



## Women In Public Space

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**(Mains Examination, GS Paper 1 - Role of women and women's organisations, population and associated issues, poverty and developmental issues, urbanisation, their problems and remedies.)**

### **Context:**

- Marked annually on **March 8<sup>th</sup>**, International Women's Day, is a global day celebrating the social, economic, cultural and political achievements of women.
- The day also marks a call to action for accelerating gender parity.
- The theme for International Women's Day 2021 is 'Choose To Challenge'.
- A challenged world is an alert world. And from challenge comes change.

### **Women's lack of access to public spaces:**

- Men will talk about year 2020, as a year out of time, but women will say, this is how we lived anyway.
- The pandemic was the first time it was recognised as a problem.
- Statistics on women's lack of access to public spaces are sobering.
- The India Human Development Survey of 2012 (IHDS), conducted by the University of Maryland and National Council of Applied Economic Research, revealed that 18 per cent of women respondents do not go to a kirana shop.
- A further 19 per cent would not go alone. A third of households relied only on men or children to do any grocery shopping.
- Only 11 per cent of rural women had ever attended a gram sabha. Barely 18 per cent had ever visited a metropolitan city, and an equal proportion had ventured outside their state.
- Even before mask-wearing limited our ability to connect with the external world, it was commonplace for 60 per cent of Indian women who practise either the ghunghat or purdah.
- Part of this isolation may be because it is difficult for women to travel unless someone accompanies them; among the IHDS respondents, only half of them felt able to travel alone

## **Causes of isolation:**

- Pandemic-enforced isolation will increase our empathy for the substantial proportion of Indian women who have found themselves confined to their homes during the normal course of life.
- But the challenge, however, lies in understanding what has caused this isolation and finding ways to address it.
- A large number of studies have documented that women face sexual harassment as they venture outside the home.
- Fear of sexual harassment has negative societal consequences in many areas of life.
- Women are less likely to work away from home in areas where perceived sexual harassment of girls is higher.
- World Bank economist Girija Borker found that despite having high marks, girls in Delhi University choose to attend lower-quality colleges to avoid sexual harassment while traveling to college.
- Safety concerns are not limited to major metropolitan cities.
- A study carried out by the NGO Safetipin in Bhopal, Gwalior and Jodhpur found that 95 per cent of women feel unsafe using public transport, 89 per cent feel unsafe in the marketplace, 84 per cent feel unsafe waiting for public transport while 76 per cent feel unsafe on roads or footpath.
- The study found that about 30 per cent of women reported having faced some form of sexual harassment in the past year.
- Half of these incidents took place while using public transport and 16 per cent were while waiting for public transport.

## **Measures to be taken:**

- Some of measures are relatively simple like improving lighting around roads, buses, and train stations.
- However, we also need to look to more creative solutions to create a critical mass of women in public spaces so that women don't feel isolated and see safety in numbers.
- This may involve hiring women drivers and bus conductors, emulating Lahore's pink buses, and expanding spaces allocated to women vendors in markets.
- It also involves creating an environment where the whole society collaborates to welcome women into public life.

## **Models to follow:**

- Empowering women is not a one-way street, benefitting women alone, rather to whole society.
- The Indian Independence movement offers an inspirational example of the synergy between the women's movement and the nationalist movement.

- This intertwining won freedom for the nation while creating an obligation for an Independent India to deliver gender justice, resulting in the Hindu Code Bill that provided for monogamy, divorce, and inheritance rights for women.
- MGNREGA, with equal pay for men and women, has played an important role in bringing women, who used to work only on family farms in the past, into paid work.

**Conclusion:**

- Finding opportunities for women to participate in creating public goods, whether through special programmes designed for women or structuring existing programmes in a way that allows for enhanced participation by women can only be a win-win situation.
- As India now thinks of emerging from pandemic isolation and resuming our social lives, country can make sure both men and women reclaim public spaces and that the new normal for women does not look like the old normal.