

# Loitering as a Feminist Act: Reclaiming Public Space and Micro Freedoms for Women in Rural India

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**Abstract:** *This paper examines the concept of loitering as a feminist act in rural India. The research emphasises the importance of micro-level freedoms, particularly women's access to public spaces, in the broader discourse on women's empowerment. While traditional empowerment indicators focus on education, employment, and political participation, this study delves into the everyday freedoms that significantly contribute to women's holistic empowerment. In patriarchal societies like India, women's mobility and presence in public spaces are heavily regulated, often prioritising men's comfort and dominance. This restriction limits women's agency and denies them the right to leisure and unmonitored existence. Loitering, the seemingly purposeless act of lingering in public spaces, challenges societal expectations that women should only occupy these spaces for legitimate, productivity-driven purposes. The article focuses on the lived experiences of Ph.D. scholars in Tamil Nadu, exploring how they navigate public spaces, resist patriarchal controls, and assert their presence in male-dominated environments. By engaging in loitering, these women reclaim physical spaces and redefine societal perceptions of gender, autonomy, and citizenship. The research highlights the transformative potential of loitering as a feminist act, positioning it within broader discussions on gender, space, and power.*

**Keywords:** Loitering, Feminist act, Public space, Micro freedoms, Women's empowerment, Patriarchal societies, Mobility, Gender, Autonomy, Citizenship

## 1. Introduction

Women's empowerment has been a central theme in global development discourse, often measured through macro-level indicators such as education, employment, and political participation. While these markers highlight significant progress, they overlook the nuanced, everyday freedoms that contribute to a woman's holistic empowerment. Among these micro-level freedoms, access to public spaces emerges as a critical, yet often ignored, dimension. In patriarchal societies like India, women's mobility is heavily regulated, and public spaces are structured to prioritise men's comfort and dominance. This restriction undermines women's agency and denies them the right to leisure, visibility, and unmonitored existence.

The concept of loitering—a seemingly purposeless act of lingering in public spaces—becomes radical within this context. Loitering subverts societal expectations that women must occupy public spaces only with legitimate, productivity-driven purposes, such as work or errands. By engaging in loitering, women challenge these norms, asserting their right to occupy space without justification. This act reclaims physical spaces and redefines societal perceptions of gender, autonomy, and citizenship.

This study explores women's loitering as an assertion of micro freedoms, focusing on the lived experiences of Ph.D. scholars in Tamil Nadu. It examines how women navigate public spaces, resist patriarchal controls, and negotiate their presence in male-dominated environments, highlighting the transformative potential of loitering as a feminist act.

## 2. Literature Review

The concept of loitering as a feminist act has been explored across various disciplines, including sociology, urban studies, and feminist theory. This literature review situates the act of loitering within broader discussions on gender, space, and power, highlighting its transformative potential in challenging patriarchal structures.

### 2.1 Feminist Perspectives on Public and Private Spaces

The division between public and private spaces has been a central theme in feminist literature. Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, famously argued that women have been historically confined to the private sphere, their existence defined in relation to men. She highlighted how patriarchal societies structure women's roles around domesticity, limiting their access to the public domain. Similarly, Sherry Ortner's work, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" discusses how women have been associated with nature and reproductive roles, while men are linked to culture and public life, further reinforcing spatial and social hierarchies.

Feminist geographers, such as McDowell (1999), have also critiqued the male-centric designs of urban spaces, which render them inaccessible or hostile to women. These critiques underline how public spaces, far from being neutral, are deeply gendered, reflecting and perpetuating patriarchal values.

### 2.2 Loitering as Resistance

Phadke et al.'s seminal work, *Why Loiter? Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets*, reframes loitering as an act of resistance

against patriarchal spatial politics. They argued that women's access to public spaces is often mediated by purpose, such as work or education, and that purposeless loitering challenges the notion that women must justify their presence in public domains. Loitering, they assert, is not merely an act of leisure but a radical assertion of citizenship and rights.

Similarly, Sadia Khatri's *Girls at Dhaba* campaign in Pakistan encouraged women to frequent male-dominated spaces, such as roadside tea stalls, to reclaim visibility and challenge gender norms. These movements underscore the symbolic power of loitering in redefining public spaces as inclusive and egalitarian.

