag. Besides I also don't feel safe as streets start becoming desolate after 9:30 p.m, especially in winter.

From Usha's narrative it becomes clear that she did not want to risk her reputation as well as her safety by returning home late. A lot of preplanning and arranging her work schedule was required to save herself from this dual risk.

Shabnam working in a tailoring shop said,

I can't stay outside home after 9:30 p.m. I am not a high society girl that I will stay out late. What will people say if I return after 9:30 p.m.? I feel if I were a man I could do overtime and earn more money. Being a woman I have to return within a fixed time. If by chance something happens to me how will I show my face? I will bring dishonor to my family. I have to protect my honor. A man does not have to fear the loss of his sexual respectability.

Shabnam compares her situation to a man's whose presence in public at night is not questioned. She narrates how safety for women in public is sexual safety, if violated brings dishonor and shame to her and her family. But to a man an assault is only an assault where he may be injured but his social honor remains unaffected. Another important component in her narrative is that women situate themselves at the intersection of gender and class. Shabnam distinguished her situation from a 'high society girl' who in her opinion can afford to take certain liberties not permissible to her. The lines of control are more rigid for a lower class woman.

The narratives of Usha and Shabnam endorses that use of public spaces at night is both gender and class based.

To minimize the risk of crime women avoided certain public spaces labeled as "dangerous areas" like unfamiliar areas, desolate roads, office areas, parks, dimly lit bus stops and/or train platforms. Women constructed these areas as risk prone as they tended to become empty after dark. This expresses the images women have of danger is a stranger lurking behind the bushes to attack a woman alone in a desolate place. It demonstrates how socially constructed images have an effect on women and their perception of risk and safety. The public spaces that were constructed as hazardous had to be negotiated through avoidance that affirms Koskela's

claim that “women prefer to avoid certain environments rather than ‘take the risk’ of facing an upsetting or frightening situation”(1997: 118). The narratives below highlight the images women have of dangerous places and consequently their avoidance of such areas. Piyali and Debdatta’s narratives reaffirm the image of the dangerous stranger who randomly attack their victims.

Piyali (30 yrs, journalist): I avoid walking through desolate roads after dark like office areas. These areas are not safe for women.

Debdatta (26 yrs, customer care executive): To reach home I have to walk by a park. Parks become desolate after dark and I may be easily attacked. If it’s late, I detour and take a longer route.

In my research women were extremely aware of what they wore in public and avoided wearing certain kinds of attire. Dressing can be seen as a means of reproducing power relations; in Foucauldian terms, it is a way of being one’s own “overseer” (Foucault 1979) and regulating even the most intimate spheres (Koskela 1999). Here I want to report that women who traveled in public transport were mainly concerned with their dress code. Women in high income groups, mainly traveling in their own private transport, and women in low income groups who generally wore saris did not show such concern. Women participants expressed that they always wore attire that would keep their bodies covered, and consequently they would feel safe in them. 55% of the women participants avoided wearing western outfits for fear of provoking sexual harassment in public spaces. In fact, when a woman is sexually assaulted the discussions focus on how the woman’s attire may have provoked the assault.

Ananya (28 yrs, journalist): I generally wear *salwar kameez*⁵ as the dress keeps my body covered. If I wear a *sari* I don’t wear a sleeveless blouse and I keep the pleats on my shoulders pinned.

Panchali (24 yrs, secretary): Even if I wear trousers, the top has to be loose. I feel much comfortable in a *salwar*.

The narratives of Ananya, and Panchali demonstrate that women do not want to violate social codes of ‘proper’ attire and thereby attract more attention or become ‘visible’ in public. They preferred wearing what is generally accepted in society as attire of ‘respectable’ women. Women who dress in a way that is socially defined as provocative in any given context are seen as ‘asking for trouble’ and are unlikely to receive public sympathy should they be harassed or attacked sexually in public spaces. Women, thus, not only want to avoid harassment, but also want to avoid being blamed for any victimization that might occur.

