# Disquisition on the Lack of Agency and Representation of Women in Urban Spaces

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*Abstract— Women haven't been able to access spaces or lay claim to the city as citizens as their male counterparts since time immemorial. Gender can no longer be considered an isolated entity of inquiry that is solely based on anthropology. The presence of gendered spaces in urban realms is reflective of the lopsided development that fails substantially in creating equity and identity. It is imperative to rectify age-old approaches to spaces that are rooted in prejudice and to capacitate women to re-occupy and reclaim spaces that they have been deprived of. An exhaustive study pertaining to the negotiation of women with spaces and reasons for doing so provides insight into the historically labyrinthine relationship. Apart from comprehending the reasons for the presence of gendered spaces, the need to acknowledge the negative consequences of the disproportionate development of spaces leading to the marginalization of a particular gender is exigent. The massive potential of gender neutrality is yet to be realized and the study compares several case studies of different strata and backgrounds to highlight the need of the hour. The stupefying observation that the average woman's network or mobility is highly restricted to the nature of her work and duties is reflective of how women are merely commuters in the public realm. The creation of gender-neutral spaces and cities has the potential to revolutionize the public realm holistically, beyond one's comprehension.*

*Index Terms— Gendered Spaces, Gender Neutrality, Mobility, Networks, Public Space*

## I. INTRODUCTION

An indispensable component of Urban Design is the study of circulation patterns and spaces that propagate triangulation. Albeit narrowing down of spaces that host a cornucopia of activity becomes vital, the study of factors that restrict a section of society from using particular spaces or limiting their mobility creates a disproportionate environment that contradicts what an equitable urban realm must stand for.

The study explores sociological and anthropological components of society and human nature respectively to understand the causes and effects that compel women to interact with spaces in such a degree of contrast from their male counterparts. Apart from the behavioral analysis and extensive literature studies, the primary method of data collection through the acquisition of data from a ward in Bangalore provides insight into the prevalent conditions and factors governing gendered spaces. The aforementioned study area is studied with respect to intricately formulated criteria and parameters, which are then analyzed and inferred from.

The permeability and accessibility of women to spaces and places are quite literally a reflection of the position they hold in the larger system of society. Exhaustive research has indicated that women restrict their mobility to activities dictated by the nature of their work and that issues like security, surveillance, and safety hinder their claim to the city. The study at hand explores these integrants at multiple levels and contexts and introduces the need for gender neutrality as a remedy instead of further segregation of the two genders.

1. **Aim**: The aim of the study is to explore the relationship between the built form and gender relationships with underlying themes of form, community, networks, mobility, and temporality.

**Objectives**: The objective of the research is to understand the tangible and intangible aspects of qualitative and quantitative aspects of research undertaken to investigate gendered spaces that result in the marginalization of women. The research study also includes a primary study in J.P. Nagar, Bangalore where gendered spaces are studied with respect to various parameters and objectives.

2. **Significance:** Gender neutrality has the potential to eradicate the marginalization of gender on the whole. If implemented, it would free a major part of the population, of shackles that literally immobilize them. Social and gender equity is the major theme under gender neutrality in urban studies and must be given the importance that it warrants.

3. **Scope**: The sociocultural structures and social processes within the urban context have a large field of opportunity with respect to urban design, sociology, and behavioral sciences if studied in depth. Changes of microscopic magnitude have the potential to create ripples in the fields aforementioned

4. **Limitations**: The discussion of gender relationships is dependent on a multitude of variables that are beyond the scope of the field analysis. Albeit parameters that can be assigned values, have been accounted for, certain qualitative aspects of the research conducted cannot be quantified due to the highly subjective nature that is associated with it.

