

Why Loiter an Examination of Women's Rights and Freedom in Public Spaces

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Abstract: *Why loiter is a movement started and initiated for women's rights and freedom. I chose the topic why loiters because I personally felt connected to the problems faced by women. Women are not allowed to go out in night at all, and if at all are out they should be accompanied by men. Decency and character of a woman is determined by her clothes she's wearing, her clothes, her way of living, food habits, number of "male friends" she has, her job schedules. A woman is judged and criticized by society on every step she takes. Patriarchy plays a role here and how it has dominated the real culture of India with the reel culture, due to multiple factors mainly patriarchy has demeaned women and has manipulated our culture. A women's freedom is a cultural revolt, but origins of our culture depict that women has ruled; our ancestors and were respected the most, our origins depict that women ruled the states. This article explores the social movement Why Loiter aimed at reclaiming public spaces for women in India. It delves into the societal influences and patriarchal structures that restrict women's freedom in public spaces. The study uses interviews and personal experiences to shed light on the issue and advocates for a societal shift towards gender equality. Why loiter movements depicts how patriarchy has influenced and dominated women's personal rights and freedom*

1. Introduction

Loitering is the act of remaining in a particular public place for a protracted time without any apparent purpose. Under certain circumstances, it is illegal in various jurisdictions. Loitering also refers to indoor littering in some parts of the world.

"The ideas of *izzat* and honour are peculiarly South Asian. Besides of course the Hindi - Urdu capacity to speak to each other," says Shilpa Phadke. "The '*chai tapris*' (tea shops) of Mumbai connected with the *dhabas* of Pakistan. The cross - border interactions never needed much explaining. When they talk, we know what they mean, and vice - versa. In coming years, there will be more South Asian bonds of solidarity over this. "

It is this fear of danger in public places that eventually leads to exclusion of women from urban spaces. In Aligarh, while there is no ban on women accessing any part of the university or the city, some public spaces, such as *dhabas*, certain streets and eating spots are so male - dominated that women feel uncomfortable there. This needs to change. "

It is in unravelling these many etceteras that 'Why Loiter?' is perceptive and challenging. Mumbai, while benign (or neutral), at least in the public realm, is actually 'value' laden; constantly putting its women (and men) under a panopticon of continuous surveillance that one may evade, or conform to.

How easy it is to be spotted as out of the ordinary, and how difficult it is to function, once one has been perceived as such. Eyes are always on the street looking out for those 'not like us' and there are so many of 'them'

The list of oddballs on the street, who are whetted by the silent city every time they step out is inclusive and top - lined by one single group: 'all women'. To conform, and so

to have open access to public space, Mumbai's every woman must be (or appear to be) 'young, able - bodied, Hindu, upper - caste, heterosexual, married or marriageable. '

There is an entire semantic of respectability she must construct each time she leaves her home. She must be (or appear to be) neutrally middle - class - 'not - lower - class, Not - Dalit, Not - Muslim, not - lesbian, not - disabled'. On Mumbai's streets, every woman must dress modestly and preferably be escorted by (an equally respectable looking) man. She must be healthy, freely mobile, sexually inert and, most importantly, have a good reason for being out of doors. She must never loiter.

'Why Loiter?' is about the ultimate freedom a woman demands in an urban space: the freedom to do exactly what a man is allowed to do. Mumbai, the progressive city, denies this just by being what it is. Perhaps the most important liberty a megalopolis should offer is the choice to do nothing. To loiter. To have fun. To be a flaneur, to go walkabout, to regard the city and its life as it happens, with no purpose in mind at all. The problem is, if you are not some kind of useful cog, you are a deviant, and a surveillance obsessed society will not accept this. It is difficult enough for men in Mumbai to loiter without being seen as vagabonds.