### 2.3 Gendered Experiences of Safety

Women's restricted access to public spaces is often justified through concerns for their safety. Mellgren et al. (2017) explored how fear of sexual harassment shapes women's mobility, leading to self-imposed restrictions and behavioural modifications. Their study emphasized that even minor forms of harassment have significant psychological and social consequences, reinforcing the notion that women are vulnerable and need protection.

Kristen Day's research, "Constructing Masculinity and Women's Fear in Public Spaces," highlighted how gender identity is performed through spatial interactions. Day argued that men's dominance in public spaces is maintained through the perception of women as fearful and vulnerable, perpetuating a cycle of exclusion.

### 2.4 Intersectionality and Public Space

The experience of navigating public spaces is not homogeneous among women. Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality provides a useful framework for understanding how caste, class, and religion intersect with gender to influence spatial access. For example, Maria Dolors Garcia-Ramon's study of urban planning in Barcelona revealed that women from marginalised communities faced compounded barriers in accessing public spaces, emphasising the need for intersectional approaches in feminist advocacy.

## 3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore women's lived experiences engaging with public spaces through loitering. The methodology is designed to understand how women perceive, navigate, and challenge societal norms in their everyday lives.

### 3.1 Research Design

As a research method, phenomenology focuses on individuals' subjective experiences and the meanings they attach to those experiences. This approach is particularly suited to examining loitering, an act laden with cultural, structural, and personal implications. Drawing from C.W. Mills' concept of the sociological imagination, this study links the micro-level experiences of participants with broader societal structures, highlighting the interplay of biography and history in shaping gendered spatial interactions.

### 3.2 Sample and Setting

The research was conducted at Gandhigram Rural Institute in Tamil Nadu, focusing on 15 Ph.D. scholars residing in the university's Working Women's Hostel. Participants were purposively selected to ensure a diverse representation of disciplines, backgrounds, and age groups (20-30 years). This sample size was deemed adequate to achieve saturation in qualitative analysis while maintaining depth in data collection.

### 3.3 Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary tool for data collection. Questions were designed to elicit detailed narratives about participants' experiences with public spaces, their perceptions of loitering, the strategies they used, and the challenges they faced. Observational techniques complemented interviews, capturing participants' body language and interactions in public spaces. Secondary data from books, articles, and journals provided additional context.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and themes. The data were interpreted using an iterative process, ensuring participants' voices were central to the analysis. Categories such as "continuity," "negotiation," and "transgression" emerged, reflecting varying degrees of engagement with public spaces.

This methodological framework enabled a comprehensive understanding of loitering as a feminist act, situating individual experiences within the larger societal and cultural context.

## 4. Findings

The findings from this study reveal the complexity of women's engagement with public spaces, shedding light on their struggles, aspirations, and resistance. Narratives of the 15 participants demonstrate how women navigate societal norms, structural barriers, and personal desires to claim space in a world largely shaped by patriarchal norms.

### 4.1 The Persistence of Socialisation

For many participants, the act of loitering itself was unimaginable due to the internalised socialisation of patriarchal expectations. The narratives revealed a pattern of early conditioning, where participants learned that public spaces were inherently male domains and that a woman's presence required a clear purpose.

Anu, a 24-year-old participant, was reluctant to loiter: "*I've never thought about it. To me, being outside is always linked to something—a reason, a task. Otherwise, people talk, and I don't want my family to face unnecessary questions.*" This reflects how deeply embedded societal judgments govern women's choices, limiting their mobility.

For others, this socialization came from observing gendered patterns within their families. Amutha, who grew up in a rural area, recounted: *"My brother could walk to the market just to have tea, but I always needed to inform someone, even if I was going to buy vegetables. Over time, it just felt normal."* These narratives highlight how family dynamics perpetuate gendered expectations, reinforcing the idea that women's presence in public spaces must always be justified.

#### 4.2 Negotiating the Boundaries

A recurring theme in the narratives was the constant negotiation women undertook to access public spaces. While some participants adhered strictly to societal expectations, others used subtle strategies to navigate these boundaries without overtly defying them.

Padmaja, 28, described how she found ways to step outside the constraints of her family's rules: *"I always tell my parents where I am going, but sometimes I stretch the truth. If I say I'm going to the library, I might spend an extra hour just walking around the campus."* Her story reveals the delicate balance between maintaining familial trust and carving out moments of freedom.

