

BETWEEN FEAR AND FREEDOM: WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE OF SAFETY IN THE URBAN SPACES OF THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

*A Dissertation Submitted to Loyola College of Social Sciences
(Autonomous), University of Kerala in the Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Masters of Arts Degree Examination in Sociology*

SUBMITTED BY

Name : **HARI MURALI MS**

Candidate Code: LC24PSO08

Course Code : SO545

UNDER THE GUIDANCE OF

Dr. NISHA JOLLY NELSON



**DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY
LOYOLA COLLEGE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
SREEKARIYAM, THIRUVANANTHAPURAM
UNIVERSITY OF KERALA
2024-2026**

DECLARATION

I, **HARI MURALI M S** do hereby declare that the Dissertation Titled **BETWEEN FEAR AND FREEDOM: WOMEN’S EXPERIENCE OF SAFETY IN THE URBAN SPACES OF THIRUVANANTHAPURAM** is based on the original work carried out by me and submitted to the Department of Sociology, Loyola College of Social Sciences(Autonomous), University of Kerala during the year 2024-2026 towards partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts Degree Examination in Sociology. It has not been submitted for the award of any degree, diploma, fellowship or other similar title of recognition before any University or anywhere else.

Thiruvananthapuram

10/07/2026

MR .HARI MURALI M S

CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

This is to certify that this dissertation entitled **BETWEEN FEAR AND FREEDOM: WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE OF SAFETY IN THE URBAN SPACES OF THIRUVANANTHAPURAM** is a record of genuine work done by **HARI MURALI M S** fourth semester Master of Sociology student of this college under my supervision and guidance and that it is hereby approved for submission.

Dr. Nisha Jolly Nelson

Research Guide

Department of Sociology

Loyola College of Social Sciences (Autonomous)

Sreekariyam

Recommended for forwarding

Dr. Nisha Jolly Nelson

Head, Department of Sociology

Loyola College of Social sciences(Autonomous)

Sreekariyam

Forwarded to the Controller of Examination,
Loyola College of Social Sciences, (Autonomous)

University of Kerala

Dr. Prakash Pillai R

Principal

Loyola College of Social Sciences (Autonomous)

10/07/2026

Sreekariyam

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

“Showing gratitude is one of the simplest yet most powerful things humans can do for each other.”

I have not traveled in a vacuum in the journey of completion of this dissertation. This study has been kept on track and been seen through to completion with the support and encouragement of numerous people including my teachers, well-wishers, my friends, colleagues and God Almighty.

*First and foremost, I take it as a privilege to thank my research guide **Dr. Nisha Jolly Nelson**, Assistant Professor and Head, Department of Sociology, Loyola College of Social Sciences (Autonomous), Trivandrum. The door to Prof. Nisha's office was always open whenever I ran into a trouble spot or had a question about my research or writing. She consistently allowed this work to be my own work, and steered me in the right direction whenever she thought I needed it. She was a great motivator and inspiration throughout the process of my dissertation.*

*I would also like to thank our former Principal **Dr. Sabu P Thomas** and the present Principal **Dr. Prakash Pillai R** for all the support and inspiration. Thanks are also due to other faculty members of the Department of Sociology **Dr. Vinumol Devassy** and **Dr. Andrew Michael** and Faculty members from other departments who were involved in the validation of the progress of my research during department and college level presentations. Without their passionate participation and input, the validation of this study would not have been successfully done.*

I also am indebted to my respondents who gave inputs to successfully complete this study.

*I am privileged to be a student of Loyola College for having provided me such a great learning experience which sparked my interest in research field. Thanks to our rich library resources and the two persons **Mr. George** and **Dr. Sunil** for assisting us in many ways in using the resources.*

Finally, I must express my very profound gratitude to my parents and to my dear friends and many others for providing me with unfailing support and continuous encouragement throughout my study and through the process of researching and writing this dissertation. This accomplishment would not have been possible without them. Thank you.

10/07/2026

**HARI MURALI M S
MA SOCIOLOGY**

CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	4
CHAPTER I	6
INTRODUCTION.....	6
1.1 INTRODUCTION.....	6
1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM	9
1.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY.....	11
CHAPTER II.....	14
REVIEW OF LITERATURE	14
2.1 INTRODUCTION.....	14
2.2 Gender, Urban Space and Feminist Perspectives	15
2.3 Women's Fear and Perceptions of Safety in Urban Public Spaces.....	18
2.4 Urban Infrastructure, the Built Environment and Women's Safety.....	22
2.5 Mobility, Freedom and the Right to the City	26
2.6 Women's Agency, Resistance and Urban Citizenship.....	30
2.7 Critical Reflection and Research Gap.....	31
CHAPTER III	36
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	36
3.1 INTRODUCTION.....	36
3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN	36
3.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS.....	36
3.3.1 GENERAL RESEARCH QUESTION.....	36
3.3.2 SPECIFIC RESEARCH QUESTIONS.....	37
3.4 STUDY AREA	37
3.5 UNIVERSE OF THE STUDY	37
3.6 SAMPLING METHOD.....	38
3.7 SAMPLE SIZE.....	38
3.8 SOURCES OF DATA	38
3.8.1 Primary Data.....	38
3.8.2 Secondary Data	39
3.9 TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES OF DATA COLLECTION.....	39
3.10 DATA ANALYSIS	39
3.11 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS	40