5. **Research Statement:** The impact of gender inclusivity or the lack thereof on the urban form, accessibility, facilities, public spaces, and urban violence in the urban scape and

the exploration of gendered spaces, and mobility networks of women with respect to the same.
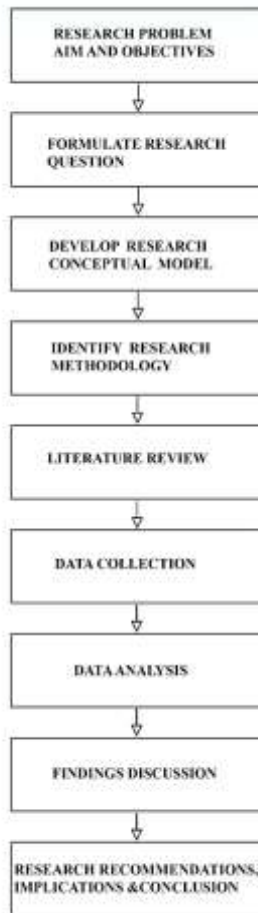
6. **Research Methodology:**



**Figure 1:** Flowchart of research methodology undertaken. Source: Author

## II.  LITERATURE REVIEW

A.  **"Negotiating Gendered Urban Space: Experiences of Women across Classes in India"**

Gender is a rather complex concept to define and the meaning it holds has been changing continually while being contested constantly. Gender is not the same as sex and is considered a social construct that segregates "male" from "female". A substantial number of scholars have been studying the relationship between gender and spaces as well as their evolution, independently and in conjunction. The process of stratification at a social level that leads to the genesis of masculine and feminine spaces has come to be known as "Gendering". On careful deliberation, it was found that a woman's access to spaces is defined by the nature of her work in addition to her mobility restricted to those realms where her labor is imperative. The author goes on to shed light on the 1980 United Nations report that stated that two-thirds of the aggregate work hours accounted for in the world,

are performed by women and that despite doing so, the spaces they have access to are minuscule in comparison to their male counterparts.

Siwach discerns the aim of the paper to be to identify all male and female spaces with the inclusion of the intermediate spaces in between them. The author reiterates that the restriction of mobility and the very presence of gendered spaces within the area of study is reflective of the patriarchal setting prevalent. The understanding that mobility and gender roles are highly interlaced becomes consequential. The author's preliminary acquaintance of the Mitathal village in Haryana comprises the understanding that it shows characteristics of classic patriarchy which is not atypical for the agrarian society that it is. The patriarchs in a typical society such as the one aforementioned, not only control women's mobility and activities but also the spaces they have access to.

The method of data collection was predominantly primary, comprising direct observations, focus groups, and exhaustive interviews. The routes, paths, and nuanced behavior of the women in public spaces were recorded. The participants of the central study belonged to households with three generations of women to provide a greater canvas to work with. It was deduced that women were preponderantly involved in agricultural activities or/and as homemakers barring the few women that were engaged in teaching. The nature of work determines the mobility of the women in question and gendered spaces are explicitly manifested. In scenarios such as this, public spaces are conventionally associated with men and private spaces such as the home is analogous with women. The author classifies exclusive male and female spaces as well as the ones overlapping with both genders as shown in Figure 2.
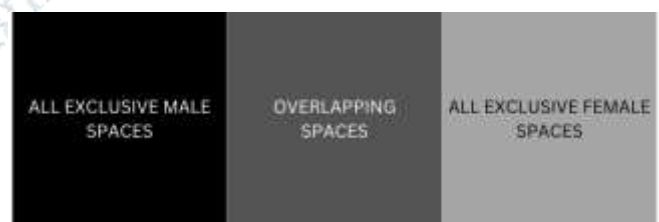


**Figure 2:** Classification of gendered spaces in Mitathal, Haryana.  Source: Author

The author describes the different components of the typical household in Mitathal, bringing to light the irony of the existence of gendered spaces within a woman's own house. *Baithak* is the transitional space equivalent of the *Jagalli Katte* in Karnataka that behaves as a space of negotiation between the private/cordoned-off household and the public street beyond it. Since time immemorial, this space has been used by the men of a household to take part in activities asserting power over their female counterparts who were only allowed in the space to serve food or clean. The *Ghar* was the innermost portion of the household comprising the kitchen, open veranda, and household, making it one of the few female-exclusive spaces albeit men were not

restricted from entering the space. The *Gher* was an outhouse-like space with cattle and was male-dominated but provided access to women due to the assistance they rendered in the upkeep of the place. Spaces that are restricted to men are often accessible to women under special circumstances and this phenomenon is known as conditional access to spaces. Women have conditional access to the Gher and Baithak whereas men have access to all spaces but choose to restrict their activity to certain spaces. The classification of these spaces is illustrated in Figure 3.
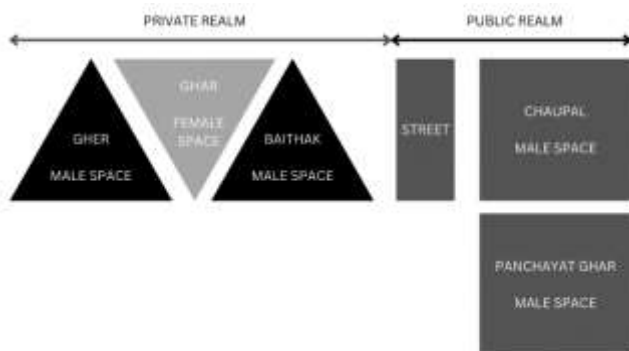


