

A feminist perspective on urban planning in a country built by a strong patriarchy

Sometimes a single individual becomes a symbol for the fight against the kind of oppression that takes human lives and creates terrible suffering. It happened with the human rights activist Rosa Parks. It happens with the women's rights activist Malala Yousafzai. It is also the case with Jyoti Singh. Jyoti Singh was the Indian woman who, in New Delhi 2012, was exposed to a gang rape so brutal it later took her life. She is now a symbol for the fight against the oppression that many women face in India today. A symbol for the control that men can exercise over women in public space. A symbol for how badly it can end.

Jyoti Singh's suffering sparked a wave of protests around the world. Through the protests, the demand for change was strengthened, but above all, a decisiveness was born. It is that particular decisiveness I meet in my dialogues with Safecity, an organization founded by Elsa D'Silva at the end of 2012. The aim was to highlight the huge gap between reported/actual crime surrounding sexual crimes in India. An observation which has its parallels in Sweden. Since the organization was founded, it has developed and they now work in different ways to increase women's usage of public space. One approach they use is, among other things, changing the physical environment to increase the security and perceived safety.

- For example, our data helped us identify a hotspot in a slum area in Delhi, right at a tea stall. Men used to loiter there, intimidating and staring at the women and girls passing by. Therefore we organized a workshop where the wall behind the stall was painted with staring eyes and urgent messages. Within one week the men's behavior ceased, and the women could walk past the tea stall without any trouble, says D'Silva.

The conclusions Safecity has drawn about what affects women's perceived safety is similar to the conclusions found internationally. The organization emphasizes the importance of good lighting, greater female presence and an environment that is even in terms of human density and functionality. D'Silva describes the organization as feminist and she believes that feminist theories are necessary to meet the needs of women in a world planned by men.

- The latest reports shows that there are 37 million more men than women in India. That indicates a rampant femicide as well as a patriarchal view which undermine women and girls. I was lucky to grow up in a family where I was treated equally like my brother. All women in India do not have that fortune. That highlights the importance of working with the security and perceived safety in public space, as it may be used as an argument that further limits women's rights and freedoms, says D'Silva.

My thoughts wander to Krishna's (2013) study, which shows that in the state of Haryana girls face twice the risk of dying before the age of 4, compared to boys. The reason is presented as malnutrition, diarrhea and premature birth. Moreover, the study also shows how selective abortions are implemented in all social classes. At the same time, India is a large country where the culture varies gravely depending on location. Safecity's campaign leader Titas Ghosh describes her shock when she moved from Mumbai to New Delhi:

- In Mumbai and Calcutta, I could smoke without anyone raising an eyebrow. In Delhi, I'm sometimes afraid to breathe, says Ghosh.

A relevant question is whether it is even possible to draw parallels between India and Sweden. To some extent it is, although the magnitude and structure may differ. For example, the Bråvalla Festival stated that they quit because of the sexual assaults that women were exposed to during the festival. On the other hand, the festival Statement was promoted through the text "The world's first major music festival free from cis-males". The fact that the movement #metoo showed that Sweden has a problem with men who consider themselves entitled to women's bodies hardly needs to be motivated further. But in comparison with India, people flinch. The common anti-feminist argument "not all men" changes to the more patriotic "not our men".

Safecity's Youth Outreach Officer, Vanshika Deswan, thinks Safecity's biggest challenge is to bring men into the conversation and to make men understand their privileges. At the same time, she emphasizes the importance of listening to the stories given, as victims often has a lack of knowledge of their rights. D'Silva also states the importance of giving the silent a voice.

- Changing violent cultures is partly about policies, but also about giving people a voice. By using women's stories, we have several examples where the police have changed and increased their patrols or where municipalities have corrected broken lighting and built safe public toilets. Together with a partner organization in Nepal we also managed to introduce buses dedicated exclusively to women, says D'Silva.

A bus only for women. In Sweden similar discussions surround parks that exclude men. That kind of gym is already available, and now a festival. Again, the feminist urban planning faces a crossroad. Should it relate to existing structures and thereby indirectly risk to support them? Or should it be used only for the visionary future? The way forward is probably somewhere in between and needs to be determined by the context.

The article is written by criminologist Marika Johansson (The Safer Sweden Foundation)