3.12 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY	40
3.13 CONCLUSION	41
CHAPTER IV.....	42
CASE PRESENTATION, THEMATIC ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION	42
4.1 INTRODUCTION.....	42
4.2 CASE STUDY 1: ATHIRA A.	42
4.3 CASE STUDY 2: GOPIKA V.J.....	46
4.4 CASE STUDY 3: SMITHA RAJESH	49
4.5 CASE STUDY 4: PARTICIPANT P4 (NAME WITHHELD FOR CONFIDENTIALITY)	53
4.6 CASE STUDY 5: REJIMOL	56
4.7 CASE STUDY 6: PARTICIPANT P6 (NAME WITHHELD FOR CONFIDENTIALITY).....	60
4.8 CASE STUDY 7: PARTICIPANT P7 (NAME WITHHELD FOR CONFIDENTIALITY).....	65
4.9 CASE ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION	68
4.9.1 THEME 1: PERCEPTIONS OF SAFETY AND FEAR IN PUBLIC SPACES	68
<i>Sub-theme 4.9.1.1: Feeling Safe During Daytime.....</i>	68
<i>Sub-theme 4.9.1.2: Fear and Anxiety During Night-Time Travel</i>	70
<i>Sub-theme 4.9.1.3: Constant Vigilance and Precautionary Behaviour.....</i>	72
4.9.2 THEME 2: HARASSMENT AND ITS IMPACT ON WOMEN'S MOBILITY	75
<i>Sub-theme 4.9.2.1: Experiences of Staring, Comments and Verbal Harassment</i>	75
<i>Sub-theme 4.9.2.2: Emotional and Psychological Impact of Harassment.....</i>	77
<i>Sub-theme 4.9.2.3: Restrictions on Freedom of Movement and Social Participation</i>	77
4.9.3 THEME 3: URBAN INFRASTRUCTURE AND INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT	78
<i>Sub-theme 4.9.3.1: Importance of Street Lighting and Safe Public Spaces.....</i>	78
<i>Sub-theme 4.9.3.2: Safety Concerns in Public Transportation.....</i>	79
<i>Sub-theme 4.9.3.3: Role of CCTV, Police Presence and Government Measures.....</i>	80
4.9.4THEME 4: SOCIAL ATTITUDES, GENDER NORMS, FREEDOM AND BELONGING.....	81
<i>Sub-theme 4.9.4.1: Family Influence and Gendered Restrictions.....</i>	81

<i>Sub-theme 4.9.4.2: Responsibility, Victim-Blaming and Social Attitudes</i>	<i>82</i>
<i>Sub-theme 4.9.4.3: Community Support and Respect for Women.....</i>	<i>82</i>
<i>Sub-theme 4.9.4.4: Diverse Experiences of Safety</i>	<i>83</i>
4.10 CONCLUSION	84
CHAPTER V	85
FINDINGS, SUGGESTIONS AND CONCLUSION.....	85
5.1 MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE STUDY	85
5.2 SUGGESTIONS.....	88
<i>5.2.1. Promote Gender-Sensitive Urban Planning</i>	<i>88</i>
<i>5.2.2. Strengthen Public Transportation Safety.....</i>	<i>88</i>
<i>5.2.3. Enhance Community Policing and Institutional Responsiveness</i>	<i>89</i>
<i>5.2.4. Improve Surveillance While Respecting Privacy.....</i>	<i>89</i>
<i>5.2.5. Promote Public Awareness and Gender Sensitisation.....</i>	<i>89</i>
<i>5.2.6. Encourage Shared Responsibility for Women's Safety</i>	<i>89</i>
<i>5.2.7. Increase Women's Participation in Urban Governance.....</i>	<i>90</i>
<i>5.2.8. Strengthen Safety Measures in Educational Institutions and Workplaces</i>	<i>90</i>
<i>5.2.9. Promote Inclusive Urban Spaces</i>	<i>90</i>
<i>5.2.10. Encourage Further Research.....</i>	<i>90</i>
5.3 CONCLUSION	91
REFERENCES.....	96
APPENDIX.....	98
INTERVIEW GUIDE.....	98

ABSTRACT

This study examined women's experiences of safety, fear, mobility and freedom in the urban public spaces of Thiruvananthapuram. While cities are often perceived as spaces that facilitate opportunity, participation and social interaction, women's access to and use of urban environments continue to be shaped by concerns regarding safety, harassment and gendered inequalities. Anchored in the perspective that the right to the city includes the right to move freely without fear the study explored how women experienced and negotiated public spaces in their everyday lives. It investigated women's perceptions of safety across different urban settings, the factors influencing these perceptions, the impact of safety concerns on their mobility and autonomy and the strategies they adopted to navigate public spaces.

