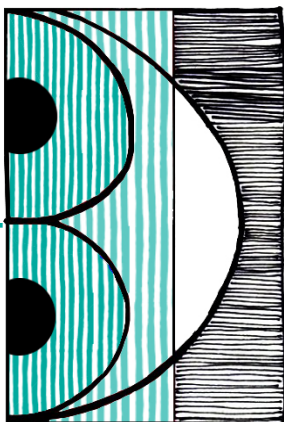
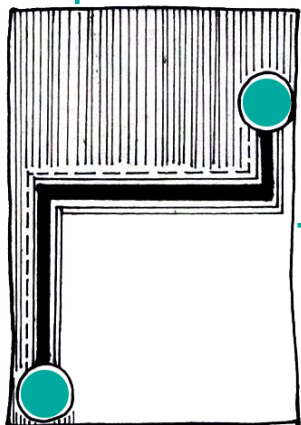


Gender and the City
Roundtable 2.0 on
Possibilities, Practices,
Policies

by
Akshara Centre and
The Feminist Collective in Architecture

in collaboration with
Safetipin and Durga



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April 8 & 9, 2026
BIC, Bengaluru

by
Akshara Centre and
The Feminist Collective in Architecture

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Introduction to Akshara

Akshara Centre, is a Mumbai-based non-profit organisation, which has been at the forefront of advancing gender equality and social justice for over three decades. Founded by feminist activists from the women's movement, Akshara combines research, advocacy, and grassroots engagement to create safer, more inclusive urban spaces for all genders. At the heart of Akshara's work is the belief that cities must reflect the rights and realities of women and marginalized communities, that gender equality must be built into the very design and governance of urban life. Through partnerships with municipal authorities, the Mumbai Police, transport authorities and urban planners, Akshara has contributed to inclusion of Gender chapter in Development Plan of Mumbai As a member of the Gender Advisory Committee of the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (MCGM), Akshara continues to offer recommendations that strengthen urban policies and infrastructure through a gender lens.

Under the Safe and City program, Akshara also contributed to developing the Subway Design Guidelines, promoting safer and more accessible pedestrian spaces. Akshara has launched many campaigns challenging Bollywood, engaging bystanders through campaigns such as Gaana Rewrite, Main hoon Na and Jagah Dakhva reaching more than 20 million people.

Akshara also works closely with youth, training thousands of young men and women in colleges and communities to challenge gender norms, become advocates for equality, and participate in city-building processes. By bridging the worlds of policy, and movement-building, Akshara strives to ensure that cities are not just sites of opportunity, but also of dignity, freedom, and belonging for women and gender-diverse people.

Get in Touch:
akshara.frea@gmail.com
www.aksharacentre.org

Introduction to FCA

Founded in January 2021, The Feminist Collective in Architecture (FCA) emerged from a series of informal discussions led by Madhavi Desai, Urvi Desai, Miki Desai, Himani Vinodrai, and Priyanshi Pathak. Based in India, FCA is a growing community of professionals, academicians, and students committed to addressing and challenging gender bias within the discipline and profession of architecture.

The Collective creates inclusive spaces for non-cis-males and strives to foster gender equity and diversity across the field. Through discussions, research, collaborations, and awareness activities, FCA brings together people, skills, and ideas to question patriarchal structures and advocate for marginalized genders and identities. As part of a larger global movement, the Collective seeks to inspire dialogue and systemic change in South Asia—encouraging all feminists, regardless of gender, to unite in shaping a more equitable and representative future for architecture.

FCA has organized three significant national events since its inception. The first, a symposium on “Women in Architectural Practice in India,” was held in 2022, followed by a colloquium on “Explorations in Gender and Space” in 2023, and most recently, a forum on “Built Environment, Design, and Gender” in 2024. FCA was featured in Feminist Spatial Practices, an international archive of feminist collectives and practices launched in New York in 2023. Additionally, it was showcased under the theme “Samatva – Women in Design” at India's first design biennale, IAADB, in New Delhi (December 2023). In 2025, FCA expanded by launching its Delhi and Pune chapters while maintaining its headquarters in Ahmedabad.

Get in Touch:
feministcollective.archi@gmail.com
www.fca-india.org

Introduction to Safetipin

Safetipin is a social impact organisation and technology platform working to make cities safer and more inclusive for women and girls by generating and using safety-related data at scale. Since its founding in 2013, Safetipin has worked across 45 cities in Asia, Africa and Latin America, collaborating with governments, communities and civil society organisations to strengthen urban infrastructure and services through data-driven insights.

This work is guided by She RISES - Safetipin's framework for advancing Responsive, Inclusive, Safe and Equitable Spaces to build caring cities. The framework assesses the gender responsiveness of urban systems based on 5 key pillars - gender responsive policy initiatives, public spaces and infrastructure, mobility and public transport, services and amenities, and response to gender based violence. Using this framework and its digital tools, Safetipin's mission is to shape cities where every woman has a voice.