**Figure 3:** Classification of gendered spaces across private and public realms. Haryana. Source: Author

The mutual spaces shared between the two genders include bus stops, agriculture fields, hospitals, and temples among more. The presence of women in such spaces is not invited but rather tolerated due to the nature of their work or the assistance they render. Notional boundaries are not uncommon in such scenarios where men and women are segregated and do not interact with one another. Gendered spaces in this context also have the tag of temporality attached to them due to which, a woman who can sit under a tree after fulfilling her agrarian duties for the day, cannot do so after the sun sets.

The author's research yielded that the concentration of female activity was in the private realm and extremely restricted to some portions of the public realm that direly needed her assistance or presence. Therefore, it can be said that the mobility, networks, and spaces that a woman interacted with were in relation to the nature of her work and duties.

Therefore, it can be said that the mobility, networks, and spaces that a woman interacted with were in relation to the nature of her work and duties. Caste and social status further classify the approach of women to spaces. Women belonging to higher strata of society can afford to restrict their movement to the private realm whereas their lesser-endowed female counterparts have no choice but to work and interact in the public realm. Apart from caste and status, age largely determines the extent of access a woman has to spaces. The spheres of access increase with social age. The grandmother or mother-in-law of the household has maximum mobility and freedom to space when compared to her daughter or daughter-in-law (who has the least access to space). Hence,

social age, childbirth, and involvement in economic activities legitimize their access to spaces or their mobility.

The findings of the study shed light on the blatant distinction and segregation between men and women in a rural setting like Mitathal and the assertion of power by men over women across spaces and realms. Women have been deprived of the nonchalant approach to movement and spaces that men enjoy. The multitude of factors that affect the mobility of women, such as age and caste, helps in understanding the working of rural society in India. It is rather interesting to find that when a women's assistance is required, a space that was off-limits to her, becomes legitimate. The study identifies factors that affect accessibility and the classification of the realms along with insight into the psyche of the inhabitants.

### B. "Negotiating Gendered Urban Space: Experiences of Women across Classes in India"

The book is a significant contribution to the literature on women's experiences in urban spaces. The authors of this book, Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan, and Shilpa Ranade, conducted three years of qualitative research to map the exclusions and negotiations that women of various age groups and economic classes encounter in their everyday lives in Mumbai.

The book presents scenarios of Mumbai's changing landscape and how this emerging urban fabric could be flawed from equitable development and equal access to all. The authors argue that while women's presence and participation in public spaces have increased over time, they still face significant challenges related to safety. Women are not granted complete safety at any time of the day, and their experiences vary depending on their economic class and mode of transportation.

The authors highlight how different economic and communal settings provide varying degrees of freedom and social constraints for women. They note that men have more access to urban spaces and can move about more vigorously than women. This limits women's choices with respect to jobs they take up or engage in various social gestures. The book also sheds light on the need for an equal claim to public safety for all individuals regardless of gender or economic class.

The authors conclude that women's presence and participation in public spaces and events have certainly increased but reserve that the city still does not offer equal claim into the realm of public safety in urban streets and spaces. Overall, "Why Loiter? Women & Risk on Mumbai Streets" provides valuable insights into the challenges that women face in urban spaces in Mumbai. The book highlights the need for policymakers to address these challenges by providing safe public spaces for all individuals regardless of gender or economic class. It sheds light on understanding how gender shapes experiences in urban environments.

### III. PRIMARY STUDY: SARAKKI WARD

The delineation of the site area to study the phenomenon of gendered spaces and networks is tortuous involving a labyrinth of factors and situations. The ward of Sarakki in Bangalore is found south of the historic Pete area where the growth of the city emanated. Inscriptions and hero stones found in the ward indicate the presence of settlements as old as 500 years old.

