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**Trust, Safety, and Urban Mobility: Experiences of Female  
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## **Trust, Safety, and Urban Mobility: Experiences of Female Student Migrants**

### **Introduction**

The aim of this article is to examine the connection between trust, safety, and the gendered sense of urban mobility from the perspective of female student migrants. Migration studies, till now have mostly focused on migration due to job opportunities, where the lived experiences of female migrant students and their exclusion from the urban migrated space have been largely neglected. Lived experience, according to the Oxford dictionary, is the personal knowledge about the everyday world of social reality, which is gained through the involvement of the actors in everyday events.

The narratives of 'risk' and 'danger' that get constructed around the city life are almost inevitably gendered (Phadke, 2016). This article looks at trust by examining the everyday practices of gendered public space from the psycho-social aspect of trust and safety (or lack of it) as experienced by female migrant students. The overarching narrative (Phadke, 2003) is that cities are violent places so it is better for women to not access it. The concept of citizenship is always affected by deeply rooted social divisions of gender, class, and ethnicity. Women do not have the same or equal access to citizenship as men (Walby, 1994) thus the public space of the cities remain, by default governed by patriarchy where women have to give extra effort to make their space. Migrant female students face double burden in claiming their accessibility in the public space of the migrated region, due to their inter-sectional marginalized position, in terms of gender, ethnicity, and age.

### **Methodology**

This article is based on the lived experiences of ten respondents who migrated from Kolkata to urban centers such as Bangalore, Delhi, and Pune for their post-graduate studies. In-depth interviews were conducted to highlight their everyday experiences in these cities, focusing on the sub-themes of safety, security, and trust in the public sphere. The responses were supported by various social media posts and elements of self-ethnography. A literature review played a crucial role in analyzing the concepts of trust, safety, and urban mobility.

Ethical considerations were strictly upheld during the interviews. None of the respondents were coerced into participation, and the intent of the research was clearly explained beforehand. To ensure confidentiality, the names of the respondents have been kept anonymous throughout the article.

### **Psycho-social impacts of migration**

Migration refers to the movement of people from one place to another with the intention of settling in the new location, either permanently or temporarily. This process inherently brings a sense of mobility that impacts the lifestyle of migrants as they adapt to a new culture. Culture encompasses the forms, content, and effects of the symbolic aspects of social life (Turner, 2006). Given India's immense diversity in terms of culture, language, and lifestyle,

each geographical region has its own way of life, sustained through the daily practices of its population. Consequently, migration presents challenges of adaptation that are both social and psychological, often resulting in cultural shock as individuals transition from a familiar culture to one that is unfamiliar.

When asked about the issues they faced while adapting to a new place and making it a home, three respondents highlighted the struggle of adjusting to different food styles, noting that cooking methods vary significantly across states in India. Additionally, respondents pointed out the challenges associated with changes in living arrangements and language barriers, which can limit their access to public spaces. Some female students living in rented flats expressed the difficulty of balancing household chores with their studies. Ultimately, the reality of making a home in a new location is often turbulent and heavily influenced by the social context of the migrated region, requiring ongoing strategizing and negotiation.

*“Uncertainty made me learn not to take certain things for granted”* (respondent).

While struggles associated with adapting to new environments are common for many migrants, gender introduces additional complexities into this process. The notion of being an “outsider” encompasses the challenges faced by both migrants and the local inhabitants who interact and share spaces with them.

One respondent shared,

*“Four of us live together here in Pune, being migrated from West Bengal we speak in a different language and also we carry ourselves in a way which is a bit different from the mass here, so we face a lot of gazing and scrutinizing every time we are out in the streets, or people are often very curious about us, that makes us feel as strangers”* (respondent).

### **Patriarchal public-sphere and exclusion of women**

Jürgen Habermas developed the concept of the public sphere as a central understanding of modernity (Habermas, 1964; Hohendahl, 1974). This sphere serves as a space for citizens to come together and exchange opinions. Historically, however, this democratic platform has largely ignored women's voices. Although this dynamic has shifted somewhat in contemporary times, the public sphere—viewed as a realm of transcendence (Beauvoir, 1949)—remains predominantly male-dominated. Within this space, influenced by Ideological State Apparatus and Repressive State Apparatus (Althusser, 1970), women struggle to make themselves visible and heard. Migrated female students represent an even more marginalized group, facing daily challenges that often render their experiences invisible.

Social exclusion is a dynamic process in which certain individuals or communities are relegated to the status of “others” or “outsiders” based on their identities. This othering can occur at social, behavioral, and psychological levels, often leading to stigmatization. Women frequently face scrutiny when they navigate public spaces without a rational purpose; when they do, the burden of making those spaces accessible falls upon them. For female student migrants, who already occupy the identity of “outsiders,” this process becomes even more burdensome. They are often viewed as “strangers” and perceived as disruptors or polluters of the local culture.

Ethnic identities can also perpetuate prejudices that further accelerate exclusion. The lived realities of female migrant students highlight difficulties in securing affordable accommodation. Such experiences of ethnic discrimination are evident in their narratives. For example, one respondent shared:

*“You know, the house-owner was a bit reluctant at first to give me rent, thanks to media which in the recent times had promoted and propagated the stereotypes on the identity of ‘Bengali women’ (as the practitioners of black magic) , but later after asking my surname he was a bit assured”* (respondent).

