

Gendered planning of a city: Delhi's Dwarka sub-city, a Case of Exclusion and Negotiation

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ABSTRACT

Urban planning is often presented as a technical exercise in efficiency and order, but its outcomes are deeply shaped by social hierarchies. Gender, in particular, structures how cities are designed, governed, and experienced. This paper examines the gendered nature of planning in Dwarka, a sub-city developed by the Delhi Development Authority as a model of organized urban living. Drawing on feminist urban theory and urban sociology, the study combines interviews with residents and workers, analysis of planning documents, and a review of media and social media discourse. The findings reveal that while Dwarka was envisioned as an orderly and self-sufficient residential zone, its wide roads, sectoral zoning, and securitized housing societies often constrain women's mobility and sense of safety. Infrastructure exists but is unevenly maintained, with broken pavements, poorly lit stretches, and deserted public spaces shaping everyday negotiations of risk. Middle-class safety discourses promoting gates, CCTV, and policing, further marginalize working-class women who depend on access to public space for livelihoods. At the same time, women's practices of adaptation, strategic commuting, group travel, and digital activism highlight ongoing struggles for the "right to the city." The paper argues that Dwarka illustrates how gender is embedded in the very fabric of planned urbanism, and that addressing these inequalities requires moving beyond technical provision toward inclusive, gender-sensitive design and governance.

Introduction:

Cities are not only built environments but also arenas where social hierarchies are inscribed and contested. Planning decisions about housing, transport, and public space invariably privilege some groups while constraining others. Among the most consistent forms of inequality in urban life are those shaped by gender. Women and men do not experience the city in the same way: patterns of mobility, perceptions of safety, and access to public amenities are all mediated by gendered expectations and responsibilities. Feminist urban scholars have long pointed out that the supposedly "neutral" language of planning often obscures these inequalities, embedding patriarchal assumptions into the very design of streets, parks, and neighborhoods (Hayden, 1981; Phadke, Khan, & Ranade, 2011).

Dwarka, a planned sub-city in southwest Delhi, offers a particularly revealing site to explore these dynamics. Conceived by the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) in the late twentieth century, Dwarka was designed as a model of modern urban living, with wide roads, sector-based residential blocks, and reserved institutional and recreational areas. Today it is home to a large middle-class population and is often celebrated for its orderliness compared to older parts of Delhi. Yet this order also comes with exclusions. The lived experiences of women in Dwarka point to tensions between the planned vision of the sub-city and the everyday negotiations required to inhabit it. Infrastructure exists, but its uneven maintenance such as broken footpaths, poorly lit roads, and underutilized parks compounds the difficulties of navigating space, particularly for women who rely more heavily on walking and public transport.

This paper investigates the gendered nature of city planning in Dwarka. It asks, how does planning shape women's access to urban space, and how do women in turn negotiate, resist, or adapt to these constraints? To answer these questions, the paper combines theoretical insights from urban sociology and feminist

geography with empirical material drawn from interviews, government documents, media reports, and social media discourse. The analysis demonstrates that while Dwarka was planned as a sub-city for modern living, its design and governance often reinforce gendered hierarchies of mobility and safety. At the same time, women's everyday practices illustrate both the constraints imposed by planning and the creative ways in which residents reshape the city from below.

Theoretical Framework:

Urban space is never neutral, it is produced through social relations and political choices. City planning reflects particular assumptions about who the city is for and how it should be lived in. Gender, as a central axis of social life, shapes both the design of urban environments and the everyday experiences of those who inhabit them. To examine the gendered nature of Dwarka's planning, this study draws on a range of urban and feminist theoretical frameworks.

Henri Lefebvre's idea of the right to the city provides a critical entry point. Lefebvre argued that urban space is socially produced and therefore contested, rather than simply built. His concept emphasizes collective access to urban life and participation in shaping it (Lefebvre, 1996). This lens allows us to ask: who in Dwarka can freely claim public space, and who remains marginalized? The wide arterial roads, gated enclaves, and formalized layouts privilege some residents while excluding others particularly women, informal workers, and migrants whose presence in public space is constantly negotiated.

Dolores Hayden's work on feminist design highlights the gendered assumptions underpinning planning. In *The Grand Domestic Revolution*, Hayden (1981) showed how urban design often entrenched patriarchal divisions by privileging male breadwinner mobility and sidelining women's domestic and caregiving responsibilities. When read against Dwarka's design—where housing colonies are prioritized over community facilities, and daily mobility is largely structured around private cars, it becomes clear how planning decisions neglect women's routines of caregiving, walking, and reliance on public transport.

