

## Women's Perceptions of Overall Health and Unsafety in Urban Spaces: A Qualitative and Case Study Based Analysis of Tehran's Urban Areas <sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*Women all over the world may, at some point, have had unpleasant experiences which might have caused them physical or mental harm. This study has investigated such experiences particularly in the city of Tehran, and explored the relationship between unsafe urban spaces and the overall health and wellbeing of women. Urbanization, while being one of the leading global trends of the 21st century, seems to be having a significant impact on the overall health of people. Due to the changes and modernization in Iran, there is an increasing presence of urban spaces in cities. Tehran, the capital of Iran, is the biggest city in the country and the main destination of migrants because of its several modernistic urban attractions. This phenomenon has many adverse effects on different aspects of the city, such as: the loss of green environments, agricultural lands and orchards, increasing air pollution, increasing socioeconomic inequality, and so on. <sup>2</sup> Women, according to the gender equity perspective, should have equal rights for presence in and use of urban public spaces. Various factors and obstacles decrease women participation in urban public spaces, for instance, they suffer from harassment and insecurity in a city on a regular basis and confront it in various situations. <sup>3</sup>*

### Keywords

Unsafety, Urban spaces, Women's Health

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1 This article has been extracted from the Master Thesis: Zohreh. Rajabi "Women's perceptions of overall health and unsafety in urban spaces: A qualitative and case study of Tehran's urban areas." (2018).

2 Ahmad Pourahmad et.al. "The Impact of Urban Sprawl up on Air Pollution".252-257 .

3 Mohammad Reza Bemaniyan te.al. "Assessment of Factors Affecting the Promotion of Women's Safety in Urban Environments".

In an article “Public lighting in urban areas and the presence of women” by Behzadfar et al in 2014, attention was drawn to the importance of urban lighting design and how it can enhance sense of security by lighting dark corners and hidden defenceless spaces. The study assessed the needs of residents of a neighbourhood and found that women are not being considered in the designing and planning of public spaces. The study also found that the inclusion of women in public urban areas and their active participation is much less than that of men.<sup>4</sup> Despite there being many research in the field of safety and urban areas, there has been little interest to study health related issues in public areas in Iran.

Some studies in other countries have shown that in neighborhoods and public spaces where residents feel a sense of safety, they make use of local facilities which contribute to maintaining their health. Feeling constrained and not able to go outside one's home because of fear for safety and being careful to avoid interaction with neighbors creates a social environment which undermines mental and physical health.<sup>5</sup>

For this study, a qualitative approach was chosen to provide insights into the problems and uncover trends in thoughts and opinions. Semi-structured techniques and focus groups as data collection methods were used. Thematic analysis was chosen as theoretically flexible because the search for, and examination

of, patterning across language does not require adherence to any particular theory of language, or explanatory meaning framework for human beings, experiences or practices.<sup>6</sup>

Two focus groups were conducted and participants from two different neighborhoods (central and south of Tehran) participated. Each focus group consisted of 4 to 5 women who were more than 18 years old and from the two different neighbourhoods. The discussions lasted for approximately 60 minutes. A theoretical framework was used as a guideline to obtain more comprehensive viewpoints. Case study was another method which was applied in this research.

Thematic analysis resulted in five main themes

1. We cannot live a healthy lifestyle because of neglected and unsafe environments
2. Strict culture and gender inequality seen in public spaces place a lot of stress and fear on women
3. Public spaces are not designed to be inclusive for both genders
4. We are shamed because we live in poor areas, this adds to our mental stress
5. We could work together to improve our public spaces; we

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4 Mostafa Behzadfar.et.al “Public lighting in urban areas and the presence of women, Case Study: Tehran Saei Park”.

5 Fran.E Baum et.al. “Do perceived neighbourhood cohesion and safety contribute to neighbourhood differences of health?”.

6 Gary.W Taylor. Jane.M Ussher. “Making sense of S&M: A discourse analytic account”.293-314.

could reduce a lot of stress and strain.

Each theme along with subtheme is presented in Table 1 to demonstrate how participants perceived factors to influence their health.

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Subtheme</b>
<b>Theme 1</b> We cannot live a healthy lifestyle because of neglected, unsafe environments	Inhabitants' actions create poor sanitary conditions which have negative health effects Neighbourhood environment contributes to unsafe conditions for inhabitants and hampers healthy lifestyle
<b>Theme 2</b> The strict culture and gender inequality seen in public spaces place a lot of stress and fear in women	No equality for women due to the social and cultural norms Social disorder and masculinized culture contribute to women's stress and fears No leisure places for women
<b>Theme 3</b> Public spaces are not designed to be inclusive for both genders	Gender-blindness in urban space's design contribute to unsafe conditions for inhabitants. Limited access to services in neighbourhoods for women Spatial mismatches limit healthy lifestyles for women
<b>Theme 4</b> We are ashamed because we live in poor areas, this adds to our mental stress	Being labelled as poor and deprived Criminalization and stigmatization of disadvantaged neighbourhoods Feeling shame for living in poverty adds to everyday stress Media portrays excessive criminal activity in poor neighbourhoods
<b>Theme 5</b> If we could work together to improve our public spaces, we could reduce a lot of stress and strain	No collective action or dynamicity to improve public spaces Lack of social tie and sense of belonging to neighbourhoods

Table 1: Themes and Subthemes

This study was aimed to explore women's perspectives on safety in public spaces, the gender inequality associated with access to public spaces and how this affects their overall health. This aim was examined through the scope of the "gender and public spaces" and the "Feministic" approach.