These seemingly small experiences reveal powerful realities where multiple identities intersect to exclude individuals from the public sphere. Migrant students also face challenges finding housing based on their gender identity. One respondent expressed:

*“I feel like, being a single woman is a crime in India, as most of the housing complexes rejected my application by saying that I will be a big responsibility for them”* (respondent).

Moreover, respondents noted that they often experience greater surveillance in their housing complexes or hostels compared to their male counterparts.

Interestingly, exclusion can also occur in the opposite direction, as many female student migrants tend to isolate themselves from the broader migrant community, choosing to socialize primarily with individuals from their own ethnic groups. They typically venture into only certain areas of the city, engaging in this self-exclusion as a strategy to foster a sense of belonging and safety in a new environment. This dynamic further reinforces their identities as outsiders.

### **Trust and safety in the urban streets: The experiences of female student migrants**

“Trust is a complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon” (Khodyakov, 2007). It is a process that demands a notion of agency, which women often lack in a patriarchal setup. In everyday language, trust is often associated with synonyms such as confidence, reliability, and faith.

Interviews with the respondents revealed that female migrant students frequently struggle to invest trust in the public spaces of their new cities. As they navigate these environments, they often feel “lonely in the crowd” (Phadke, 2005) and must negotiate risks and dangers to create a sense of ‘space’ for themselves in public. They employ various strategies to access these spaces while managing risk and cultivating safety. Safety is not only about physical security; it is also tied to the psyche of individuals and significantly influenced by their perceptions of safety and risk.

The respondents expressed their insecurities in the streets of their new cities due to their gender identities. One participant stated:

*“As I am in a completely new city, on my own, I always try to be extra careful and aware. I dress as ‘modestly’ as possible...”* (respondent).

She further explained that, as a woman, it is ingrained in her to anticipate certain dangers and take precautions accordingly. This brings in the notion of trust—not only toward the people

around her but also toward the institutions in her new environment. Female student migrants have to employ diverse strategies to negotiate risks and establish safety, creating ‘space’ for themselves in public.

When asked about their sense of belongingness within the university campus, one of the respondents who live in the hostel has mentioned,

*“Though Delhi is infamous for its unsafe streets for women, I do not ever feel unsafe or insecure within the boundary of my university campus. I trust the people I interact with here, and I can roam around freely at any time of the day, but whenever I step outside the campus I dress differently and always try to be extra careful”* (respondent).

In contrast, another respondent shared a differing perspective, stating that she does not feel safe at certain hours, even within the campus. She expressed that she cannot trust every individual she interacts with, noting that many outsiders also inhabit the same space. She mentioned being instructed by the authorities not to loiter after dark.

## **Discussion**

From the narratives of female migrant students, it emerges that the responsibility for their safety largely rests on their shoulders. They feel compelled to adhere to certain protocols to navigate public spaces and protect themselves in unfamiliar environments. While many students express a sense of freedom due to the absence of familial curfews, this newfound liberty comes with the burden of ensuring their own safety.

*“I am experiencing the nightlife of a city for the first time; I can go out of my flat anytime I want for a quick walk. Though it feels very liberating, I have to be extra careful by making rational choices about which places to avoid, and I make sure to go out with friends rather than alone”* (respondent).

Some respondents highlight the positive aspects of their struggles, noting that being an unknown outsider can reduce the fear of judgment they experienced in their familiar surroundings. This phenomenon allows them to develop new identities and explore their sexuality. However, the intertwined issues of trust, safety, and risk still constrain their opportunities for exploration, requiring constant vigilance as they navigate public spaces.

Ultimately, while these female migrant students find ways to assert their independence and carve out new identities, the ongoing challenges they face underscore the need for greater systemic support. Creating safer public environments with equal access for all gender identities would enable female migrant students to fully embrace their freedom and identity without compromising their safety. The ability to navigate public spaces without fear would foster trust and a sense of belonging in their new surroundings, effectively reducing perceived risks.

## **Limitations and Scopes for Future Research**

Intersectional modes of stratification tied to identity create different dimensions of exclusion and marginalization. In India, urban spaces are heavily influenced by caste, class, and religious divisions, leading female migrant students to experience both vertical and horizontal exclusions in their access to the public sphere, whether in the streets or within academia. This

paper is limited in its exploration of trust and safety, as it focuses primarily on the narratives of female migrant students from middle-class, Hindu, and predominantly upper-caste families. While these students face challenges in creating their space in public as individuals with limited authority and resources, their caste, class, and religious positions afford them certain advantages in terms of accessibility.

By examining exclusion based on gender, ethnicity, and age, this study highlights significant issues; however, incorporating additional modes of exclusion could offer a more comprehensive understanding of safety and security—or the lack of it. Furthermore, the understandings of interpersonal and institutional trust and safety based on gender could be enriched by including narratives from male migrant students. Future studies can take up such comparative approaches to develop a more critical analysis.

Nonetheless, this article aims to explore the varied experiences of female migrant students as they struggle to claim their rights in public spaces, where they often face discrimination and exclusion based on their identities. This complex situation complicates their ability to rely on or trust the people and institutions in their new environments.

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