Get in Touch:
www.safetipin.com

Introduction to Durga

Durga is a citizen sector initiative of I'm Every Woman trust, founded in 2013, with a vision of witnessing public spaces that are equally occupied by people of all intersectional identities for commute, leisure and other activities. We enable this by building the capabilities of all actors who use these spaces through Theatre of the Oppressed to foster compassion, solidarity and action while providing experiential support in deterring acts of sexual harassment, violence and gender-based discrimination. We have collaborated with government systems, private unions and educational institutions and work directly with various communities in Bangalore who face multiple vulnerabilities and ensure we leave them with power to address their issues in their own way.

We've reached over 45,000 people, nurtured over 12000 active bystanders who prevent and take action to deter sexual crimes in public spaces. We've worked with over 15 government institutions and catalysed over 200 VOICE communities (solidarity spaces that place power in the hands of the people in all our partner institutions).

Get in Touch:
www.durgaindia.org

About the Roundtable

India continues to experience rapid urbanisation, reshaping how people live, work, move, and participate in city life. Yet questions of gender, care, safety, accessibility, and inclusion remain insufficiently integrated into mainstream urban planning, governance, and policy frameworks. While there is growing recognition that women, gender-diverse persons, children, elderly populations, informal workers, and other marginalized groups experience cities differently, these lived realities are often inadequately reflected in the design and management of urban systems.

The roundtable was grounded in the understanding that cities are interconnected systems where housing, mobility, governance, public space, care infrastructure, livelihoods, safety, and environmental conditions collectively shape everyday experiences. Gender inequalities are often embedded within these systems, influencing access to opportunities, resources, services, and participation in public life. Addressing these challenges requires not only physical interventions, but also institutional change, community participation, and cross-sectoral collaboration.

Drawing from experiences across multiple cities and sectors, the roundtable created a space for reflection, exchange, and collective learning. Participants examined both persistent barriers and emerging practices that have demonstrated potential in advancing gender-responsive urban development. The discussions focused on identifying actionable pathways for strengthening policy, governance, design, and community-led approaches that place dignity, care, equity, and inclusion at the centre of urban futures.

The discussions were organised around four broad themes:

- Theme 1: Housing, Neighbourhoods and Basic Services
- Theme 2: Social Amenities, Care Infrastructure and Leisure
- Theme 3: Mobility, Accessibility and Safety
- Theme 4: Governance Challenges and Possibilities

The roundtable was a closed-door event, with invited participation to

reimagine infrastructure, mobility, housing, public space, governance and entire cities through the lens of relationality, interdependence, and lived experience: placing care, dignity, and equity at the very heart of urban futures. Akshara Centre and Feminist Collective in Architecture sent invitations to individuals and organisations, including:

Opening Session

The opening session framed the roundtable as a collaborative and action-oriented platform, building on shared intent across organisations and disciplines. The convening was positioned around a central question: what changes are required in public infrastructure, institutions, and cultural attitudes to make cities more safe, fair, and inclusive in practice? The collaboration between Akshara Centre and the Feminist Collective in Architecture (FCA) was highlighted as a deliberate coming together of different perspectives. While Akshara brings long-standing experience in gender advocacy and grassroots engagement, FCA contributes a lens on design and the built environment.

This was further complemented by Safetipin's data-driven approach and Durga's focus on behavioural change and citizen participation, underscoring the need for multi-sectoral engagement. A key emphasis of the session was on moving beyond problem identification towards solutions, strategies, and collective action. Short presentations were positioned as starting points for wider discussions, with the intent of drawing on the collective knowledge and experience in the room. The importance of building a shared language across disciplines was identified as a necessary step for enabling more effective collaboration.

Structure of the Roundtable 2.0

DAY ONE: Wednesday, 08 April 2026

9:30am - 10:00am: Registration & Learning Wall

10:00am - 10:30am: Opening Frame: Akshara Centre & FCA

10:30am - 12:30pm: Session I: Housing, Neighbourhoods and Basic Services

Moderator: Prachi Merchant, UNEP

Practice Presentations:

1. Housing Relocation: Integrating Livelihood, Mobility and Safety; Bijal Brahmabhatt, MHT
2. City Action Plans for Participatory Planning and Governance; Janaagraha
3. Informal Work and Waste Systems; Nalini Shekhar, Hasiru Dala
4. What It Takes to Make Sanitation Work for Women: Systems, Standards and Scale - Ansu Susan, BORDA South Asia
5. Rental Housing & Urban Access: Challenges & Institutional Levers; Jasmine Saluja, PLURAL

Reflective Discussions

Synthesis and Summary Presentation - Solution Oriented Possibilities

12:30pm - 13:30pm: Lunch Break

13:30pm - 15:30pm: Session II: Social Amenities, Care Infrastructure and Leisure

Moderator: Champaka Rajagopal, The Entrepreneurship and Partnerships Lab

Practice Presentations:

1. Gender Lab- Experiments within Greater Chennai Corporation; Meera Sundarajan, Gender Lab Chennai
2. Unseen Thresholds: A Feminist Critique of Night Shelters in Thiruvananthapuram; Rajshree Rajmohan

3. Reclaiming Leisure from a Gender Lens on Public Infrastructure, Kavya Suresh.
4. Gender Integration in Development Plan; Dr Nandita Shah, Akshara Centre
5. Gender and Heat; Prachi Merchant and Minni Sastry, UNEP.