“Choosing the safest transportation option”, “planning the safest possible routes to and from activities” were important decisions that women took in public spaces. 68% of the respondents stated that they avoided certain modes of public transport when alone after dark. However, women’s material condition determined whether women had the option to avoid public transport perceived as unsafe. For instance, in this study, women working as domestic

⁵ Salwar kameez is a popular attire for women in India. This dress evolved as a comfortable and respectable garment for women in Kashmir and Punjab, but is now immensely popular in all regions of India. Salwars are pyjama like trousers drawn tightly in at the waists and ankles. Over the salwars women wear a long and loose dress called kameez.

help walked to their places of work and their activities were mostly concentrated near their homes. Other women from low income groups had no option but to take the cheapest public transport, like buses though assessed unsafe when too crowded or empty after dark. In buses women tried to occupy the least possible space to avoid groping hands. Women with higher incomes and occupational status availed of their private transport if they were late. One common theme across the narratives was the avoidance of taxis and share taxis⁶ after dark by women from middle income groups.

Chandrani (30 yrs, social worker): I never take a cab alone after dark. The taxi driver can take me anywhere.

Piyali (32 yrs, journalist): I do not take a taxi after dark for fear if the driver takes me somewhere else. I do not get up in a share taxi if there are only male passengers.

Ishani (26 yrs, journalist): After 9:30 p.m., I take taxis only if I have friends with me otherwise not. I never take taxis with a helper nor take share taxis. Share taxis are very unsafe as you don't know the people and whether they are together to cause trouble.

The narratives of women participants demonstrate that they were afraid to be in an enclosed space with a male stranger who controlled the wheels and could take them anywhere. It expresses women's perceptions of physical vulnerability in face of male strength as women lacked confidence in overpowering the male driver. Young argued that girls do not develop a relationship with their bodies as agents, as instruments of action. '...a woman frequently does not trust the capacity of her own body to engage itself in physical relation to things...' (1990: 145). Male dominance is inscribed in the bodies of both men and women and becomes constructed as self-evident and natural (McCaughey 1998:281).

In public women avoided waiting for a friend or a relative. A woman waiting in public is open to conjecture and it is generally assumed that she is soliciting. Hence women generally avoided 'hanging out' in public for fear of being labeled a 'prostitute'. A woman's access to public space is determined by her ability to manufacture respectability and legitimate purpose (Phadke 2005).

Ananya (28 yrs, journalist): I never wait for a bus beyond ten minutes after dark. I never wait in front of a cinema hall as invariably men start staring and cars stop. I then feel my body exists for other's pleasure and gaze.

Shabnam (30 yrs, tailor): I fear that I will be looked at as a prostitute and the guys may call me. What shame! I fear being beckoned and asked the rate.

Savita (34 yrs, marketing coordinator): In areas like Park Street, you cannot stand long. Men will come and ask your rate. Actually men also don't have any way of

⁶A share taxi is a mode of public transport that take passengers on a fixed or semi-fixed route, stopping anywhere to pick or drop off passengers.

knowing who is a call girl and who is not. They come from good families. It's just for easy cash. Men try out by trial and error method.

The narratives of women participants exhibit that to wait in public alone, especially after dark is to be perceived as accessible, an 'open' or public woman whose body can be used and abused for the pleasure of men. A great source of anxiety around public space is the risk of being confused as an 'unrespectable' woman. However, women feel much safer to wait alone or hang out in privatized public spaces like shopping malls. Here women can loiter without purpose exempt from the threat of sexual harm.

Constraining Public Leisure

Women's fear of crime and victimization had the greatest impact on women's public leisure activities. In India, women from an early age learn that public space is a male domain, and that the risk of their bodies getting violated is the most in public spaces and from strangers. Media, parents, peers make a binary distinction between public and private while constructing risks for women and focus primarily on "faceless criminals who make our streets unsafe"⁷ (Stanko 1990). Hence women's access to public spaces becomes "delimited by what women can and cannot do", while men are more free to explore public territories (Ranade 2007: 1523). Most women did not engage in solitary leisure activities in public spaces as it is generally assumed that unescorted women in leisure venues are "asking" to be picked up, and partly from unwelcome male attention associated with this belief. "The association of woman alone in public with sexual invitation" is part of patriarchal culture and women had to avoid the appearance of accessibility in public (Gardner 1988: 387). The restriction of public leisure activities is well expressed in Mandita and Saraswati's narratives.

Mandita (34 yrs, deputy manager): I do not go to a club or a party thinking I will be very late. Then I have to depend on a man that is my husband, as I cannot think of coming back home alone at 11:30 or 12:00 at night.

Saraswati (35 yrs, leather cutter in a factory): I go to friend's house but always when there is daylight and return before dark. I only visit those friends who stay near.

Women participants either restricted themselves from engaging in late hour leisure activities, or planned their leisure activities with others, or planned them during the day time. Planning, looking for leisure companions were important strategies used by women to reduce their feelings of risk.