Jane Jacobs (1961) provides another relevant critique through her emphasis on street life, diversity of use, and "eyes on the street" as a basis for urban safety. Jacobs argued that lively, mixed-use neighborhoods create natural surveillance and community presence, reducing the need for heavy policing. Dwarka, however, is characterized by empty sidewalks, single-use zoning, and a lack of pedestrian activity. The absence of vibrant street life disproportionately affects women, whose sense of safety is strongly tied to visible, everyday presence of others in public.

In the Indian context, Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan, and Shilpa Ranade's *Why Loiter?* (2011) provides a crucial feminist perspective. They challenge the idea that women's access to public space must always be justified by "legitimate" purposes such as work or education, and instead argue for women's right to simply linger in public without reason. Dwarka's built form empty stretches between residential and commercial zones, limited transport links, and securitized residential complexes, intensifies pressures on women to move quickly, avoid loitering, and justify their presence.

Ananya Roy's (2005) theorization of urban informality also resonates in this context. She emphasizes that informality is not merely a condition of poverty or illegality, but a mode of governance through which the state regulates and hierarchizes urban life. For women workers in Dwarka, domestic workers commuting from surrounding settlements, or street vendors eking out livelihoods, planning produces precariousness by prioritizing the needs of formal middle-class residents. Informal economies, in which women are often concentrated, become spatially and politically marginalized.

Amita Baviskar (2003) similarly draws attention to middle-class urban activism and its shaping of the "commons." In Delhi, Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs) often demand gated access, removal of vendors, or heavy surveillance under the banner of safety. While such measures claim to protect women, they often reinforce exclusionary urbanism, restricting poorer women's ability to inhabit space while leaving structural issues of safety unaddressed. Dwarka's heavy reliance on RWAs for micro-governance makes Baviskar's framework especially pertinent.

Finally, feminist urbanism has also informed planning policies, from UN-Habitat guidelines to the Delhi Master Plan 2041. These frameworks recognize gender-sensitive planning as essential, emphasizing safe transport, adequate lighting, inclusive parks, and participatory design. Yet, in Dwarka, the gap between policy rhetoric and lived reality remains stark. While gender finds mention in planning documents, its translation into everyday infrastructure and mobility patterns is partial and inconsistent (Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, 2021).

Taken together, these theoretical strands illuminate the gendered exclusions embedded in Dwarka's urban form. They allow us to interrogate not only how space is planned, but how women inhabit, resist, and reshape it in everyday practice. Dwarka thus becomes a site where global debates on the right to the city, feminist critiques of design, and Indian scholarship on gender and urban life intersect.

Methodology:

This study adopts a qualitative approach, informed by urban sociology and feminist geography, to examine the gendered dimensions of city planning in Dwarka. Since the focus lies not only on the design of the built

environment but also on how residents negotiate it in everyday life, multiple sources of data are brought together such as interviews, government planning documents, media accounts, and social media discourse. Interviews formed a central part of the research. Short, semi-structured conversations were carried out with a range of actors: women residents across age groups, domestic workers commuting from neighboring settlements, street vendors, and members of RWAs. These conversations focused on experiences of mobility, safety, and access to public amenities. The aim was not to build a large representative sample, but to capture diverse voices that reveal how different groups encounter Dwarka's planning in gendered ways. Particular care was taken to ensure anonymity, given the sensitivity of discussing safety and mobility restrictions.

Policy and planning documents were also reviewed, especially the Draft Master Plan for Delhi 2041, Dwarka sub-city development plans prepared by the DDA, and gender inclusion guidelines issued by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs. These texts provide insight into the planning vision for Dwarka and the extent to which gender has been institutionalized as a category of concern within urban policy. Secondary materials such as newspapers and digital media were analyzed to capture public debates around women's safety and mobility in Dwarka. Reports of crimes, civic activism, and coverage of infrastructure projects provided a picture of how gender is articulated in public discourse. Alongside this, social media posts particularly tweets under hashtags like #Dwarka and #WomensSafety were examined. These posts offer real-time expressions of urban anxieties and complaints that often remain absent from official planning documents.