Reflective Discussions

Synthesis and Summary Presentation - solution oriented possibilities

15:30pm - 15:45pm: Tea Break

15:45pm - 17:45pm: Session III: Mobility, Safety & Women's Right to the City Moderator: Smruti Koppikar, Question of Cities

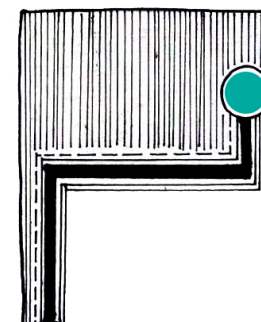
Practice Presentations:

1. Transport Initiatives and Safety Assertions; Kalpana V, Safetipin
2. Embedding Gender Sensitivity in Public Transport Training; Snehal Velkar, Akshara Centre
3. Public Campaigns and Bystander Engagement; Durga India
4. Reimagining Urban Transport from a Gender Lens; Aravinda Devaraj, WRI
5. Transport Policy and System Reform; Aswathy Dilip, ITDP

Reflective Discussions

Synthesis and Summary Presentation - solution oriented possibilities

17:45pm - 18:00pm: Closing Remarks



DAY TWO: Thursday, 09 April 2026 (Half Day)

9:30am - 10:15am: Synthesis from Discussions of Day 1 and Emerging Directions for Collective Action; Prem Chandavarkar and Shimul Javeri Kadri

10:15am - 11:30am: Governance Challenges and Possibilities.

Moderator: Meera Sundarajan,
Expert in Gender and Urban Issues

1. Making Networks Work: How Collective Platforms Shape Inclusive Cities; Akshay Agarwal, U-CAN
2. Governance Partnership in Embedding Gender: UN-Women (Online)
3. Women's Hostel Changing Landscape of workforce participation in Tamil Nadu; I.A.S Sharanya Ari (Online)
4. Embedding Gender: What Actually Works in Governance; IAS Shreya P, MD-TNHU

11:30am - 11:45am: Tea Break

11:45am - 12:45pm: Plenary: Towards Coordinated Possibilities

12:45pm - 13:00pm: Closing, Feedback and Thanks

13:00pm onwards Lunch

Team Akshara

Nandita Shah, Co Director
Shimul Javeri Kadri, SJK Architects
Snehal Velkar, Lead - Safe and Inclusive City
Samarth Vijay Khandekar- Facilitator, Safe and Inclusive City

Team FCA

Madhavi Desai, Co-founder
Urvi Desai, Co-founder and President
Himani Vinodrai.



Session 01: Housing, Neighborhoods and Basic Services

This session was moderated by Prachi Merchant - UNEP.
Presentations were made by:

Bijal Brahmabhatt (Mahila Housing Trust, Ahmedabad)
Anita Kumar, (Janaagraha, Bengaluru)
Nalini Shekhar, Hasiru Dala (Bengaluru)
Ansu Susan, BORDA South Asia (Bengaluru)
Jasmine Saluja, PLURAL (Mumbai)

The session on Housing, Neighbourhoods and Basic Services explored the complex relationships between housing, urban governance, infrastructure, livelihoods, and gender, presenting cities not merely as physical spaces but as interconnected systems that shape people's opportunities, security, and quality of life. Across diverse topics ranging from housing relocation and rental housing to sanitation, waste systems, and participatory governance, the discussions emphasized that urban development must move beyond infrastructure provision alone and instead focus on creating inclusive systems that respond to the realities of everyday life, particularly for women and marginalized communities.

A central theme that emerged throughout the seminar was the recognition that housing is far more than shelter. Housing determines access to livelihoods, education, mobility, safety, public services, and social networks. Speakers repeatedly challenged approaches that treat housing as a standalone intervention, demonstrating that decisions about where people live have far-reaching consequences for how they participate in urban life. Whether discussing relocation projects, rental housing, or access to sanitation, the presentations highlighted that the effectiveness of any urban intervention depends on how well it is integrated with broader systems of service delivery, governance, and economic opportunity.

The discussions also revealed the hidden costs of urban transitions. Processes that appear successful on paper, such as relocation to improved housing or the construction of new facilities, often generate significant

disruptions that are rarely captured in official assessments. Relocation, for example, was presented as a prolonged period of adjustment rather than a one-time event, frequently disrupting livelihoods, schooling, access to welfare services, and social support networks. These disruptions often fall disproportionately on women, who assume responsibility for maintaining household stability during periods of uncertainty. The seminar therefore encouraged a broader understanding of urban development that accounts for social continuity, not merely physical outcomes.

Another recurring insight was the importance of viewing cities through a gendered lens. Across presentations, women's experiences emerged as a critical indicator of how urban systems function. Mobility, safety, housing, sanitation, access to services, and participation in governance were shown to be deeply interconnected challenges that shape women's ability to access opportunities and exercise agency. Rather than treating women as a special category within urban policy, the discussions suggested that understanding women's everyday experiences provides valuable insights into the strengths and weaknesses of urban systems as a whole. Gender-responsive planning was therefore presented not as an optional addition but as a necessary foundation for equitable urban development.