For many, this negotiation extended to their choice of companions. Monisha, 25, shared: *"Whenever I wanted to go out, I made sure to invite my friends. Being in a group made my parents more comfortable. They trusted that I wouldn't be alone, and honestly, I felt safer too."* This collective strategy allowed women to access public spaces without attracting scrutiny, though it underscored their inability to move freely as individuals.

However, the negotiation often came at the cost of emotional exhaustion. Participants described the mental calculations involved in planning outings—anticipating questions, justifying their actions, and ensuring they adhered to societal norms. This constant self-monitoring created a tension between their desires and the fear of overstepping boundaries.

#### 4.3 Acts of Defiance: Transgressing the Norms

Some participants described moments when they consciously defied societal expectations to reclaim public spaces. These acts of transgression, though often subtle, carried significant personal meaning and a sense of empowerment.

Abinaya, 25, recounted an instance when she visited a roadside tea stall alone: *"It was something I had always wanted to do but felt afraid. One day, I just walked in, ordered tea, and sat there for a few minutes. It was such a small thing, but it felt revolutionary. I didn't feel like I was being watched for those few minutes."* Her experience highlights how even mundane activities can become acts of rebellion in the context of a patriarchal society.

Others shared stories of taking risks to experience the city on their terms. Keerthana, 24, described her late-night walks in her hometown: *"I knew it wasn't safe, but I wanted to feel the night air, to experience the city without the usual daytime rush. It was terrifying at first, but with every walk, I felt*

*stronger."* For her, these moments represented a reclaiming of time and space that were traditionally denied to women.

These narratives also revealed the community-building aspect of defiance. Several participants described how they supported one another in challenging societal norms. Kanimozhi shared: *"In college, my friends and I would plan outings that weren't approved by the hostel. We'd tell the warden we were visiting family, but instead, we'd explore the city. It wasn't just about breaking rules—it was about bonding and creating memories."* This collective transgression created a shared sense of agency and solidarity among the women.

#### 4.4 Encountering Barriers in Public Spaces

Despite their efforts, participants faced significant barriers in their engagement with public spaces. These ranged from infrastructural challenges to societal attitudes, all of which reinforced the notion that public spaces were not designed for women.

The lack of clean public toilets emerged as a recurring theme. Kanimozhi described how this issue shaped her decisions: *"I avoid traveling long distances unless I know there's a place where I can use the restroom. Public toilets are either too dirty or unsafe, so I have to plan around that."* This infrastructural neglect highlights how urban planning fails to accommodate women's needs, further discouraging their mobility.

Participants also spoke about the pervasive threat of harassment. Amutha recounted a harrowing experience: *"One evening, I was walking back from the bus stop when a group of men started following me. They laughed and commented, and I didn't know what to do. I finally hid behind a shop until they left."* Such incidents reinforced the fear that public spaces are inherently unsafe for women, leading many to avoid them altogether.

Institutional restrictions, such as hostel curfews, also created barriers to women's autonomy. Abinaya expressed frustration: *"Even though we are adults, the hostel rules treat us like children. We have to be back by 6 p.m., while the male students can come and go as they please. It's unfair."* These restrictions limited women's access to public spaces and perpetuated the idea that their mobility must be controlled.

#### 4.5 The Transformative Power of Loitering

Despite these challenges, participants described how the act of loitering, however limited, brought them a sense of liberation and empowerment. For many, it was an opportunity to reconnect with themselves and experience joy without constraints.

Keerthana shared her experience of purposeless wandering: *"One day, I skipped my usual bus route and decided to walk home. I didn't have a plan; I just wanted to observe the world around me. I noticed things I'd never seen before—a mural on a wall, a street vendor's smile. It reminded me that the city belongs to me too."* Her narrative highlights the potential of

loitering to foster a sense of belonging and ownership of public spaces.

For others, loitering became a way to challenge societal norms and inspire change. Abinaya reflected: *"Whenever I loiter, I think about the younger girls who might see me and feel encouraged to do the same. It's a small way of showing that we have the right to be here, to exist without explanation."*

These stories underscore the transformative potential of loitering—not just as a physical act but as a reimagining of what it means to be a woman in public spaces. Through their narratives, participants illustrated how loitering can subvert patriarchal expectations, create moments of joy, and build a collective sense of agency.