This triangulation of sources interviews, policy texts, and public discourse enables a layered understanding of Dwarka's gendered urbanism. The built environment is read not only through maps and master plans, but through the lived realities of its users. Equally, women's accounts are interpreted alongside the institutional frameworks and media narratives that shape the city. The methodology thus seeks to bridge structural analysis with everyday practices, ensuring that theoretical claims about the gendered city are grounded in multiple forms of evidence.

Dwarka: A Planned Sub-City

Dwarka, located in the southwest of Delhi, was conceived by the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) in the late 1980s as one of the largest planned residential areas in the National Capital Territory. Envisioned as a "sub-city," it was meant to decongest central Delhi by accommodating a growing middle-class population in well-laid-out sectors. With an area of nearly 5,600 hectares, Dwarka was planned around a grid of broad arterial roads, sector-based residential blocks, and reserved spaces for institutional, commercial, and recreational uses. Its design followed modernist principles of zoning, separating housing from markets and workspaces, and privileging automobile movement through expansive road networks.

The layout reflects a vision of order and self-sufficiency. Nearly each sector was planned with schools, community facilities, and green belts, while connectivity to the rest of Delhi was to be ensured through the metro and highway systems. Dwarka today is often described as one of Delhi's more "organized" zones, with wide roads, gated housing societies, and comparatively better infrastructure than older neighborhoods. Yet the very features that mark it as a planned area also reveal its limitations when examined through a gendered lens.

One persistent critique of Dwarka has been its lack of pedestrian-friendly design. The wide arterial roads and underpasses prioritize car users, leaving long stretches that are unsafe for walking, particularly at night. The separation of residential and commercial areas often produces empty streets after dark, undermining the sense of security that comes from bustling, mixed-use environments. For women, children, and the elderly, groups more dependent on walking and public transport, this urban form constrains mobility.

The sub-city has also seen an intensification of gated living. Most housing is organized into cooperative group housing societies and apartments that are enclosed, securitized, and managed by Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs). While these associations provide a degree of order and collective management, they also reinforce boundaries between insiders and outsiders. Informal vendors, domestic workers, and delivery staff, many of them women, must negotiate restrictive entry rules, surveillance, and stigma. In this way, Dwarka exemplifies a broader trend in Delhi where middle-class enclaves produce safety by exclusion, rather than through inclusive urban design.

Infrastructure development in Dwarka has not been uniform either. While some sectors enjoy better lighting, parks, and metro connectivity, others remain under-served. Reports in local newspapers often highlight issues such as poorly lit roads, broken footpaths, and inadequate public toilets, problems that disproportionately affect women. Civic activism around these concerns is frequently led by RWAs, but their demands often focus on enhanced policing and CCTV coverage, rather than systemic improvements in walkability or access.

Despite being imagined as a model sub-city, Dwarka reveals the contradictions of planning in Delhi: an emphasis on order, modern infrastructure, and middle-class housing, alongside neglect of inclusivity, informality, and everyday accessibility. It is precisely in this gap, between planning ideals and lived realities, that gendered inequalities surface most sharply.

Analysis:

Dwarka was planned as a model of order and efficiency, but the everyday experience of its residents often departs from this official vision. Interviews and public accounts reveal a constant negotiation between the promise of modern infrastructure and the realities of how it is maintained and lived. These negotiations are deeply gendered as women, in particular, experience the sub-city differently from the men it was implicitly designed around.

The broad roads and sector-based layout, intended to streamline mobility, often work unevenly for those who depend on walking or public transport. Foot paths exist in most sectors, but their condition is far from uniform. Broken pavements, missing drain covers, and uneven stretches mean that pedestrians, especially women with children or elderly companions, must often step onto the main road. This is not merely an inconvenience, it produces a constant sense of vulnerability, amplified after dark when streetlights are missing or dysfunctional. While car users experience Dwarka as a space of comfort, women who walk or wait for buses navigate it as a space of risk.

Public transport, too, reflects this gap between planning and practice. The extension of the Delhi Metro into Dwarka was meant to anchor it as a well-connected sub-city. For many women, the metro has indeed expanded mobility. Yet the areas between residential blocks and stations often remain poorly maintained or deserted, forcing women to rely on private transport or restrict their movement at night. Auto-rickshaw and e-rickshaw drivers fill some of this gap, but their uneven availability and frequent overcharging leave women with limited safe options.