⁷ The state of West Bengal whose capital is Kolkata has topped the charts in crimes against women in India in 2013. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) statistics in 2013 show that West Bengal tops the chart in crimes against women with 30,942 cases registered only in 2012 (incidentally the highest in the country). West Bengal accounted for 12.67 per cent of the total crime committed against women in the country while Kolkata ranked the third most unsafe metropolis for women in India, behind Delhi and Bangalore. 2,046 cases of rape were registered in 2012 alone. Registered cases of insult to modesty of women (sexual harassment) in 2012 was 556 while registered cases of cruelty by husbands or his relatives was 19865 in 2012. The figures attest to the fact that social definitions of crime that silence the threat posed by insiders are to be challenged as a huge part of women's risks are constituted by their husbands and their relatives.

Most of the women shared with me that they often felt the need to engage in leisure activities in groups to increase their sense of safety. Women were very concerned about the means of communication to be used to and from leisure venues. Young women narrated that their socialization in night clubs to 'have fun' was underlined with concerns regarding their safety at midnight and they strategized to produce safety for themselves by going in groups, always taking a private car and never coming back home alone but staying at a friend's place. In my study restriction of leisure activities was class based. Women with no private transport restricted evening and nighttime activities more often than women with access to private transport. Women with private transport had the capacity to produce safety for themselves in public and they did not have to encounter problems like not going out late or returning home before dark or wearing certain types of clothes. Moreover, they could spend their leisure hours, even at night in privatized public spaces like night clubs and lounges without having to access public spaces. Possession of a car, in some cases, always did not produce unrestricted use of public spaces. The narrative of Sharmishtha, a 31 year old school administrator best captures how women restricted themselves, isolated themselves from pleasure giving activities to feel safe and hence comfortable. It illustrates how public spaces are shrinking for women. In her narrative, Sharmishtha said that she restricted herself from going to discos, cinema halls, or to any relative's place alone. She went out after dark only when she had her personal car and rarely went out during any festive occasion as places remain crowded then.

I do not go to discos as I feel a chance of getting sexually harassed is high there. I avoid going to cinema halls alone. If a man sits next to me invariably he will try to touch me. I do not go to a relative's place or to any gatherings alone. If I go to my friend's place I remain very cautious of the male members in the house. After dark I don't go out unless I have my own transport. Even then somebody has to accompany me. On any festive occasions like Christmas, New Year I don't go out even when my friends come to pick me up in their cars which are usually loaded with people.

Women's fears reinforced the patriarchal assumption that "women only need to use the public space in rational, goal-oriented, purposeful ways and not for irrational pleasure seeking" (Phadke 2005: 42). From women's narratives processes of self-governance (Foucault, 1979) can be discerned as women engage in self-regulation and self-policing when negotiating male dominated public space.

Relying on Others

One way that women preferred to deal with their fear of crime in public sphere was by looking for protectors. Many of the women interviewed said that after dark they felt safe only in the company of others. Married women from middle and upper income groups utilized their husbands as protectors. Women in occupations that involved late hours felt safer with their husbands while returning from office. For instance some of the married women reported that they called their husbands whenever they got late in office:

Rupa (37 yrs, processing officer): My office gives its employees car drop only after 12 a.m. so if it's 10 p.m. I don't get a car. Then I ask my husband to come and pick me up in his car.

Mili (27 yrs, graphics designer): If I am late in office, either my husband picks me up or he waits for me in the station as the station becomes desolate except for a few drunkards after 9 p.m. I never wait alone in a station for a train as the place becomes very unsafe after dark and I feel very insecure.

The narratives illustrate that women considered their husbands as protectors. Women relied on their husbands if they went to any party or friend's house in the evenings. This is narrated by Dola, a 26 year old engineer.

I usually have somebody with me if I go out in my leisure time. I always plan ahead. If I know I will be late in a friend's place I take my husband with me.

Women also relied on their colleagues if they were late in office.

Dolan (26 yrs, engineer): As my office area is not safe we come out of office in a group.

Saheli(26 yrs, engineer): If we are late in office we always come out in groups. If I am the only woman in the group, the guys first see that I get a transport. They stand with me until I get a transport.

