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## **Gendered Spaces in the Public Sphere: A Micro Study of Bangalore's Malls, Airport, Railways, and Educational Institutes**

By Cecilia Juanita<sup>1</sup> and Fatema Kapadia<sup>2</sup>

### **Abstract**

This study focuses on public spaces and analyses them to reveal their gendered nature. It is organized around the following public spaces: educational institutions, malls, railway stations, and the airport. Architectural designs, facilities provided, and gender-specific organization are some of the aspects of these spaces that are under study. Our study identified the discriminatory patterns in some of these places suggesting that there are long-term effects of discrimination on the human psyche, particularly when these spaces do not accommodate gender diversity. This paper highlights some of the discriminations and their effects on the LGBTQ+, gender-fluid and gender non-conforming communities. We observed architectural spaces to trace the subtlety with which gendered structures were incorporated into their architectural design. Specifically, we surveyed architectural designs of railway stations, airports, malls, and selected educational institutions. Each public space accommodates the needs of a specific gender while often overlooking the necessities of the under-represented genders. Despite a nearly balanced ratio that exists between males and females, there is minimal representation of the latter in several public spaces. Shared public spaces generally disregard non-dominant genders, and instead, align themselves with the dominant identities of the gender binary. The indifference towards the presence of genders other than men and women emphasizes the importance of acknowledging evolving identities and their specific needs. For such reasons, the development of gender-neutral spaces and openness towards the multiplicity of genders is of paramount importance in order to incorporate the needs and necessities of all individuals.

*Keywords:* Public Spaces, Gendered Architectural Spaces, Under-Represented Gender Identities, Dominant Genders, and Gender Discrimination, Bangalore, India, LGBTQI Spaces, Gender Diversity

### **Introduction**

This paper focuses on gendered public social spheres in Bangalore city and its urban spaces. It draws a unisexual discourse (highlighting the priority of a singular gender identity over others) around the differences and specificities that exist in these areas, and a distinct comparison between the various provisions of these spaces that either makes or does not make them a domain that is inclusive of the needs of individuals belonging to various gender identities.

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The universality of gender stereotypes within any given society has opened a window for discussion about both the systemic as well as the unconscious passing-down of beliefs over generations. These beliefs of strict gender roles have had the hegemonic impact of turning many associations of stereotyped gendered behaviours into an assumed preference for all the individuals identifying with that gender, thereby promoting a limited and faulty understanding of gender that is then generalised to the entirety of that group.

Although there may be various psychological reasons for the assumption of gender roles, especially when one aims for monetary profits through businesses, such as in marketing specific services and products, it is debatable that some of these may have been accepted simply due to the familiarity of the association over centuries' worth of practice and not entirely of preference. An example of such an assumption in the Indian context can be seen in the marketing and advertising of kitchen equipment that is primarily catered to and by women. In a country where patriarchy forms the cultural soup of most communities, this simply can be considered an unconscious translation of the belief that it is women who belong in the kitchen. This belief, however, only persists because of an age-old association of women with the kitchen as one who is obligated to serve the family, and not always because they prefer to. While this remains a primary topic of discussion here, the whitewash of heteronormativity that poses a huge threat to inclusivity stands as another major concern, leaving no chance for consideration of non-dominant or evolving genders and their needs.

### **Review of Select Literature**

The similarity of intention among different societies regarding gender and role attribution as a psychosocial concern threatens fundamental freedoms and rights of certain gender identities. Several researchers have highlighted the ways in which these biases have seeped into our day-to-day lives even while it is broadly unnecessary. Gender becomes compulsively attributed to concepts, objects, and in the case of this article, spaces. Lefebvre (1991), a French philosopher who mastered many fields, in his book *The Production of Space*, explains the concept of space as a translation from the abstract to the physical. This implies that the understanding of space first exists as an idea, as a mental and psychological place. This idea exists with its own nature, characteristics, rules, expectations, etc. which is then interpreted into a physical area that will conditionally have the same features and characteristics as the one that was ideated. What Lefebvre implies is that there is a constant search for the reconciliation between the mental space and real space, the result of which brings about a concentricity between the two. He navigates through metaphysical laws of how we attribute meaning to space and how we experience the same in the physical reality of our daily lives.