The ultimate irony, then: in Mumbai, every woman still needs to manufacture a 'disciplined body' just to be acceptable on its streets. To achieve unconditional access in a true sense, however, would require a patriarch ally enmeshed society to transform itself from the inside out, beyond both gender and 'otherness' to make Mumbai 'aamchi' for all.

2. Review of Literature

Loitering as a feminist right he protection and/or safety of women has long served as a litmus test of a nation's

progress and maturity - a measuring tool first employed by the British and Portuguese in colonial India, and now equally taken up in our postcolonial and globalised landscape. If our colonial overseers (to repeat an overused but apt phrase by Gayatri Spivak sought to “save brown women from brown men”), our loftier goal in the present has been to imbue that racist dictum with more localized and ethical context. Gendered bodies, feminists robustly argue, particularly in post - independence and urban India, continue to be subject to aggressive censorship, sexual harassment/ violence and state surveillance, to name a select few evils. Such issues have been granted even more visibility in the past few years through the launching of multiple activist efforts such as the Besharmi Morcha, Freeze the Tease and Chappal Marungi that have urged women to speak up against the daily sexual violence they endure. Ironically, it is now routinely acceptable, particularly in mega - cities such as Mumbai and New Delhi, to see previously segregated interest groups, such as government planners, media and feminist activists, coming together in multi - pronged efforts to highlight the sexual harassment of women in urban spaces. Safety for women at all costs has become the desired goal of the Left and the Right, an objective that few would ostensibly disagree with. Unless, of course, you are the authors of the wonderful and quite radical collection, *Why Loiter? Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets*. For Shilpa Phadke, Shilpa Ranade and Sameera Khan, safety for women is primarily a safe and thus inherently limited feminist project. To stress safety for women, they argue, without stressing the structural violence that makes such an objective desirable is to refuse the larger spatial contexts within which women live and work in. In other words, if the demand for safer public spaces for women is met at the expense of other minoritised bodies (such as those of migrants and/or Muslim men), or through the increased surveillance of how women access and travel public spaces, how has the status quo been challenged? The focus on the threat of ‘outsiders’ as potential harassers and perpetrators, for example, provides a distraction from a city’s battered infrastructure and lays the blame instead on the bodies of (primarily male) migrants who are seen to invade and occupy spaces. What we gain here is not safety for women but rather a more restrictive language of respectability and territoriality that casts women as victims who trespass into ‘wrong places,’ at the ‘wrong times,’ wearing the ‘wrong clothes’.

Statement of Purpose

Aims and objectives

- To study society
- To study women in society
- To study society’s perception about modern women.

Limitation

Research has been limited to a geographical boundary.

Location: Maharashtra – Mumbai – Mulund

The purpose of this article is to examine the social movement *Why Loiter* and its role in advocating for women’s rights and freedom in public spaces in India. It

aims to highlight the societal and patriarchal influences that restrict women’s access to and behavior in public spaces.

3. Methodology

I chose the topic *why loiter*, because it related to me on a personal level as well as a social issue. *why loiter* is started in Mumbai by Neha Singh on the streets of Mumbai.

Loitering without purpose on streets for women has always been challenging, either purpose should be there for women to step out of the door. The effect and dominance of patriarchy in society has led women to suffer, the basic right of loitering.

So in this research I decided to take interview of women of different age groups, women and men both are equally responsible for loitering movement. I decided to focus on women because patriarchy society has suppressed women’s voice and opinions.

4. Findings

The basics first. We hear that in a country where even women out on the road ‘for a purpose’ (work, school, college) are molested/raped, being out for pleasure is the last thing to worry about. WHY is loitering an important right for women?

The right to occupy public spaces is an unconditional and fundamental right for women. For years we have tried to justify women’s visibility or access to public spaces with reasons like, she has to be outside to access education or make a living or to shop for groceries, but the right to loiter says that just like men occupy public spaces unconditionally and uninhibitedly, women must occupy spaces in the day and night, for work or for pleasure, alone or in a group, wearing clothes of their own choice and behaving as they please, whether they appear ‘respectable’ or not, whether their being visible is sanctioned and approved by society or not, and the state, the police and society still have absolutely no right to violate her physically, sexually or psychologically. Among other things, this is a direct protest to victim blaming, where whenever a woman faces sexual violence in a public space, there are a million questions raised, putting the onus of the incident on the woman.