The session also highlighted the limitations of infrastructure-led approaches that focus on physical assets without considering how they are used, maintained, and governed. Basic services such as sanitation were discussed as systems rather than isolated facilities. Toilets without water, maintenance mechanisms, waste treatment, or consideration of user needs often fail to deliver meaningful improvements. Similarly, housing without adequate access to livelihoods, transportation, or social infrastructure can reinforce exclusion rather than alleviate it. The discussions advocated for lifecycle and systems-based thinking, where planning extends beyond construction to include operation, maintenance, accessibility, and long-term sustainability.

Questions of dignity, recognition, and inclusion featured prominently

throughout the session.

The presentations challenged conventional assumptions about informality by demonstrating how groups often perceived as marginal, such as waste pickers, informal workers, migrants, and renters, play essential roles in the functioning of cities. Rather than viewing these populations as beneficiaries of welfare, speakers emphasized their contributions to urban economies, environmental sustainability, and community resilience. The discussions highlighted the transformative potential of policies and programs that recognize these contributions, provide institutional support, and create pathways for meaningful participation.

Governance emerged as a key mechanism through which urban outcomes are shaped.

Many of the challenges discussed were traced not only to resource constraints but also to gaps in planning processes, institutional coordination, and representation. Participatory governance was presented as an important strategy for addressing these shortcomings. Examples from community action groups, women's collectives, and local planning initiatives demonstrated that residents possess valuable knowledge about local needs and priorities. When communities are included in decision-making processes, planning becomes more responsive, effective, and equitable. However, the seminar also noted that meaningful participation requires addressing existing power imbalances, particularly the underrepresentation of women in formal decision-making structures.

The discussions further highlighted the importance of urban access and mobility as foundations of inclusion. Housing location, affordability, and connectivity influence who can access education, employment, public services, and social opportunities. Rental housing emerged as a particularly important but often neglected component of this ecosystem, serving as the primary entry point into cities for migrants, young people, and women seeking greater independence. Despite its significance, rental housing remains fragmented and under-supported within policy frameworks. The

seminar suggested that expanding access to affordable and secure rental options is essential for creating more inclusive urban futures.

Taken together, the presentations advanced a vision of cities as interconnected social, economic, and governance systems rather than collections of physical infrastructure. The recurring message was that urban challenges cannot be addressed through isolated interventions. Housing, sanitation, livelihoods, governance, mobility, and gender equality are deeply intertwined, and meaningful progress requires integrated approaches that recognize these relationships. Across all discussions, there was a strong call to centre community knowledge, strengthen participatory governance, and design urban systems that prioritize dignity, inclusion, and long-term well-being.

The seminar ultimately argued for a shift in urban development thinking—from building infrastructure for people to building cities with people. By placing lived experiences, particularly those of women and marginalized groups, at the heart of planning and governance, cities can become more equitable, resilient, and responsive to the needs of all residents.

Session 2: Social Amenities, Care Infrastructure and Leisure Services

This session was moderated by Champaka Rajgopal, The entrepreneurship and partnerships lab.

And the presentations were made by:

Meera Sundarajan, Gender Expert

Rajshree Rajmohan, Thiruvananthapuram; Kavya Suresh, ArchitectureRED

Dr Nandita Shah, Akshara Centre, Mumbai,

Prachi Merchant and Minni Sastry, UNEP.

The session on Social Amenities, Care Infrastructure and Leisure explored how cities are shaped not only by their physical infrastructure but also by the often-overlooked systems of care, inclusion, and everyday social life that enable people to participate fully in urban environments. Through discussions on public amenities, governance, leisure, gender-responsive planning, shelter design, and climate resilience, the session challenged conventional approaches to urban development that prioritize physical assets while neglecting the social conditions that determine whether cities are truly accessible and equitable.

A central theme was the idea that care is a critical yet under-recognized component of urban infrastructure. While cities routinely invest in roads, buildings, and utilities, the systems that support daily life such as childcare facilities, shelters, public toilets, community spaces, and safe public environments, often remain peripheral within planning frameworks. The presentations collectively argued that these forms of social infrastructure are not supplementary services but essential foundations that determine who can access opportunities, participate in public life, and exercise their right to the city.

The discussions repeatedly highlighted the gap between policy intentions and lived realities. Many urban interventions are designed with the objective of promoting safety, accessibility, or inclusion, yet their implementation often fails to account for how people actually experience and use these spaces. The example of women's shelters illustrated this disconnect clearly.

While such facilities may be conceived as protective and empowering spaces, design shortcomings, restrictive operational practices, inaccessible locations, and institutional approaches can undermine their effectiveness. This broader critique extended beyond shelters to urban planning more generally, emphasizing that infrastructure must be evaluated not only through technical standards but also through dignity, usability, comfort, and lived experience.

Another significant insight was the need to rethink safety itself. Traditional urban responses often focus on surveillance, control, or regulation as mechanisms for protecting vulnerable groups. However, the seminar suggested that genuine safety emerges from environments that foster inclusion, visibility, accessibility, and social interaction. Safe cities are not necessarily those with the greatest degree of monitoring, but those where people feel welcome, respected, and able to occupy public space without justification or fear. This perspective reframed safety as a product of social and spatial design rather than simply security infrastructure.