Women's reliance on resources increased their sense of safety in public spaces. Possession of private cars, mobiles increased women's feelings of safety and comfort. Cell phones increased a woman's sense of safety as it was felt that they were not alone but connected with friends and family who would know their location. For instance, Indira, a lecturer, 28 years of age felt protected in public spaces as she had a mobile with her.

If I am late I always take my car, and my mobile is also with me. I always keep my father's number on immediate calling so that I am saved from wasting time in case of trouble.

Many women, armed with the latest smartphones, have downloaded free applications that provide location services to family and friends at the click of a few buttons or touch-screen manoeuvres. In the words of Mahua, an IT sector employee "With the help of smartphones, security for women is just a click away. Whenever I am out somewhere, I keep updating and sharing my locations with applications like Latitude and Facebook." It was also conceded by women that cell phones cannot be accessed in times of random attacks. As was expressed by Priya, a school teacher:

When in distress, how often do we get time to take the phone out of our bag, unlock it and open an application to let people know we are in trouble?

Women of lower income groups with low occupational status had to manage risks by themselves and did not rely on their family members. Moreover, they lacked the material resources that would make them feel safe.

Non-Acknowledgement of Fear

In this study women had restricted their lifestyles and routine activities in a manner that they did not acknowledge having any public fears. They did not have the space to feel fear because of the utmost self imposed restrictions on their public activities. According to these women their chances of victimization were low as they acted sensibly, by not putting themselves into risky situations. 'Acting sensibly' included not returning home late, not taking cabs or share taxis, being in the company of males in public, not being in 'bad' areas alone. This reflects that the women were influenced by the socially constituted meanings of sexual violence and notions of female sexual vulnerability in public spaces, and constrained their lifestyle to an extent that they had negligible fears. For instance Savita, a marketing co-ordinator did not acknowledge having any fears in public as she felt she did not unnecessarily place herself in risky situations.

At night it is obviously risky but if you maintain your time, it is not at all risky. Like at night time I don't come by taxis but always travel by bus. So it is always safe. It depends on you actually. How much risk you are getting yourself into. I don't go out after dark. I take proper amount of security.

Similarly Sumitra, a 35 year old engineer, reiterated the same point that she did not feel afraid as she did not take risks that might put her into danger.

I don't feel afraid because I am not a person who will do a lot of adventures. I don't take the risks that are beyond my control. For instance I don't take a cab at night because I know that will be risky. I try not to take such risks.

The narratives indicate that women keep away from risk which gives them a sense of security. Restriction of activities to familiar areas within 'safe' hours was an important factor in women's denial of fear of crime. Women in teaching profession and in government service mostly expressed that they were not concerned about crime risk as their mobility was restricted to familiar areas during safe hours.

Sharmila (28 yrs, school teacher): I get up in a chartered bus in the morning and come back in a chartered bus in the afternoon. It is rarely that I am out alone after dark. I don't do late nights as I have to get up early. There is no scope for risk in my life.

Dipa (30 yrs, clerk): I don't feel at risk or afraid as I don't get late. I am home by 5:30 to 6 p.m.

Women working in other's homes as maids, cooks expressed that did not have any public fears. They lacked the material resources to venture out into unfamiliar zones and kept to their localities where they stayed and worked. The area, the local boys were too familiar to be any

source of risk and anxiety. Here again familiarity was the key factor in feeling safe. Their activities were restricted to familiar areas, and as they knew their environment they felt at home there. If women have the feeling of being able to interpret the environment they walk in, and of making it their own, they feel spatially confident (Koskela 1997).

Kalpana (34 yrs, domestic maid): I work in houses near where I stay. In the evenings I work till 8. I know everyone here. I don't feel afraid here.

Rekha (35 yrs, domestic maid): My life is restricted to this area. I don't have to go to far off places that I will fear. Previously I worked in a home quite far. I used to look after a baby. It used to get late in coming back home. Roads would become desolate and I use to feel afraid. Now I have no fears. All the houses where I work are near.

Restriction of activities to familiar areas as the narratives demonstrate made women feel safe. Women felt confident in spaces they knew well. Koskela argued that "thus, it is understandable that women who have considerable experience of a certain place are themselves less afraid. Making use of space a part of one's daily routine erases the myth of danger from it. By routinising public space women are 'taming' it for themselves" (1997: 307). This highlights that risk is a cultural construct as unfamiliar environments are perceived to be risky than familiar ones.