Block seven of the Sarakki ward is home to the iconic Veerabadhra Swamy temple and interestingly comprises both historic/fine grain and contemporary/coarse grain which allows for comparison not only between different stakeholders but also the kind of impact that economic activity, social class, and built entities have gendered spaces and human behavior in general.
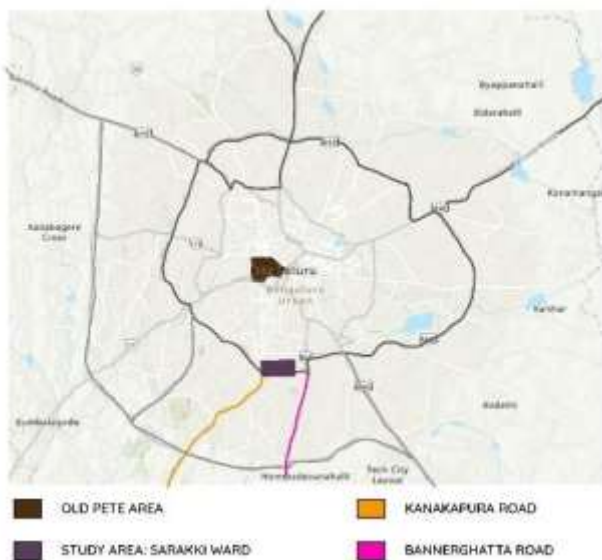


**Figure 4:** Location of the study area with respect to Bangalore. Illustration source: Author



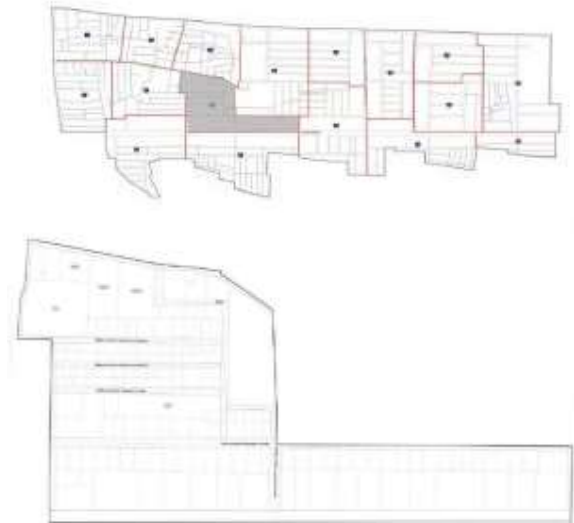**Figure 5:** Study area- Sarakki ward.
Illustration source: Author



**Figure 6:** Study Area-Block 7 of Sarakki ward.
Image Source: BBMP

#### A. Inferences and Analysis

The major points of triangulation are ascertained within the block. The said spots of interaction in the preliminary stage of activity mapping aren't gender centric but provide an overall holistic view of the pulse in which the study shall gain momentum eventually. The map hence obtained provides a base map to conduct a further investigation that would be gender specific as well as mobility/behavior based.

Activities are mapped at different times of the day to fathom the temporality and nature of congregation/ user behavior in the study area as depicted in figures 8-11.
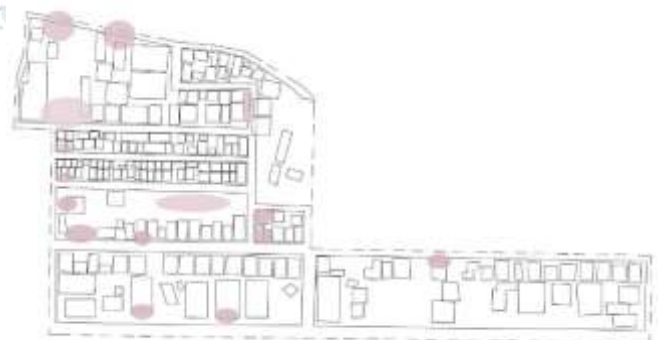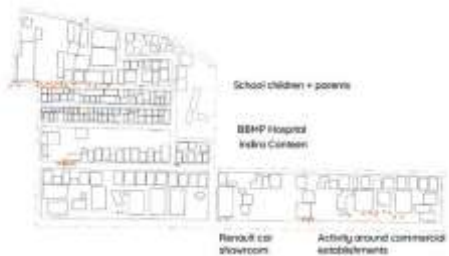