The pleasure principle also makes loitering a sustained, long term and peaceful resistance, rather than, say, a public outcry after a sexual attack, which usually leads to short sighted and knee jerk reactions by the state to pacify the public sentiment.

The act of loitering aims to normalize women’s visibility in public spaces and break norms of respectability, ‘safe and unsafe’, ‘good enough reason or not’ and change society’s perception of a woman in a public space. This will have far reaching effects in terms of physical safety for women, their social, physical, cognitive and economic growth. It will account for a progressive mindset change in all of society, will eradicate victim blaming and self blaming. It will force the state machinery to create infrastructure that supports

women's accessibility and safety in public spaces like street lights, public toilets, helplines, patrolling etc.

How does the right to loiter sit within the larger movement for gender equality – i. e., how do you place this with regard to other 'basic' rights for sanitation, reproductive choices or a life free from domestic violence?

Basic sanitation, reproductive rights, fight against domestic violence and the right to reclaim public spaces are not separate rights. They all lie under the same spectrum, which is to be treated as individuals that have equal right to social, economical and political opportunities. The right to loiter is based on the pleasure principle, it is the most basic and yet the most evolved way of reaching equality in a society, and pushes the envelope of the society to stop looking at women in the boxes of sexual violence, reproduction and sanitation and force them to see women as evolved, creative, free spirited, inspirational, adventurous, intelligent, productive beings that demand that their cities, villages, towns belong as much to them in every respect, unconditionally, as they belong to men. When men and society in general starts viewing women as wholesome beings occupying 50% of all spaces, they will also be open and accepting of women's right to reproduction, sanitation, and fight against domestic violence.

The first question anyone brings up when talking about women's right to be in public is that the public space isn't safe (and that it's not safe for men either). How do you explain women's right to risk?

Well, it's a catch 22 situation, where one says that women shouldn't be in public spaces for their own safety, thus removing the presence of women from public spaces and in effect, making public spaces even more dangerous for women. Eventually this 'solution' to avoiding risks will make women invisible in public spaces.

The solution, according to Why Loiter? is to do the exact opposite. To be so visible that no place remains unsafe. To occupy spaces that are considered unsafe and in such large numbers that even those spaces become safe, vibrant and lively. In fact, if there are more and more women that come out on the streets, the streets will become safer for everybody, including for men, children, the transgender, the religious minorities, the disabled etc. Sanitizing spaces, putting guards, barbed wires, iron gates, ticketed entries, excluding people of a certain class/caste/minority/sexuality, in order to make them 'safe' for women, actually makes the spaces more dangerous for women. The more open, free and accepting of all kinds of communities a space is, the safer it is for women.

Case in point is the Shivaji park in Dadar (Mumbai), which has an almost nonexistent boundary wall, no guards, no gated entries, no tickets is by far the safest public space for women in Bombay, mainly because it is always occupied by several hundred people who roam around freely. Because of the low boundary wall, the road is easily accessible in a jump. In contrast to this is the Oval maidan, which has a ten feet high sharp edged iron fencing all around and has just one entry and exit points that are guarded. One never sees

women strolling there since the strict sanitation alienates the space for many.

Privatization of spaces and denial of access to certain sections of society makes spaces dangerous for women. Another case in point, after the hawkers and book sellers were removed from the fort area of South Bombay, the area became desolate and dangerous for women, who earlier would stroll around till late browsing through books, eating pani puri and chatting on the roads, safe because of the sheer numbers of hawkers and food stalls.