Breaking Fear: Controlling Emotion

Of all the women participants in this research, educated women with at least a graduation degree emphasized that it was important not to let their fears restrict their freedom in public. This is illustrated in the narrative of Lina, a 35 year old public relations officer who felt apprehensive to travel at night in a cab but carried on with her activities.

If I go to late night parties I use my car. But when I do not get a car I take a cab to reach the place. I feel afraid when I cross a desolate stretch and then I start talking on my cell. I remain cautious, thinking what I will do if something happens.

Controlling fear, trying to reason fear away is a strategy used by women to use public spaces. Though they felt afraid, they expressed that it was important for them to move independently in the public spaces and not let fear constrain their choices. Rita, a 41 year old, working as an air-hostess said,

It was a beautiful moonlit night and I decided to walk down home from the pub at 12 a.m. I was shivering with fear and had my nail file out. I felt when men can walk why can't we? We are not given the right to walk, why will it be said that we have asked for it? Whenever late I tremble inside but I don't show the fear. I don't want it to stop me from doing things that I like to do.

Further, Abhirupa, a 28 year old journalist reiterated the same point that though she felt afraid it was important for her not to let her fears control her activities in public spaces.

I have a history of coming back home late. I feel afraid but I try to show that I am not afraid. I always remain alert and ready to strike.

In the narratives it becomes clear that the women tried to be confident, reclaim public space by suppressing their fears. The women felt that they should keep their courage and not 'give in' to fear or otherwise fear would limit their lives.

Taking the Risk: Carving out Their Own Spaces

Taking risk for women is perceived as transgressive but on the other hand is considered acceptable, even desirable masculine behavior. For instance, in urban areas in India accessing public spaces at night without male companions is a risk taking behavior for women. However, men in urban areas are allowed more freedom to engage in pleasure in the public spaces at all times of the day and night. Phadke asserts that "women's presence in public space is only acceptable when they have a purpose." (2011: 113) and engagement in purposeless fun by women is perceived as frivolous, promiscuous, or 'inviting trouble'. Women participants from upper and middle income groups, though very few, dared to socialize at night in 'male dominated' spaces of popular culture like nightclubs and lounges. Though club space was thought of as 'safe' by the women frequenting clubs, subtle covert forms of sexism operate in these spaces that sexualize and objectify women. Despite the prevalence of sexism, covert or overt, women participants socialized at night clubs, thereby claiming the space for themselves. It is within the space of the club that women challenge the signifiers of traditional femininity and act out their new femininities (Hutton 2006). It is a resistance practice to the dominant safety discourse that associates danger with night or darkness and instruct women to stay within the safety of their private spaces at that time. In India, it is assumed that 'good traditional women' stay inside their homes after dark and even women's work in public after dark is looked with disdain though the time boundary for returning home after work is expanding. In a global city like Kolkata, women who frequent night clubs are still perceived as "easy" women. Most of the night clubs of Kolkata are open till midnight on weekdays and till 1 to 1:15 a.m. on weekends. Women are aware that using the city at night implies being labeled a public or an "open woman". For instance in this study, a woman participant narrated incidents of harassment and her practices of resistance within the night club where she frequently socialized alone. Rita raised the question in her narrative, "can't a girl go to the bar by herself and have a drink?" She narrated how "decent men touched her bodily because they were drunk." Initially she hesitated to resist, to make a noise, feeling that others would perceive her as a "troublemaker". Then she said "I resisted as my inner voice told me to fight it out, next time they won't touch you." She beat up the man who confused her for a prostitute until he collapsed, verbally resisted the harassers who touched her by shouting at them "excuse me, you touched me, why did you touch me?" Her narrative demonstrates that women like Rita, take the risk of coming alone to night clubs as well as the risk of fighting away her harassers.

In the night clubs women's drinks consisted primarily of beer, wine and cocktails. By having beer from the bottle in a public space, women participants were breaking the link between beer and a strong version of masculinity. Engaging in masculine activities like public drinking in male dominated spaces is an indicator of women's resistance to fear.

Fighting back their molesters was a risk women in this study took. Shrestha and Rupa's narratives point to the fact that women take safeguards and are ready to fight back but did not compromise on their bodily experiences.

Shrestha (20 yrs, fashion model): I do fight back. I don't quarrel or argue a lot. What I do is hit back the person. I have slapped people in many occasions and that has put me into trouble as they have tried to take revenge when I am traveling late. I carry a blade and a knife when I know I will be late. Previously in crowded places I used to carry safety pins. Whenever I used to feel a person is touching me I used to prick the person with a safety pin.

