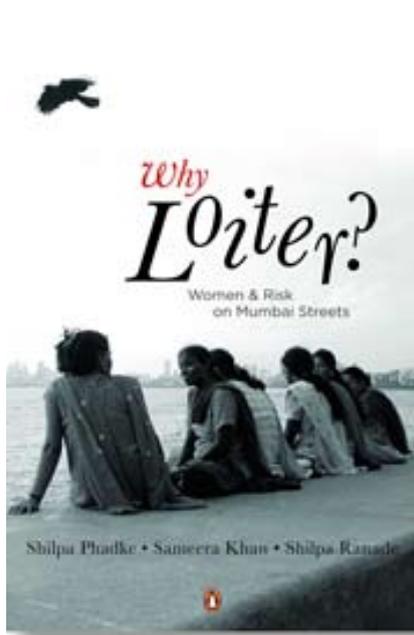


The protection and/or safety of women has long served as a litmus test of a nation's progress and maturity — a measuring tool first employed by the British and Portuguese in colonial India, and now equally taken up in our postcolonial and globalised landscape. If our colonial overseers (to repeat an overused but apt phrase by Gayatri Spivak sought to “save brown women from brown men”), our more lofty goal in the present has been to imbue that racist dictum with more localised 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 to 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’.

Let me be clear here, the authors of *Why Loiter?* are not facetiously arguing that safety for women should not be a concern for us. The book openly acknowledges the continued rise of crimes against women and the urgent need to address such an escalation through the establishment of good public transport, clean and accessible toilets, decent street lighting, all open 24 hours, to name only a few of the needed improvements they cite.

# Loitering as a feminist right



## Why Loiter? Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets

By Shilpa Phadka, Shilpa Ranade and Sameera Khan

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Rather, the ambitions of the book are more conceptual and wonderfully counterintuitive. What would it mean, the authors provocatively ask, for us to abandon the language of danger and safety, and to inhabit instead a language of pleasure and possibility? What would it mean, in other words, for women to “just loiter”? As they write, “Most debates on public space are disproportionately focused on danger rather than pleasure... Pleasure or fun is seen as threatening because it fundamentally questions the idea that women's presence in public space is acceptable only when they have a purpose.” This radical shift from a politics of safety to a politics of pleasure demands that we examine what it means for women to have ‘fun’ in public spaces, to interrogate the restrictive and often repressive ideas around women's sexuality that make such a conversation undesirable, if not impossible. In turning to the term ‘loiter’, the authors remark that “nobody likes loitering”! So much so that the State legislates against it (pace Bombay Police Act, 1951 whereby “laying or loitering ... shall on conviction, be punished ...”) and that words in various Indian languages reference loitering in distinctly uncomplimentary terms (*lukka*, *lafanga*, *vella*, *tapori*, *bekaar*). To recuperate ‘loitering’ then as a term of possibility is not to trivialise a women's right to public space; rather the authors write that the “right to loiter has the potential to change the terms of negotiation in city public spaces and creating the possibility of a radically altered city, not just for women, but for everyone.”

‘Loitering’ for women here thus means standing at street corners, doing ‘timepass’ over chai without surveillance, using clean toilets after dark, and indulging in consensual flirtation and sexual encounters. Needless to say, such a shift does not divert from the political project of making public spaces habitable for women; it compels a broader understanding of the linkages between gender and space in urban cities like Mumbai.

The arguments of the book are drawn from the findings of a three-year research project, the Gender and Space Project, based in Mumbai, that examined how women (despite their apparent visibility) still do not share equal access to public space with men. The project used both conventional and non-conventional techniques to initiate a more public debate on the intersectionality of gender and space in the emergence of the city. Thus accepted methods such as locality studies, ethnography and mapping, from the fields of social sciences and urban planning, are amply supplemented by non-conventional research techniques such as video and audiodocumentaries and photography. Additionally, the authors conducted extensive workshops and seminars with undergraduate and graduate students, convened open roundtable discussions on relevant themes, and overall present the reader with a book that is as well-researched as it is well-written. The book is based in Mumbai to precisely work against the stereotype that Mumbai is the safest urban city for women to live and work in, as opposed to say the unsafe and

sexually rapacious landscape of a city like New Delhi. Instead, the authors carefully demonstrate (through a range of interviews and surveys) that Mumbai women or ‘Bombay girls,’ of all types, backgrounds, classes and orientation – addressed in different sections of the book – survive under increasing surveillance and constraint in the city.

It is impossible to provide an adequate summary of this weighty book; suffice to say that each section of the book grapples with how to understand and constitute public spaces for women outside of settled languages of safety. Thus, for example, the authors note that even as ladies' compartments on Mumbai's trains provide reasonable commuting options for women of all classes, such ‘safe’ spaces equally discriminate against other gendered outsiders: “Hijras are met with annoyance mixed with anxiety. Transgender people and lesbian women who dress ambiguously face reactions ranging from confusion to hostility.” The first section, “City Limits,” engages with the persistent dichotomy of good versus bad subjects as exemplified in the figure of the well-behaved middle-class wife versus the dangerous lower-class bar dancer. Within such dichotomies, the emphasis continues to be on the dangers women are exposed to in public spaces, even though they are known to be equally unsafe at home. The second section, “Everyday Spaces,” by far the most ethnographic and humourous, deals with the daily exigencies of travel, defecation, and gathering for women in Mumbai. On the most delicate subject of “peeing”, the authors wryly note: “If public toilets were to be your guide to imagining the city, what would they say about Mumbai? First, they would imply that there are very few women in public as compared to men... Second, they would suggest that if Mumbai women need to pee, they do so at home... And third, they would say, since even fewer facilities are open after 9 pm, respectable women have no business being out in public after dark.”

The third section, “In Search of Pleasure,” chronicles the different itineraries of pleasure as experienced by *Bandra Girls*, *Muslim Girls*, *Rich Girls*, *Slum Girls*, *Old Girls*, *Lesbian Girls* and *Working Girls*. Even as each sub-category of girls provides rich and startling narratives of spaces to have ‘fun’ (the gym, call-centres, nana-nani parks, the internet,) it becomes equally apparent that such ‘fun’ is only possible through a series of negotiations that “subtly manipulate the system rather than openly rebel against it”. The last section, “Imagining Utopias,” (perhaps drawing inspiration from the feminist classic, *Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's Sultana's Dream!*) provides, as it were, a manifesto for why it's worth taking the risk to loiter. Here, the authors make a passionate case for loitering as a fundamental feminist right of claiming space. To imagine a city full of women sitting, talking, strolling, eating, protesting, is to imagine a city full of possibilities. “When we ask to loiter,” the authors declare, “the intent is to rehabilitate this act of hanging out without purpose not just for women, but for all marginal groups.” ■