**Figure 7:** Activity mapping in block 7 (generalized).
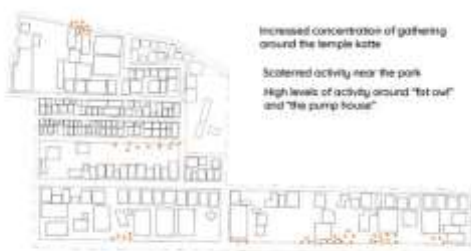Illustration source: Author

**Morning activity 6-9**



**Afternoon activity 12-3**



**Evening activity 4-7**



**Night activity 7-10**

**Figures 8-11:** Activity mapping in block 7 at different times of the day. Illustration source: Author

The mapping of activities and the density of the same has been depicted above to realize the areas where people interact the most with the spaces and to understand the reasons for doing so. These reasons could range from the presence of a school to that of a temple or even a small Kirana shop or chai stall. The mapping has been carried out at different times of the day as it is a highly influential factor on who carries out activities and how. The different zones of the block become active or passive at different times of the day. In compliance with convention, people flock to the temple in the wee hours of the day before they head to work or start their day while simultaneously, crowds of children and parents can be seen in the school/playschool vicinity. Eateries and commercial spaces pick up pace as the day progresses and gastropubs towards the Outer Ring Road see high footfall towards the night.



**Figure 12:** Sectional elevations through the Veerabadhraswamy temple showing gendered spaces in the study area. Illustration source: Author



**Figure 13:** Sectional elevations through the Veerabadhraswamy temple showing gendered spaces in the study area. Illustration source: Author

Figure 14 thematically conveys how the block is dominated by spaces for men. The ratio is almost 1:4 and is heavily lopsided, to say the least. In accordance with the studies quoted in the previous sections of the literature review, it is evident that the places with female hegemony are those where they are required to be i.e., pit stops to drop off/pick up kids, vegetable/fruit stalls to pick up produce, playground to pick up children, hospitals/healthcare centers for health consultations. In the case of their male counterparts, places such as tea stalls, bakeries, storefronts of male salons, small eateries/dharshini's, temple katte's, and even public washrooms are dominated by their presence.

In the case of a younger demographic, it was observed that little school girls tend to move in packs and don't waver around as much as the boys who take up larger spheres of space around them and tend to move slowly, observing others. They also tend to hang around smaller shops selling refreshments while the girls move on quickly from the place post their purchase. It was also observed that the boys create

a large central space in the park indicated whereas the girls form smaller inconspicuous groups in corners with less visibility. This could be associated with a sense of security.

Block 7 comprises a substantial number of commercial establishments that in turn employ female and male employees. It is interesting to note that the women move in packs, either eating together at the eatery or bringing back their takeaway to their place of work without any segues or deviations. The men on the other hand seem to possess no qualms about moving alone without company. They tend to locate themselves in close proximity to the street adjacent to chai stalls, small hotels, paan shops, male salons, or even outside temples where they could look at everyone and everything around. Women seemed to be keen on picking the shortest distance to their destination, avoiding male-dominated spaces such as the salons and chai stalls (even crossing the road in order to avoid them).
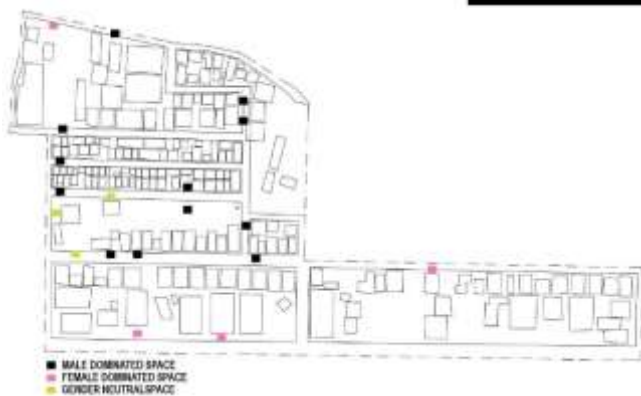


**Figure 14:** Male and Female spaces in block 7. Illustration source: Author

A multitude of inferences can be drawn from these observations- women probably feel unsafe or insecure walking through certain spaces where they perceive themselves to be vulnerable to danger such as harassment or the fear of being touted as an immoral woman. The behavior of men similarly, can be attributed to the lack of policing toward them by society or the primitive need of man as a hunter to be on the lookout due to which he is always observing his surroundings and assessing threats. But despite these countless inferences, what is of importance is the fact that spaces and their treatment with respect to men and women are lopsided. Gender neutrality and equity of spaces seem to be highly lacking in the study area which happens to be situated in the heart of the cosmopolitan city that sets standards for the rest of the world.