Rupa (20 yrs, fashion model): If I am late and I see a man approaching I look around for bricks or stones. I look at his eyes and menacingly juggle the stones in my hands so that he does not dare approach.

An absence of fear made two women take possession of public space at night and interrupt any threatening situation. The narratives of the women participants highlight that they not only fought for themselves but also to help others.

Sraboni (34 yrs, social worker): Why should I be afraid of another human being? I return in taxis even at 2:30 at night. I walk the streets at 2:30/3:00. I work in an NGO that works for prostitutes. Once one had got injured and I sat within the hospital compound till 3 a.m. If somebody misbehaves with me I don't take any one's help. I just beat him up. I don't fight only for myself. Once I saw a few drunken men abuse a taxi driver. I just went and tried to stop them. When I could not stop them I called the police to intervene.

Mita (30 yrs, flight attendant): Men are scared of women who are confident and sure. I am not scared. I think more than aggression, awareness is what you need. If somebody touches me I feel my space is being invaded. Then I start beating up the person as my blood begins to boil.

Sraboni and Mita's narratives illustrate how agency manifests and how resistance is negotiated through women's bodies. The narratives of the women point to the fact that women also take risks where bodies become sites of resistance be it at the level of dress code, engaging in 'masculine' activities or fighting for the possession of space.

Discussion and Conclusions

In this paper I have argued that fear of crime and victimization have 'disciplinary' power effects on women's everyday lives as women engage in self-regulation and self-policing while negotiating risks of harm in public. Women orient their lives to avoid victimization than take proactive measures to keep themselves safe. In this study, avoidance or engaging in preventive actions was documented by most women participants regardless of their age and socioeconomic background. Women experienced the narrowing effects of forced choices and limited options as they restricted their access and mobility in public spaces, avoided wearing clothes that stimulate

interest, avoided certain forms of public transport. In this study economically disadvantaged women engaged in less avoidance behavior as they lacked the material resources to opt for a more secure alternative. In this study a few women had restricted their lives and routine activities to an extent that they did not feel at risk and denied having any fear of victimization. It has been observed that women with more education and income deny fear in the public sphere.

An important finding of this research is the impact of fear of crime on women's public based leisure activities. Very few studies have dealt with this theme. Women restricted themselves from engaging in solitary leisure in public as they feared they would be perceived accessible as still a single woman in public is associated with sexual accessibility. Women participants either restricted themselves from engaging in late hour leisure activities, or planned their leisure activities with others, or planned them during the day time. Planning, looking for leisure companions were important strategies used by women to reduce their feelings of risk. Women in the lowest income category were the least frequent users of recreation facilities, lack of financial resources being the chief structural constraint.

Apart from restraining oneself, another way that women preferred to deal with their fear of crime in public sphere was by looking for protectors. The participants were socialized to believe that they could avoid victimization if they relied on men for their protection. Educated women with higher income and occupational status mostly relied on protectors. They met gender expectations by relying on men for their safety and accepted their weakness and vulnerability to crime. Women with least financial resources navigated home and work during 'safe' hours and did not need to rely on others.

To assert that fear produces a subjectivity that is self-regulative, submissive making men take control of the streets is not to present the full picture. Women also resist fear by taking risk in public spaces. Women resisted from letting fear constrain their choices through not giving into fear, that is by controlling fear and by fighting back to reclaim public spaces for themselves. In this study, women with more education, income and higher occupational status controlled fear and fought back. Women fought back by taking the risk to have pleasure in public spaces and hence by disrupting the division between private and public and between respectable and non-respectable women. For instance, a woman who sought pleasure of a walk on the streets in a moon-lit night or the woman who chose to come back home at late hours were demanding the freedom to take risks rather than a guarantee of safety. Young women participants in this study broke norms of 'appropriate feminine behavior' by socializing in 'male dominated' spaces of popular culture like nightclubs and lounges, thereby legitimizing alternative forms of femininity. Women express boldness by transgressing normative feminine behavior by being in privatized public spaces throughout the night and thereby producing a space that is more available to women. Women's participation at night clubs demonstrates that new subject positions are made available to young women that provide a counterdiscourse to the woman as victim. This illustrates that women take up subject positions within resistant discourse and oppose the dominant conceptions of women as incapable and ever-vulnerable to male violence. I argue that when women reveal agency and resist, it is an indicator of social change that rests on the subversion of gendered hierarchies of power.

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