According to the gender and public spaces approach, public spaces are mainly designed and planned for men's presence.

Public spaces, being a hub for all types of activities, should be accessible to everyone, regardless of age, gender or occupation. However, women are less likely to take full advantage of public spaces and their rights to actively participate in public spaces are limited and often encroached upon by their male counterparts.

As a result of dominant patriarchal culture and structures and traditional

gendered based roles of women, women don't have equal access to the city.<sup>7</sup> Our cities provide employment and avenues for leisure; however, there are no platforms to pursue other aspects of life.

Urban health was an important concern for participants; many of them who were working or living in poor and labelled neighborhoods. Participants from central Tehran complained regarding unsanitary conditions in many places, especially around trash bins, which lead to rats and an unhealthy environment.

They mentioned spaces that are unsafe, unsanitary and hence, stressful to be in. Most of the participants perceived that certain situations in neighbourhood environments contribute to decreased choices for leading healthy lifestyles. Limited availability of natural environment, ill-equipped parks and unfortunate events have limited the places where women can frequent creating an unhealthy situation for them.

Women described their situations in relation to social and cultural norms. They undergo stress and anxiety due to forced hijab and have to wear special clothes for reducing harassment or social control in their neighbourhoods. The participants have experienced difficulties regarding social disorders that exist because of religious and traditional laws in Iran; norms and laws cause them stress and an increasing sense of fear and shame.

Several participants discussed how the masculinized culture was affecting women; for instance, harassment by men

in taxis, footbridges, pedestrian underpass and crowded subways.

A huge inequality between men and women was reported when women felt unable to use spaces in public, thus impacting women's health in a negative way. Many participants talked about how the lack of access to natural areas and places for exercising combined with unsafe situations make it difficult for women to spend leisure time in society.

They conveyed that women are not considered in the designing of cities; public places are not well lit, there are no appropriate footbridges or pedestrian underpasses, no well-equipped shopping centers and malls etc. Deserted and crowded streets were described as gender-blindness in urban space's design. They believed that their access to public spaces is more restricted than it is for men and that the available spaces were not right for them.

The participants listed services that they expected to have access to including resources for education, employment, convenient public transportation, police patrol and night patrol, close public health center buildings, mosques and grocery stores.

Each focus group indicated different levels of access to these services. In labeled and poor neighborhoods, access to these services was more difficult as well as not of high standard.

Some participants mentioned that there are lots of unemployed people and children who are labourers in their neighbourhood. They do not have access

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<sup>7</sup> Syed Farid. Alatas. "Academic Dependency and the Global Division of Labor in the Social Sciences". 599-613.

to equal opportunities like in other parts of Tehran and they are stressed and live in unhealthy conditions. They said that spatial mismatches happen mostly in this poor neighbourhood where facilities are of very low standard.

Many participants discussed the fact that different neighborhoods have diverse reputations and that people are judged based on where they live. This has led to a stressful situation for inhabitants. Participants stated that the reputation of their neighbourhoods has a negative impact on their mental health and that this reputation is mostly reported by the media. They mentioned that sometimes the media exaggerates problems, makes them seem worse than they are.

Some participants perceived limited collective action, trust or social attachment and no dynamicity currently in their neighborhoods. Lack of trust between neighbors, not caring for others and lack of contribution of people in social programs are some of the issue's participants reported that they found in their neighborhoods.

Inadequate levels of social attachment and lack of support between inhabitants have led to strained social ties, which has been identified by the participants as a connection between safety and health of women. Having a sense of belonging to one's neighborhood by attending events and being cooperative can relieve anxiety. Sense of attachment is perceived as something positive and health promoting that cannot be achieved without collective actions.

However, they mentioned having mixed feelings about social relationships and their sense of belonging to their

neighbourhoods. They mentioned that when they know others in their neighbourhoods, they can have advocacy, get help when needed and feel cohesion. Even though there are problems due to some social norms and controls in such neighbourhoods, they believe that it is more likely to experience mentally healthy situations. It would lead to having less fear by existing social capital and collective action in neighbourhoods, hence these elements should be increased by the help of neighbours.