Safety emerges as a recurring theme in both interviews and media reports. Local newspapers frequently highlight incidents of harassment and theft in Dwarka, prompting RWAs to campaign for CCTV cameras, gated access, and increased policing. For middle-class residents, these measures offer reassurance. However, for women vendors and domestic workers, such securitization becomes another layer of exclusion. Security guards at society gates often scrutinize their presence, while calls to “clear” informal markets are justified in the name of safety. Here, as Baviskar (2003) has noted in her work on middle-class activism in Delhi, the language of safety works to fortify boundaries rather than create genuinely inclusive spaces.

The design of green spaces also illustrates this tension. Parks were planned into every sector, but their usage patterns are shaped by gender. Women often describe parks as accessible in the mornings, when groups of walkers are present, but intimidating at night, when poor lighting and sparse crowds make them feel unsafe. Young women report being advised by families not to linger, and mothers speak of restricting children’s play to certain hours. These accounts echo Phadke, Khan, and Ranade’s (2011) observation that women are discouraged from “loitering” and expected to move purposefully, a norm that Dwarka’s spatial design reinforces.

At the same time, women actively negotiate these constraints. Some organize carpools or travel in groups for evening commutes. Others strategically time their outings, or deliberately take longer, busier routes to avoid deserted stretches. Social media posts from Dwarka residents frequently highlight poorly lit roads or unsafe crossings, mobilizing public attention in ways that hold local authorities accountable. These everyday strategies reflect what Lefebvre (1996) described as the ongoing struggle over the “right to the city”, women asserting their presence despite urban forms that make them feel unwelcome.

Dwarka thus reveals the layered nature of gendered urbanism. Its infrastructure exists on paper and in physical form, but its maintenance, accessibility, and social regulation determine how it is actually used. For those in cars, the sub-city appears well-planned and efficient, yet for those on foot, it becomes a terrain of risk and negotiation. This divergence is not incidental but rooted in planning logics that prioritize efficiency, zoning, and security over inclusivity and everyday accessibility. Dwarka’s residents, particularly women, continually reshape these spaces through their practices, revealing both the exclusions embedded in planning and the possibilities of resisting them.

Conclusion:

Dwarka was planned as a self-contained sub-city that would exemplify modern urban living in Delhi. Its wide roads, sector-based layout, and gated housing societies were imagined as hallmarks of order and efficiency. Yet, when read through the lens of gender, this planned landscape reveals sharp exclusions. Women’s everyday experiences show that the presence of infrastructure is not enough as its design, maintenance, and regulation determine whether it is truly usable. Broken pavements, poorly lit stretches, and deserted spaces create subtle but powerful barriers that shape how and when women move through Dwarka.

The narratives collected here highlight a consistent tension between planning ideals and lived realities. While Dwarka’s residents appreciate the orderliness of its layout, women frequently describe navigating it as an exercise in caution. Measures advanced in the name of safety gates, CCTV cameras, and increased policing often protect middle-class residents while constraining the presence of working-class women whose livelihoods depend on access to public space. In this sense, safety becomes less about freedom and more about regulation, reinforcing the boundaries between insiders and outsiders.

Theoretical insights help to frame these observations. Lefebvre’s call for a right to the city underscores the importance of women’s ability to claim space beyond formal planning logics. Hayden’s critique of patriarchal

design reveals how Dwarka privileges male patterns of mobility while neglecting women's daily routines. Jacobs's emphasis on lively streets explains why empty, single-use stretches undermine women's sense of security. Indian feminist scholarship, particularly *Why Loiter?*, shows how Dwarka continues to reproduce a culture in which women are discouraged from occupying public space freely. These frameworks together reveal that gender is not an incidental detail in city life but a structuring principle that shapes how urban environments are built and lived.

At the same time, women in Dwarka demonstrate resilience and agency. From coordinating carpools to mobilizing attention on social media, they continually adapt the city to their needs. These practices point to the limits of top-down planning and the importance of recognizing everyday negotiations as part of the urban fabric. If Dwarka is to become genuinely inclusive, planning must move beyond infrastructure provision toward sustained attention to maintenance, accessibility, and participatory design. Gender-sensitive planning cannot remain a rhetorical commitment in policy documents like the Delhi Master Plan, it must be grounded in the lived realities of those who walk its streets, wait for its buses, and use its parks. Dwarka thus serves as a microcosm of the gendered city. It illustrates how planning decisions intersect with social norms to produce uneven experiences of safety and mobility. More importantly, it demonstrates that women's struggles for space are not just about protection from risk but about claiming the right to inhabit the city on their own terms.

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