Considering the discussion of gendered public settings, mental perceptions are extended to physicality, such that gendered features that are attributed to space, either in the abstract, physical or social form are in some ways internalized stereotypes that we carry around both consciously and unconsciously. They also shape interpersonal relationships that are culturally bound. For example, in her paper, 'Gendered Public Spaces', Nina Flores, uses examples from public spaces to illustrate the applications of the Nature-Culture Dichotomy. She demonstrates how in some societies, the culture of a particular place dominates the nature of their public spaces and how that culture may subordinate specific genders (particularly women) within these spaces (Flores, 2014).

On this front, Petra L. Doan also critically argues that the consequences of a binary system of gender norms are experienced as a kind of gender tyranny both for those who transgress gender

in their daily lives and also those whose lives are lived within such constraints through “The Tyranny of Gendered spaces: Reflections from beyond the Gender Dichotomy” (Doan, 2010). The central idea of Doan’s paper is that gendering has significant negative and marginalizing consequences for the minority or under-represented gender identities. The failure on the part of the society and public officials to accommodate intersex and transgender communities in constructing common spaces underscores the rigid categorization of gender. Doan cites examples of experiences in public places such as public restrooms, parking lots, shopping malls, workplaces, and even home. In an attempt to bring about change, spaces that accommodate marginalized communities, making them available for legal and rightful public access is an important stepping-stone to the expansion of inclusive spaces.

Similarly, Herman (2013) in his paper, ‘Gendered Restrooms and Minority Stress: The Public Regulation of Gender and its Impact on Transgender People’s Lives’, speculates upon the designs of our built environment which exhibits public facilities that are segregated by gender and how this reliance upon gender segregation in our public spaces harms transgender and gender non-conforming people. Herman’s study also includes an original survey of transgender and gender non-conforming people in Washington, DC about their experiences in gendered public restrooms. His survey showed that nearly 70% of the respondents reported that they were denied access, verbally harassed, or physically assaulted in public restrooms (Herman, 2013).

In a discussion with certain women architects from New York, principal and design director of interiors at FXCollaborative, Angie Lee shared that modern architecture is how they demonstrate their activism and create a medium of expression for themselves. They use their designs to tell stories, even as they learn, of how these architectural structures are also rooted in traditions of a male-dominated culture and system. She explained the explicit use of code words to suggest that some things were “too feminine” and embellishments were too “frivolous and unnecessary” while considering an international style of design. The discussion offered insights into how certain colours such as pink are “weaponized” against women. Manufacturers still designate pink toys, pink clothes, pink play kitchens, and the like for girls. It is notable that pink is not considered for official spaces such as boardrooms or conference halls, indicating the masculinization of those spaces through colour (Krichels, 2018) and the specific marginal inclusion of feminization in parts of company logos, feeding rooms, libraries for women’s literature, etc.

Drawing from the theorists earlier mentioned, we can conclude that genderism is spatially reinforced by design, from our systematic method of behaving and interacting, down to simply existing individual public spaces, which affect the judgment of gender roles. From this brief overview of select literature, it is clear that common architectural discourse assumes that the normative human is masculine – and that the subjectivity of all human experience is, by default, masculine as understood by the architect. Attributing the dominant male experience synonymously to humans has been made so common that it often goes unrecognized in highly conservative communities. However, the global feminist movement has sought to raise awareness of gender segregation for over 150 years and has also, since the 1990s, focused attention towards the gender binary challenging the assumptions of masculine and gender binary normativity.

The world of architecture as cultural heritage appears to be a world, for the most part, constructed and inhabited by men. From both traditional and modern practices, it is implicit that the beauty of architecture shares a close relationship to the anatomy of the human body, so much so that the proportionality of the human body was then translated to architectural designs in one way or another. Under too many circumstances, this has put women in architecture at a

disadvantage in relation to men. From our observations, we can see similar examples of the same in subtle and indirect portrayals of gendered architecture and spatial arrangements.