The question of who has the right to occupy, enjoy, and shape public space emerged as a recurring concern. Presentations examining leisure and public life revealed how women's engagement with cities is often constrained by social expectations and urban environments that prioritize functional movement over social presence. Public spaces frequently accommodate women only as workers, caregivers, shoppers, or commuters, limiting opportunities for recreation, rest, exploration, and community interaction. Leisure was therefore presented not as a luxury but as an important dimension of urban citizenship, reflecting an individual's ability to claim space, exercise agency, and participate in collective life.

This emphasis on everyday experiences highlighted the importance of human-centred urban design. Rather than relying solely on large-scale projects or monumental public spaces, the seminar emphasized the value of smaller, accessible, and context-sensitive interventions embedded within daily urban routines. Streets, neighbourhood parks, community

facilities, and transitional spaces can play a crucial role in fostering inclusion when designed to accommodate diverse users and activities. Such approaches recognize that meaningful urban experiences are often shaped by ordinary spaces encountered throughout the day rather than by landmark destinations alone.

The institutional dimension of urban change also featured prominently throughout the discussions. Several presentations demonstrated that transforming cities requires not only physical interventions but also changes within governance systems. Gender-responsive planning was presented as an example of how social concerns can be embedded within formal planning processes when advocates, practitioners, and public institutions work collaboratively. The inclusion of gender considerations in development planning represented an important step toward institutionalizing equity, demonstrating how issues traditionally viewed as social concerns can be translated into planning frameworks, policies, standards, and land-use decisions.

At the same time, the seminar acknowledged the challenges of sustaining such change. Many advances depended on committed individuals, sustained advocacy, and long-term engagement within institutions. Progress often occurred incrementally, requiring negotiation, experimentation, and the gradual creation of legitimacy for new ideas. This highlighted the importance of building institutional capacity alongside community engagement to ensure that inclusive approaches are not dependent solely on individual champions.

The relationship between gender and environmental vulnerability added another important dimension to the discussions. As cities confront rising temperatures and increasingly frequent climate-related stresses, the impacts are not experienced equally. The seminar illustrated how women often face greater exposure to environmental risks due to caregiving responsibilities, unpaid domestic labour, mobility patterns, housing conditions, and unequal access to resources. Climate resilience therefore

emerged not only as an environmental challenge but also as a question of social equity. Effective responses require a deeper understanding of how vulnerability is shaped by the intersection of gender, income, occupation, housing, and access to infrastructure.

A consistent thread across all presentations was the need for planning approaches that are grounded in lived experience. Whether addressing shelters, leisure spaces, governance processes, care infrastructure, or climate adaptation, speakers emphasized that the people who use urban spaces possess critical knowledge about how cities function in practice. This perspective challenged top-down models of planning and reinforced the importance of participatory processes that engage communities in identifying needs, evaluating interventions, and shaping urban futures.

Taken together, the seminar advanced a broader vision of urban development centred on care, dignity, and inclusion. It argued that cities should not be evaluated solely by their infrastructure or economic productivity but by their capacity to support everyday life, particularly for those who have historically been excluded from planning processes. Social amenities, care infrastructure, leisure spaces, and climate-responsive environments are not peripheral concerns; they are fundamental components of a just and equitable city.

The discussions ultimately called for a shift in urban planning paradigms—from designing cities around efficiency and functionality alone to designing cities around human well-being. By integrating care into governance, embedding gender perspectives into planning, creating inclusive public spaces, and addressing emerging environmental challenges, cities can become places where all residents are able not only to live and work, but also to belong, participate, and thrive.

Session 3: Mobility, Accessibility and Safety & Women's right to the City.

Moderated by Smruti Koppikar (Question of Cities, Mumbai)

This session included presentations by:

Kalpana Vishwanath (Safetipin, Delhi)

Snehal Velkar (Akshara, Mumbai)

Priya Varadarajan from Durga India (Bengaluru)

Aravinda Devaraj (World Resources Institute, Bengaluru)

Aswathy Dilip (Institute for Transportation and Development Policy, Chennai).

The presentations positioned mobility as central to women's access to the city, directly shaping their ability to work, study, and participate in public life. They also highlighted how mobility was deeply shaped by gendered social norms and inequalities. Women's lower workforce participation and limited access to economic resources such as private vehicles, further restricted their mobility choices, often making them dependent on walking or public or shared transport. Safety was framed not as an isolated concern but as embedded within everyday mobility systems. Holistic systems approach to urban safety and mobility that integrates infrastructure, governance, and social dimensions was emphasized. Data-driven approaches, such as Safetipin's work, demonstrated how mapping urban conditions can inform more responsive planning and highlight gaps in infrastructure and services. One important project shared by Safetipin was Bus Terminal Gender Assessment Project that did safety and accessibility audits of 15 bus terminals in Delhi in Collaboration with: Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC) where the evaluation parameters were: Safety (lighting, visibility), Accessibility, Information systems, Facilities (toilets, rest areas) and Anti-sexual harassment measures. Some of the emerging focus areas that came out were: mobility study of women gig workers, women's underrepresentation (<3% in India) in the transport sector, including in decision-making and in the workforce, as well as the urgent need for public engagement campaigns on safety.