Figures 12 and 13 indicate the sectional elevations of one of the oldest parts of the ward. A mixture of dominance can by both genders be noticed in this portion of the block where women tend to occupy the temple premises during the time of service and men tend to occupy the spaces in and around the temple in much larger numbers prior to or post to it. It wouldn't be out of the ordinary to find a man sitting by the Ashwath Katte staring into space and contemplating or a group of middle-aged men by the temple with parked scooters debating on politics and religion without a single woman in sight. These activities/situations are highly dependent on the time of day.
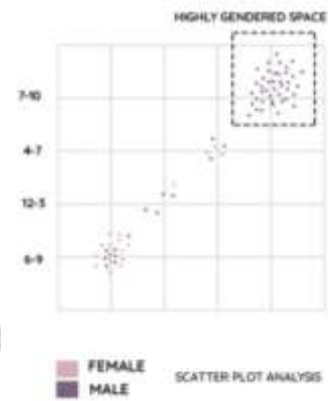


**Figure 15:** Scatter plot analysis to show the activity mapping near the temple and the creation of a highly male-gendered space. Illustration source: Author
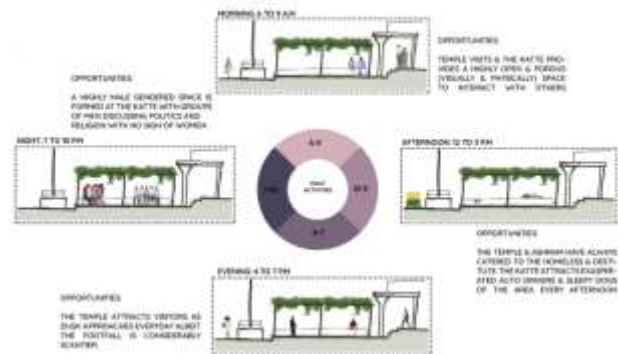


**Figure 16:** Blow-ups of sectional elevations through the Veerabadhraswamy temple showing gendered spaces in the study area. Illustration source: Author

Every space- gendered or not has opportunities that attract activities. Figure 16 attempts to capture these opportunities at four quadrants of time at the same place to further identify the gendered space through scatter plot analysis shown in Figure 15. Men of the block/ward belonging to particular communities/social circles gather in the space illustrated at dusk and dawn every day. They do so after their morning walk and before they call it a day. Questions like what are the reasons for the space to not welcome any women into the interaction bubble and why they choose to gather at the place every day at a particular time are intriguing to the field of sociology and urban studies.

**B.    Interventions and Strategies**

• Making women and girls visible as active users in the urban setting
• Promotion of recreational activities that engage women
• Activities that channel diversity
• Interactive edge conditions

• Safe mobility
• Reducing the perception of fear in urban spaces
• Mobilizing women in urban space
• Ensuring free movement
• Legibility in mobility
• Reforms in governance

## IV. CONCLUSION

Public spaces and infrastructure are usually designed for an abstract 'generic' user. In the context of an ideology that deems women's proper place to be at home, this imagined 'neutral user' of public facilities and infrastructure is invariably male. It is imperative that urban spaces and their design are revisited to fill the gaps created by generations of patriarchal thinking that insinuate that the gender of a person should be a determining factor in how and when they should access public space. Initiatives must be taken not only to implement strategies that would promote interactive edge conditions, safe mobility, and reduce fear but also to sensitize the general public to the need for egalitarianism. Given the complexity and dynamic nature of urban networks, design opportunities could concentrate on fostering adaptation and bolstering this system through thoughtful design. The study of gendered spaces and advocacy for gender-neutral ones is not exclusive to sociological or gender studies but is the first stride towards creating access to spaces and opportunities for girls and women.

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