## **Observations and Discussion**

### *Analysis of Malls*

In our research, we visited four of Bangalore's most renowned malls to identify the gendered nature of these public spaces and if the facilities offered in these social spheres accommodated the needs of individuals who do not conform to the binary gender scheme. In the process, we observed that bias existed in the structural and organizational system of shopping areas, methods of arrangement of the goods, and even the location of billing counters. The description and analysis to follow, contributes to the long history of a feminist and queer optics, which shed light on the patriarchal nature of gendered, exclusionary spaces organized through a gender binary and in some cases with power and dominance attributed to the masculine.

We observed that the women's shopping section was far more pompous with loud colours and scattered arrangements of the products for sale. The products were arranged haphazardly with no symmetry. All the products on display seemed to be placed to occupy the space and attract the customers by volume. The lighting in the women's section was also comparatively warm, with similarly toned colours like warm cream and pink shades for the walls. By contrast, in the men's section, the products were arranged in neat rows and in an orderly fashion. The arrangement of the products in each section could possibly be drawing a parallel to how each gender is perceived in social circles, depicting the stereotypically gendered personality traits of the "alpha" male and the female while almost completely disregarding the fluidity that exists between the two. The lighting in the men's section had a cold undertone, with most either a stone white or light blue shade on the walls and shelves.

Everything in the women's section stood out distinctly calling for the buyer's attention whereas the men's section displayed uniformity and a systematic arrangement of products. Another observation included the manner in which the mannequins were set up and the number of mirrors that adored each section. While the mannequins in the male section had been placed rather symmetrically, in an upright and stiff posture, the ones in the women's section, on the other hand, were arched and poised in various ways to distinctly define the physique of the female body to make them more visually appealing. Another similar observation was also made in which it was noticed that the number of mirrors that were placed in the sections catering to women's products was comparatively greater than those placed in that of men.

The fitting rooms in the malls also highlighted an observable difference between males and females, where it was noticed that the trial rooms of women were located within enclosed spaces, whereas, the men's fitting rooms were more evidently placed. Another interesting analysis that this study of the malls highlights is the placement of billing counters within the stores. Shops that primarily dealt with women's and children's products had their billing counters located internally or at the far end of the store while the same in stores that solely catered to the needs of men were found present right beside the entrance and centrally located in unisex stores.

These gendered spaces in an urban setting such as Bangalore city have varying degrees of influence on its customers. While the presence or absence of the above-mentioned properties of social spaces has a negligible effect on the customers' experience, some others like restrooms and care rooms pose a dire need for the consideration of spaces that accommodate the requirements of all genders, such as in the case that was observed in one of the malls which only made provisions

for a “Mother/baby care room” and subtly ignores the possibility of single male parents who may also require a secluded space for the same.

### *Analysis of Airports*

With respect to our many observations regarding gender accommodations in public spaces like malls, railways, and educational institutes, one cannot overlook the Bangalore airport, the hub for the fastest domestic and international travel. We observed the evolving acceptance and accommodation of gender-friendly public spaces. In contrast to other public spaces, where gender identities were still not entirely acknowledged, the airport offers a more open and welcoming space. Gender segregation exists in public restrooms and in security checks but is absent from architectural design. Soon, the airport will take a major step towards eradicating the separate gender lines through security check-in procedures that unite all identities. It is notable that this segregation, however, does not exist in any of the airports in western countries and hence, can possibly be a cultural bias blurring the lines of genderism at the melting point of national and international exchange. The effort to change this, nevertheless, symbolizes a milestone in the journey to unite people of all gender identities without any explicit biases that have divided people under preconceived notions of outdated gender constructs. In addition, the lounges and overnight rest area facilities also recognize diverse genders by created shared spaces.

Another interesting observation we made while studying gender spaces throughout the landscape of Kempegowda International Airport Bangalore was the unique ‘Buggy Service’. It is a rather helpful service but shows gender bias at the same time. However thoughtful the idea of providing vehicular assistance to access the airport facilities might be, it is available only to senior citizens, disabled people, and women with children, women being the operative word. The idea of one gender, particularly the masculine identity, not needing the service of vehicular assistance just because they are preconceived as the physically stronger sex in the society says a lot about the privilege afforded to men and assumptions about physical strength. Steps to consider the needs of single male parents should be given equal importance and they should be assisted without any cynical analysis on their abilities.