## 5. Discussion

The discussion delves into the intricate and layered meanings of women's engagement with public spaces through loitering, drawing on the study's findings. It examines the act of loitering as a feminist assertion of autonomy, challenges societal and structural norms, and contextualizes the findings within broader theoretical frameworks. This exploration reveals loitering as a subversive act that reclaims citizenship and gendered spaces, challenging societal constructions of respectability and redefining public spaces as inclusive and egalitarian.

### 5.1 Loitering as a Challenge to Gendered Citizenship

Citizenship, in its ideal form, embodies equal rights and responsibilities for all individuals within a society. However, in patriarchal contexts, women's citizenship is conditional and mediated through societal expectations that prioritize productivity, safety, and morality. Loitering disrupts these conditions, asserting women's right to occupy public spaces without purpose or justification.

Participants in this study illustrated how societal expectations frame women's mobility. Public spaces are perceived as sites for productive activities—work, errands, or education—and women's presence is accepted only if it aligns with these functions. Loitering defies this logic by its very nature, challenging the pervasive notion that a woman's value in public is tied to her utility. For instance, several participants described the liberating experience of sitting in parks or walking without a goal, reframing these acts as assertions of autonomy and equal citizenship.

This discussion aligns with feminist theorists like Phadke et al. (2011), who argue that purposeless loitering is a radical claim to the city. It is not merely a question of spatial access but one of visibility, belonging, and recognition. Loitering asserts that women are not visitors or dependents in public spaces but rightful participants whose citizenship is unconditional.

### 5.2 Resistance to Patriarchal Spatial Norms

The act of loitering fundamentally challenges the patriarchal norms that govern women's access to public spaces.

Patriarchy perpetuates the division between private and public spheres, associating the former with femininity and domesticity and the latter with masculinity and autonomy. By stepping into public spaces without purpose, women subvert these associations, challenging the gendered division of space.

Participants highlighted how societal narratives reinforce patriarchal spatial norms. From a young age, women are socialized to view public spaces as dangerous and inappropriate for unaccompanied or purposeless engagement. Family restrictions and societal surveillance serve as mechanisms of control, ensuring that women conform to expectations of respectability. This study revealed that women internalise these norms, often hesitating to loiter out of fear of judgment or harm.

However, acts of loitering—even when covert or cautious—represent resistance. Women reframe public spaces as sites of pleasure and self-expression by prioritising leisure and presence over productivity. The narratives of participants who loitered alone or in groups underscored the transformative power of this act. For instance, participants described feeling empowered and visible, experiencing public spaces as individuals rather than as symbols of morality or family honour.

### 5.3 Loitering as a Reclamation of Time and Space

Loitering allows women to reclaim both time and space, challenging the temporal and spatial boundaries imposed by patriarchal norms. Public spaces are often perceived as masculine domains, particularly at night, when women's presence is viewed as transgressive. Participants who loitered at night described their actions as both thrilling and defiant, asserting their right to occupy these spaces regardless of societal expectations.

The reclamation of time is equally significant. Family responsibilities and societal norms often dictate women's schedules, leaving little room for leisure or unstructured activities. Loitering disrupts this routine, creating opportunities for self-exploration and autonomy. Participants who engaged in purposeless wandering spoke of the joy and liberation they experienced, emphasizing how these acts helped them reconnect with their identities beyond societal roles.

This discussion resonates with feminist theories of space and time, which highlight how patriarchal structures constrain women's mobility and autonomy. By loitering, women challenge the temporal and spatial restrictions that limit their access to public life, asserting their right to exist freely and authentically.

### 5.4 Structural Barriers to Loitering

The study revealed that structural barriers play a significant role in restricting women's access to public spaces. Urban and rural infrastructure often fails to account for women's needs, reflecting a gender bias that perpetuates inequality. These barriers include inadequate public toilets, poor lighting, and



unsafe transportation systems, all of which disproportionately affect women.

Participants frequently cited the lack of clean public toilets as a deterrent to loitering. Women reported avoiding long-distance travel or extended periods in public spaces due to concerns about hygiene and safety. Similarly, poor lighting in public areas created a sense of vulnerability, particularly at night, reinforcing the idea that women's presence in public spaces is time-bound.

Transportation systems also emerged as a site of gendered inequality. Participants described incidents of harassment on buses and trains, as well as the discomfort of travelling alone. This aligns with existing research, highlighting how the design and operation of transportation systems often neglect women's safety and comfort, further marginalising them from public life.