Why Loiter? believes that the only way to make spaces safe is to access the right to risk, in large numbers, and occupy these spaces during day and night, thus making it accessible and safe for the entire society, and normalize women's and other minorities' presence in these spaces.

Women from all socio - economic backgrounds have the right to loiter. How can the movement become inclusive?

Since the movement started very organically and through word of mouth, it included women that were my friends, friends of friends and acquaintances. Since we put up all photos and stories from our loitering sessions on social media and the why loiter blog, we started getting a lot of enquiries from women unknown to us. Thus our reach grew, but still restricted itself to a certain socio economic class that has access to social media. But since its second year into being, the group has reached out to universities, groups and women in different cities, including Jaipur, Aligarh, Delhi and cities in Pakistan.

The authors of the book and I have been conducting workshops with college students and also with women's and girls' groups across the country. Recently we tied up with a Delhi - based NGO called CREA to conduct a two - day workshop on reclaiming public spaces and loitering with fifty tribal girls in Jharkhand. We have also produced a play called 'Loitering' that is co produced by the National Center for Performing Arts and we plan to show the play across the country in schools, colleges, women's organizations and alternative spaces.

Apart from these ways of reaching out, the very act of loitering in public spaces that are free and open to all creates a gradual change in the minds of all that are watching, irrespective of class/caste/religion and inspires others to do the same.

What is your take on women - only spaces – be it in local trains or like we heard recently, a women - only liquor shop in Delhi? How do these support or detract from the movement for women's right to equal access to public spaces?

I personally think that reserved coaches in trains and buses encourage women to access public spaces without the fear of harassment, although this situation should be a transition from being a patriarchal and regressive society to one that is evolved and progressive. The ideal situation would be to have no division of public spaces based on gender, including in washrooms and changing rooms, like it is in some countries in Europe, but since the situation for women in India is far from the ideal currently, I personally feel

creating reservations of space in public transport is essential for women to step out and access public spaces.

Personal experience

So why loiter was the topic I wanted to select because I related to it a lot. Basically in a society women are not supposing to go out alone or roam aimlessly, if women are stepping out of the door should be for purpose only; and if they are going out to have fun and then should be accompanied by a male.

I grew up in a family where rules and rituals are supposed to be followed, my parents are still in influence of patriarchy, although they have changed in some ways, I changed them this is what my sister says, she wasn't given freedom at the age of 11 or 12 but I was, or choice of clothes, or choosing arts, she didn't fight for it because she conditioned to the norms whereas I didn't, my life was meant to be written by me, so when choosing why loiter – I interviewed my mother, my grand mom, and also my maternal aunts, I saw and heard how their lives changed and they could never pursue their dreams.

In the 21st century the phrase we use so often and proudly say we are modern, we don't have to. we just have to find our roots, our ancestors always have respected women and never abused them, but because of invasions and manusmriti we tend to believe that our past has always harassed women and I am not denying that it hasn't but also we have a rich cultural which is lost and according to me and whatever I have learnt or read or saw, our roots are somewhere related to these social movements and probably we will be able to bring back what is ours.

5. Conclusion

Why loiter - a social movement for rights of women's in public spaces and to claim those public spaces. society influences in women's claim to public spaces, influence and effect of patriarchy society has oppressed women in every aspect of life.

Although, some women are trying to change and are fighting for rights of women and some of them have created an impact on youth.

Suppression of women in society isn't because of modern women but because people have hatred towards people and how things have changed.

In conclusion, the Why Loiter movement plays a crucial role in advocating for women's rights and freedom in public spaces in India. The study highlights the need for societal change to dismantle patriarchal structures that restrict women's access to and behavior in public spaces. Further research and advocacy are needed to continue pushing for gender equality.

Declaration

The research done is carried out by me and is an original research. This assignment reflects the original research under taken by under signed researchers and all materials,

ideas and concepts taken from others are duly acknowledged and proper reference is given.

References

- [1] Mumbai women assert their right to loiter - The Hindu
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