Despite these gender biases we found it refreshing to see that the airports are adapting to the possibility of gender fluidity.

### *Analysis of Railways*

In built-up, metropolitan cities like Bangalore, the policymaking concerns with respect to public transportation are primarily about transport infrastructure being effectively and efficiently maintained. This process has introduced comfortable travel for regular commuters. The introduction of the local railway system in Bangalore city, the Bangalore Metro Rail Corporation, also known as “Namma Metro” has been a blessing in disguise, creating opportunities for individuals who, almost wholly, rely on public transport to access formal or informal work. Nonetheless, within the context of our gendered research lens, gender is clearly a factor in these transportation services. The rail service has declared that the first coach is exclusively for women passengers. Several metro stations have created distinct spaces on the platforms for women to board. To help passengers identify these spaces and get accustomed to the system, the BMRCL has posted signs where the first two doors of the trains stop. There are also regular announcements being made about the same at the stations and during rides. It is important to note that the emphasis is placed on women’s segregation rather than men’s since the rationale for these spaces is to free

women from the abuses of men. This gender-segregated infrastructure has been climacteric in expanding women's mobility.

### *Analysis of Educational Institutes*

We also explored public spaces associated with educational institutions as gendered and sexualized arenas. We observed clear distinctions of genderism in these spheres of learning and education. We included a comparative analysis of women's and co-educational institutions and we noted subtle incorporations of stereotypical architectural patterns.

One of the women's institutions we studied reflected an architectural structure that artfully incorporated the anatomy of the female reproductive system. They had extended driveways that spanned halfway across the whole campus before opening up to the heart (uterus) of the building, with a flagellum of blocks extending from either side of the central structure mimicking the woman's fallopian tubes. While this is a subjective observation that we made, it is notable because there are several other women's institutions in the city that, while they could not be included in our study, nonetheless follow a similar architectural structure (based on informal observations), which raises the possibility of intentionality. Although these aspects have minimal or absolutely no effect on the academic education provided by the institutions, others gendered features, such as the complete absence of sports fields and gymnasiums, or the structural orientation of being internally located undermines the abilities of female students, creating an assumed bias of opinion and hampering their holistic development.

On the other hand, in co-educational institutions, the complexities of space weren't as conspicuous as those in women's colleges. Albeit, the construction of the buildings did not appear incongruent, the central administrative building was located up front on entering the campus, unlike the former, allowing for quick and easy access to the outside world. The main roads are clearly visible even from within the buildings, the driveway and classroom blocks are adjacently placed, and all of them included the presence of one or more areas for sports, athletics, and other outdoor extra-curricular activities. When viewed through the lens of whose needs and requirements are met by architectural design, there is palpable discrimination between the provisions of co-educational institutions and all-women institutions, putting women and gender non-conforming individuals at a disadvantage.

### **Conclusion**

It is critical to bring a gendered understanding of architectural spaces and the intentions behind the nature and construct of each of them. We must ask what assumptions, biases, and stereotypes reign supreme, and which cultural principles demonstrate evident examples of discrimination on both personal and professional levels as a result. This paper broadly contributes to a feminist and queer optic of architecture, observing that several biases exist, privileging the masculine and gender binary, while marginalizing the feminine and the queer community.

While it may take years or even decades to deconstruct the gendered nature of existing physical spaces, to see that progressive changes such as in the case of the airport security system are still being made, points toward a hopeful future for the development of gender inclusivity in public spaces. The ongoing discussion of gender transcribed into structures also highlights the need for more women and queer individuals in the field of architectural education and training who are likely to push gender boundaries by removing the masculine lens through which most historical foundations and contemporary structures have been laid. This study's observations also

point to the need to advocate for greater gender inclusivity, making room for a world in which non-binary gender norms shape the creative human use of space with liberatory and inclusive goals and human rights at its centre.



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