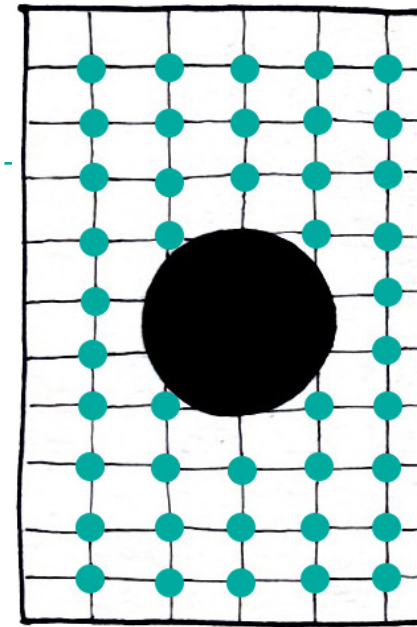
A key emphasis was on moving beyond surveillance-led solutions towards

systemic and behavioural approaches to safety. Training programmes within public transport systems illustrated the importance of collaboration with frontline staff, as shown in the Akshara presentation on their Gender Sensitization Initiative with BST (Mumbai), while public campaigns highlighted the role of bystanders and collective responsibility in shaping safer environments. Challenges were identified as privatization of public transport, contractual staff, and limited time available instead of sustained training and interaction over a long period of time.

The speakers stressed gender-just public spaces through community-centered approaches rather than reliance on formal legal systems. Durga elaborated on and critically evaluated their project of introducing a low-tech panic alarm system in Bengaluru buses. Using a case study of the Mumbai Metro, WRI representatives demonstrated how data-driven methods- "count, ask, and audit"-revealed critical gender differences. Women commuters were more diverse, travelled for varied purposes such as caregiving, and prioritized safety, accessibility, and convenience more than men. The representative from ITDP highlighted the complexity of urban mobility governance, involving multiple agencies managing streets, buses, rail, metro, and planning, which created coordination challenges. Large-scale, private-vehicle infrastructure investments often overlook everyday travel patterns, and the needs of diverse users. This results in fragmented solutions and marginalization of the needs of the pedestrians and the cyclists.

In general, it was pointed out that addressing gender in mobility required action at multiple levels, including filling the structural gaps in the design of mobility systems within transport planning. Some of the excellent suggestions and recommendations included gender-disaggregated data collection, looking at various gendered travel patterns, focusing on last-mile connectivity (use of mini buses, for example), improvement of bus stop and walking infrastructure (continuous investment in footpaths), seat reservations for women, women-only bus services (during peak hours), and many more.

This session underscored the need for systemic change—better multi-agency coordination, sustained funding for inclusive mobility, gender-sensitive policymaking, and behavioral shifts, and most of all, embedding these insights into policy.



Session 04: Governance Challenges and Possibilities

Moderated by Meera Sundarajan, Independent Expert in Gender and Urban Issues- Chennai.

This session included presentations by:

Akshay Agarwal, Lead Programs, Urban Collective Action Network (U-CAN) Bangalore

Veda Bharadwaja, Country Program Manager, UN Women, Delhi (Online)

Sharanya Ari, IAS, Additional Director- Social Welfare Department, Tamil Nadu (Online)

Shreya P. Singh, IAS, Managing Director Urban Habitat Development Board, Tamil Nadu (Online)

The session focused on the role of governance systems, institutional structures, and collective platforms in advancing gender-responsive urban development. Presentations highlighted the importance of building collaborative networks that bring together diverse actors across sectors, enabling more coordinated and sustained engagement with urban challenges. It illustrated how collective platforms can function as neutral spaces, allowing organisations to align efforts and move beyond siloed approaches. For instance, the U-CAN network was presented as a model that connects multiple organizations and stakeholders across cities, enabling shared learning and coordinated action rather than isolated interventions, including jointly developing common recommendations for government departments as well as creating connections with elected representatives where possible.

Governance-led interventions demonstrated how embedding gender within institutional processes can influence large-scale outcomes. Examples from state-led initiatives highlighted efforts to integrate gender considerations into workforce participation and implementation, showing how bureaucratic systems can act as enablers when there are internal alignments and leadership. Special attention was given to women-oriented programmes such as creating fellowships for placing women professionals within social impact organizations (not government). UN Women

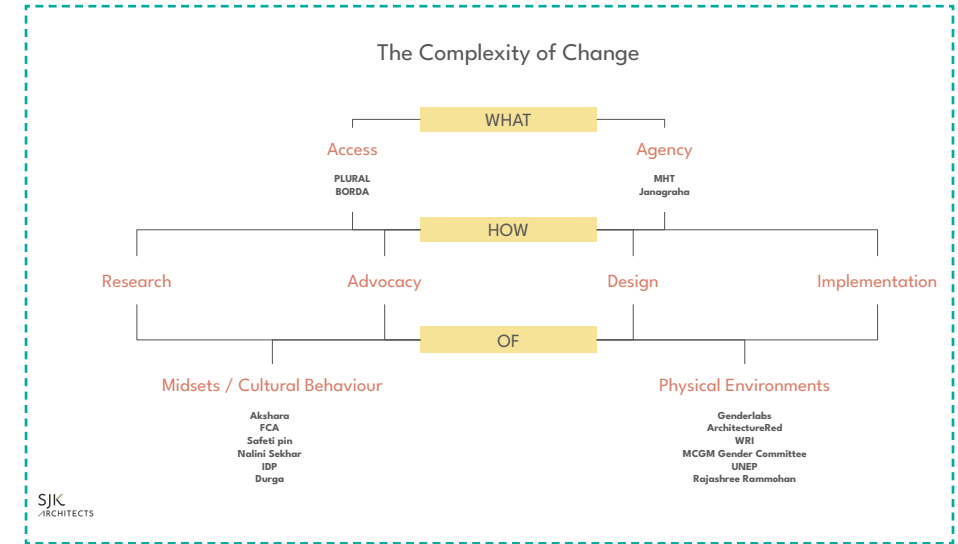
representatives also suggested bringing civil society organizations together with the government, aligning organizational goals with government priorities. She also spoke about “feminist advocates” (called champions) within government institutions as a working strategy. Another highlight was collaboration with Kerala’s Responsible Tourism Mission, combining global frameworks with local systems to produce gender-inclusive tourism policy.