Addressing these structural barriers requires a shift in urban and rural planning paradigms. Gender-sensitive policies and infrastructure are essential to creating inclusive public spaces that accommodate women's needs and encourage their participation.

### 5.5 The Role of Pleasure in Feminist Discourse

Loitering challenges the utilitarian framework that governs women's access to public spaces, asserting the legitimacy of pleasure and leisure as feminist concerns. Traditional feminist movements have often prioritized issues like safety, equality, and rights, framing women's struggles in terms of necessity rather than desire. However, participants in this study emphasised the joy and fulfilment they experienced through purposeless wandering, reframing pleasure as a form of resistance.

Participants described how loitering allowed them to disconnect from societal pressures and experience moments of unstructured freedom. For instance, drinking tea at a roadside stall or walking through a market without a goal became acts of self-care and defiance. These narratives highlight how pleasure, often dismissed as frivolous, is central to women's empowerment.

Feminist theorists like Shilpa Phadke argue that the right to pleasure is inseparable from the right to live without violence. By claiming pleasure through loitering, women not only challenge patriarchal norms but also assert their right to a life of dignity and fulfilment.

### 5.6 Intersectionality and Loitering

The experience of loitering is not homogenous among women; it is shaped by intersecting factors such as caste, class, religion, and geographic location. This study revealed significant variations in participants' engagement with public spaces based on their socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds.

For instance, participants from rural areas described heightened societal surveillance and family restrictions, which limited their ability to loiter. Women from

marginalized communities faced additional barriers, including discrimination and limited access to safe public spaces. Urban participants, while relatively freer, still navigated institutional restrictions such as hostel curfews and workplace policies that curtailed their mobility.

These findings underscore the need for an intersectional approach to feminist advocacy. Loitering, as a feminist act, must address the unique challenges faced by women from diverse backgrounds, ensuring that efforts to reclaim public spaces are inclusive and equitable.

### 5.7 Risk-Taking and Agency

Loitering often involves an element of risk, as women navigate hostile environments and societal disapproval. Participants in this study described how taking risks to loiter empowered them, fostering a sense of agency and resilience. For instance, women who confronted harassers or ventured into male-dominated spaces reported feeling stronger and more confident in their ability to assert their rights.

This discussion challenges traditional notions of risk often associated with masculinity. By embracing risk, women redefine it as a feminist practice, reclaiming their autonomy and challenging the structures that seek to confine them.

### 5.8 Loitering and Community-Building

While loitering is often viewed as an individual act, it also has a collective dimension. Participants described how group loitering fostered solidarity and mutual support, creating a sense of community among women. These shared experiences strengthened individual agency and challenged societal norms on a broader scale.

Movements like *Why Loiter? Girls at Dhaba* illustrate how collective loitering can amplify the impact of individual acts, creating a ripple effect that inspires others to reclaim public spaces. This community-building aspect of loitering highlights its potential as a catalyst for social change.

### 5.9 Toward Inclusive Public Spaces

The ultimate goal of advocating for women's right to loiter is to create public spaces that are inclusive and egalitarian. This requires a reimagining of urban and rural environments, prioritising gender-sensitive design and policies that encourage women's participation.

Efforts to promote loitering must also address cultural attitudes that stigmatize women's presence in public spaces. Public awareness campaigns, educational initiatives, and community dialogues can be crucial in challenging these norms and fostering a more inclusive society.

## 6. Conclusion

This study highlights loitering as a radical feminist act that challenges patriarchal norms and reclaims public spaces as inclusive arenas of autonomy, pleasure, and citizenship. Through their narratives, participants revealed how loitering disrupts the utility-based expectations imposed on women,

asserting their right to exist in public spaces without justification. Despite facing significant structural, cultural, and institutional barriers, women navigate these challenges with creativity, resilience, and defiance.

Loitering transcends its superficial interpretation as purposeless wandering, symbolizing a deeper resistance against gendered spatial hierarchies and societal control. It empowers women to redefine their identities beyond societal roles, fostering agency and visibility.

Systemic changes in urban planning, policy, and cultural attitudes are essential for public spaces to become truly egalitarian. This research contributes to feminist discourse by situating loitering as a transformative practice, inspiring further exploration of how women can reclaim their rightful presence in shared societal spaces.

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