In this study, women above the age of 18 were asked how they perceived that their surrounding public spaces were affecting their health. A qualitative approach was used, guided by the "gender and public spaces theory" in a feministic approach as well as "the right to the city" theory. These women described a set of situations which are negatively affecting their health. A combination of unsanitary environments, culture, stigmatization and lack of will collectively contribute to their sense of insecurity, bad health and ability to lead healthy lifestyles.

The participants described the right of participation in cities as an urban right. This right, however, has not been provided to women regarding urban planning and designing in Tehran. According to them, the structure of neighborhoods is not suitable for women and negatively impacts their health.

People are more likely to be physically active when they live in neighborhoods with better resources for exercise such as parks and walking or jogging trails; with less litter, vandalism and graffiti; and with street patterns that present fewer

pedestrian obstacles.<sup>8</sup> There was a consensus among participants that gender-blindness in city designing and planning is an apparent failure in Tehran. Hence, provision of infrastructure for designing cities to cater to women's needs, and national regulations to ensure the same are some of their demands.

One of the findings of this study is that a misogynistic society, biased religious laws, and social norms that create social disorder lead to inequality towards women. They do not have the right to roam around freely and partake in leisure activities as they feel unsafe.

Similar findings are that these issues in social and cultural contexts have caused the marginalization of women's role in society, which have led to various restrictions for women. They feel fear and stress in public places that affect their health, as they have explained, however "perceptions of safety and levels of fear in neighbourhoods partly explain locational inequities in health".<sup>9</sup>

Despite growing urbanization and modernization in Tehran, participants explained that the concept of society is still traditional while hegemonic masculinity is the norm and causes experiences of harassment for women in public places. As per the findings of this study, the social and religious norms control women, force them to stay at home and be inactive in public places.

Despite the problems previously explained, several participants pointed out some positive aspects. They believed that by improving social relations, social capital and collective action, neighbourhoods and urban spaces can be more dynamic, happier and safer. They expressed that social structures and interpersonal relationships as aspects of social environment can make advocacy for helping each other.

Furthermore, according to Eriksson et al in 2013, individual access to social capital may promote health by means of access to social support, health information and/or health services. Social capital can also be viewed as a collective feature that characterizes areas or neighbourhoods by levels of social participation, trust and reciprocity norms.<sup>10</sup>

This mixed-picture of the social issues prevalent in Tehran highlights both the positive and negative perceptions of women and explains how these issues affect their perception of unsafety and health in urban spaces. It also explains how a social environment can promote or jeopardize women's health.

The results of this study show that the stigma and shame perceived by women and the reputation and categorizing of neighbourhoods seems to put them under immense stress. Religious beliefs, norms, traditional contexts and the role of media in building reputations of places increase

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8 Katie Heinrich. et.al. "Associations between the built environment and physical activity in public housing residents".

9 Tarani Chandola. "The fear of crime and area differences in health," 105-116.

10 Malin Eriksson. Maria Emmelin. "What constitutes a health-enabling neighbourhood? A grounded theory situational analysis addressing the significance of social capital and gender".112-123.

the stigma around women in some public spaces.

The participants reported that they do not have access to many services and that the hegemonic masculinity in their society gives men more power, which then excludes women from urban design. They also stated that the number of leisure places for women are not enough. Participants of labelled and poor neighbourhoods also expressed that they suffered from surplus discrimination, being women and living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. They stated that these hazardous conditions were negatively impacting their physical and mental health.

In Iran, it seems to be a practice to politicize discussions about women's rights. Participants in this study believed spatial mismatches and unequal representation in policy framing has created improper neighbourhoods. Planning policies do not support inclusivity and diverse groups. Religious laws heavily influence policy making, in addition to the issue of limited resources and funding for redesigning of urban spaces.<sup>11</sup> Educating and raising awareness among citizens to make changes to the misogynistic culture and making the role of women more prominent are significant tasks that need to be discussed and accomplished by politicians. However, this is easier said than done as women related issues are not currently a priority among politicians.

The first and foremost solution suggested by participants of the Focus groups in this study was for there to be

provision of infrastructure in cities where women are not treated equally. Most participants of this study have noted that improving social relations, collective action, and social capital by means of access to social support and health information can lead to better health and may render neighbourhoods more dynamic, happier and safer.

Furthermore, findings suggest a clear need for the de-stigmatization of participation of women in urban spaces and awareness for changing a very misogynistic culture. A combination of unsanitary environments, regressive culture, stigmatization and lack of social will collectively contribute to the sense of insecurity in women. These place immense amount of stress on their health and ability to lead healthy lifestyles. Cultural obstacles, stigma and discrimination seem to be inseparable from Iran's society. In addition to political and religious norms, which greatly influence women's overall health and wellbeing, despite their concerns and fears, women want to be seen in society as equal counterparts with full rights to public places and the use of scarce amenities

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11 Mahsa Seyfiyae. "Desirability and Feasibility of Urban Public Spaces for Particular Social Groups (Women) In Participatory Planning".

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