Filling a critical gap, safe, affordable housing as a socially accepted living space for women entering urban education and employment was introduced by the IAS from Tamil Nadu where the state operates 25 hostels across 21 districts. The facilities included a canteen, internet, creche, etc. The intervention enabled mobility, economic independence, and supportive networks for women, significantly boosting women’s workforce participation and urban inclusion. The state also has plans to introduce student housing, creches and elderly care centres in the future. Shreya from Tamil Nadu Urban Habitat Development Board, emphasized the need for integrated gender-focused policies rather than standalone women-specific programs, highlighting the importance of gender budgeting and cross-departmental collaboration. The discussions centered on practical challenges of working with government systems, the role of community participation, and effective strategies for mainstreaming gender considerations into urban planning and policy implementation.

Overall, the session highlighted that achieving gender-responsive cities requires working both within and across governance systems, combining institutional reform with collaborative, network-driven approaches. Importantly, smaller (Tier 2/Tier 3) cities were identified as critical sites for intervention, through live projects, offering opportunities for more context-responsive and community-rooted urban approaches. Ultimately, effective governance required embedding and integrating gender at the planning and policy formulation stage, supported by data, budgeting, institutional mechanisms like gender labs, and continuous feedback loops.

Synthesis of Day 01 by Shimul Javeri Kadri and Prem Chandavarkar

Shimul noted “the complexity of change,” where multiple actors, systems, and scales intersect in shaping urban outcomes. She pointed out three key threads; First, the importance of agency, particularly in enabling women to shape urbanisation processes, rather than being passive recipients of planning decisions, especially through examples of collective organising and institutional engagement. Second, the question of access to the opportunities of the city, from housing and sanitation to mobility and employment, which continues to structure who can participate in urban life. Third, the potential for cultural transformation, where both spatial design and behavioural interventions can shift norms. Prem’s reflections pushed the conversation further by calling for a rethinking of foundational concepts. He emphasised that gender must be understood beyond fixed categories, and that participation must move beyond token inclusion. His final reframing addressed a crisis of recognition in Indian cities. Corrupt, inefficient land markets price much of the population out of the official master plan, producing informality not as a choice but as something legality itself generates. Elite “capsularisation” through cars and metros compounds this, biasing investment toward large infrastructure over grassroots reform. His central proposition was that the city itself must be radically reimagined as a space of human rights and this as the only way to overcome the exclusions that leave the urban poor with nothing more than the bare fact of being human to stand on. Together, the summary framed the need to move from isolated interventions towards more systemic, inclusive, and rights-based approaches to urban transformation.



Core Insights Across Themes

Reframing Infrastructure as Interconnected Systems

There is a need to include gender sensitivity and concerns into the built environment at the start itself so that urban design and urban interventions can be integrated systems that account for use, continuity, and long-term functioning because access is determined not by provision alone, but by how well systems are connected and sustained. Gender concerns across the spectrum must be brought into both availability and accessibility levels of a city's systems.

Access, Proximity, and the Structuring of Everyday Life

Relocation to peripheral areas, lack of rental housing in well-connected locations, and weak last-mile connectivity all limit the ability to participate in the city, especially for women; access and safety issues remain central to all classes and categories across gender although their manifestation differs based on the class, caste and other factors intersecting with gender. Proximity to work, education, and social networks reduces time burdens and enables greater inclusion for a large majority of women.

Embedding Care and Lived Realities into Planning

There is an absence of childcare facilities, safe sanitation, rest spaces, and accessible public amenities within planning frameworks flowing from the old and traditional approaches to urban planning and design that do not acknowledge the socially and economically pivotal Care Economy. The assumption of a neutral user fails to account for differentiated experiences shaped by gender, caste, class, and ability. Urban planning and design of systems must be evolved around the fundamentals of the Care Economy, which rests primarily on women's labour and their lived realities.

Agency, Informality, and Pathways for Change

Meaningful change emerges through collective agency, but requires institutional alignment to scale and sustain impact. Informal housing and rental arrangements continue to provide critical access where formal systems fall short. Organised efforts such as women's collectives and community groups demonstrate the potential to engage with governance,

influence decisions, and secure tangible improvements, though they remain rather limited in scale but their experiences must be shared on a regular basis.

Strengthen Women's Agency in Urban Systems

Build on approaches that enable women to actively shape urban processes, recognising, as highlighted, the need for "agency for women in the way the city grows" from planning and design to implementation and managing the city systems.

Ensure Equitable Access to Urban Opportunities

Prioritise housing, mobility, sanitation, and livelihoods as interconnected systems that determine access to the city. Use the Best Practices and Case Studies approach to advocate change in each.

Use Design as a Tool for Cultural Change

Expand the role of urban design to specifically reorient it to gender concerns by influencing behaviour and values, acknowledging its potential to "design cultural behaviour" and shift societal norms.

Build and Share a Collective Knowledge Base

Develop a "web of resources" that allows organisations to share tools, research, and implementation strategies for wider application.

Adopt More Expansive Understandings of Gender

Incorporate perspectives that recognise gender as diverse and fluid, moving beyond binary frameworks to include gender fluidity.

Reframe Participation in Its Full Scope

Move beyond limited and government-mandated forms of participation, recognising that it must include deeper social and cognitive dimensions, not just formal inclusion so that gender concerns are reflected across class, caste and geography.

Strengthen Horizontal Forms of Collective Action

Build citizen-to-citizen networks, recognising that meaningful change can emerge from “the horizontal axis” of relationships and collective mobilisation.

Address the Structural Crisis of Recognition

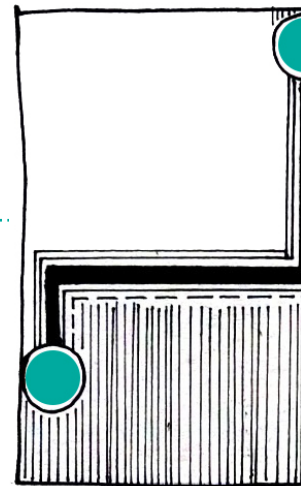
Acknowledge how the prevalent and inadequate planning systems exclude large populations, where “legality itself produces informality,” and work towards more inclusive frameworks by emphasising on the “crisis of recognition”.

Decentralise Governance for Meaningful Engagement

Advocate for governance at smaller, localised scales where recognition and participation can be effectively realised. Advocate and campaign for better representation of women and other genders at the area sabha level and in local-level politics to strengthen and more effectively implement the 74th Constitutional Amendment.

Reframe Cities as Spaces of Rights

Adopt the ‘Right to the City’ framework in all of the above so that the city is universally accepted by all stakeholders as a site where gender rights, including that of the marginalised and migrants, are actively defined and realised, addressing the condition where many are left without recognition as rights-bearing citizens.



Emerging Directions and Way Forward for the larger Collective

Drive Policy Change Through Targeted Entry Points

Move from broad advocacy to clearly identified policy interventions at national, state and importantly at city levels. Prioritise issues such as migration data, rental housing, and service access, and push for gender-disaggregated, publicly accessible datasets. Identify 3–5 priority policy tasks and pursue them through coordinated advocacy, including direct engagement with elected representatives at the city and state levels as well as the governments.

Build a Shared Knowledge and Data Infrastructure

Develop and widely disseminate an open-access platform that consolidates data, case studies, relevant literature, and tools across advocacy and rights' organisations where documentation goes beyond outputs to capture processes, interconnections as well as drawbacks. This will be a shared, searchable repository, which will improve accessibility of data, critical for both advocacy and implementation.

Enable Structured yet Flexible Collaboration

Form working groups based on themes or geographies strengths across individuals and organisations and establish a light coordination structure to sustain collaboration. This includes mapping, enabling both collective and small-group work, and addressing fragmented funding structures through joint approaches.

Translate Ideas into Scalable Interventions

Focus on identifying and implementing small, actionable collaborative pilot projects that can demonstrate impact and be scaled while strongly and consistently advocating for large systemic shifts in cities towards gender concerns. The focus on neighbourhood-level interventions, rethinking public infrastructure, and developing multi-city program models that integrate design, policy, and community engagement are the bottom-up actions while the policy-level advocacy and planning are top-down.

Strengthen Community-Led Approaches and Inclusion

Establish formal mechanisms to integrate community organisations into planning, implementation, and policy engagement, especially for those most affected by urban inequalities. This includes strengthening grassroots participation, expanding inclusion to account for diverse identities, and building stronger links between community organisations and governance systems to ensure that communities are not just beneficiaries, but active participants in shaping outcomes.

Invest in Capacity Building Across Stakeholders

Seeding change is important. Build sustained and targeted training and sensitisation programs for a wide range of stakeholders, including government officials, frontline workers, and practitioners. This includes embedding gender-responsive thinking within institutions and expanding understanding across sectors. Identifying officials sensitive to gender issues, building working relationships with them, and seeding change for more gender-sensitive and gender-just cities is needed.

Anchor Work in Shared Values and Systems Thinking

Ground all efforts in a shared framework of equity, care, and inclusion, while adopting systems thinking to address fragmentation. Participants emphasised the importance of maintaining flexibility and allowing the network to evolve organically, with one framing it as needing to remain “emergent, not overly structured.” At the same time, sustaining trust, relationships, and shared intent was seen as critical to long-term impact.

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