The study adopted a qualitative research design to capture the lived experiences of women in depth. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with women from diverse age groups, occupations and residential backgrounds in Thiruvananthapuram. The participants included students, professionals, nurses, sales workers, domestic workers and self-employed women, all of whom regularly accessed public spaces such as roads, bus stops, markets, educational institutions, workplaces and public transportation. The data were analysed using thematic analysis, enabling the identification of recurring patterns and meanings across participants' narratives.

The findings revealed that women's experiences of safety were highly contextual and shaped by the interaction of physical, social, and cultural factors. Most participants reported feeling relatively secure during daytime and in busy, familiar locations, whereas poorly lit streets, isolated roads, deserted bus stops, and late-night travel generated feelings of fear and vulnerability. Many women recounted experiences of staring, verbal harassment, unwanted comments, stalking and intimidating behaviour, demonstrating that gender-based harassment remains a significant feature of everyday urban life. Such experiences contributed to a persistent sense of vigilance, limiting women's confidence and comfort in public spaces.

The study further found that concerns about safety substantially influenced women's mobility and everyday decision-making. Participants frequently modified their travel behaviour by avoiding particular routes or locations, restricting movement after dark, selecting longer but perceived safer routes, sharing live locations with family members, and remaining in constant communication while travelling. These adaptive practices illustrate how women continuously negotiated the tension between fear and freedom, exercising agency while simultaneously

responding to perceived risks. The findings also highlighted the influence of family expectations, gender norms and prevailing social attitudes in regulating women's access to public spaces and shaping their sense of independence.

Urban infrastructure and institutional support emerged as critical determinants of perceived safety. Participants consistently identified adequate street lighting, reliable public transport, CCTV surveillance, visible police presence, responsive grievance mechanisms and well-maintained public spaces as factors that enhanced their confidence and sense of security. However, women's experiences were not homogeneous. Variations were observed based on age, occupation, travel patterns, and familiarity with different urban environments. While some participants expressed a strong sense of belonging and confidence in navigating the city, others described living with continuous caution, anxiety, and self-imposed restrictions.

The study concludes that women's safety in urban spaces extends beyond protection from physical violence; it is fundamentally linked to freedom of movement, equal access to public spaces, social participation, and the exercise of citizenship. The experiences documented in this research demonstrate that women's everyday lives in the city are characterised by a constant negotiation between fear and freedom. Building safer and more inclusive cities therefore requires an integrated approach that combines gender-sensitive urban planning, improved infrastructure, effective law enforcement, accessible public transport, responsive institutional mechanisms and social transformation aimed at challenging discriminatory gender norms.

By understanding the lived experiences of women in Thiruvananthapuram, this study contributes to sociology of gender, urban space, and everyday life. It offers empirical insights that can inform policymakers, urban planners, law enforcement agencies and civil society organisations in developing inclusive urban policies and interventions that promote women's safety, mobility and right to the city.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Urban public spaces play a central role in shaping social interaction, economic participation, cultural engagement and democratic citizenship. Streets, markets, parks, transport systems, educational institutions and workplaces provide opportunities for mobility, employment, recreation and civic participation. However, access to these spaces is not experienced equally by all sections of society. Gender remains one of the most significant factors influencing how individuals perceive, access, and experience urban environments. Although cities are frequently portrayed as spaces of freedom and opportunity, women's experiences within urban spaces are often characterized by negotiation, caution and unequal access resulting from concerns about safety, harassment, and gendered power relations.

Urban scholars have long argued that cities are not merely physical environments but socially produced spaces where relations of power are continuously negotiated. According to Henri Lefebvre (1991), urban space is socially constructed through everyday practices, institutions, and social relations rather than existing as a neutral physical setting. Similarly, Doreen Massey (1994) emphasized that space is relational and shaped by social identities, including gender, class and ethnicity. These perspectives challenge the assumption that urban spaces are equally accessible to everyone and instead highlight how social structures influence people's experiences of the city.

Within feminist urban scholarship, considerable attention has been devoted to understanding how women's mobility and use of public space are shaped by gender inequalities. Scholars argue that women experience the city differently because public spaces have historically been designed around male patterns of movement and participation. As a result, women frequently encounter visible and invisible barriers that influence where they travel, when they travel and how they occupy public space (Kern, 2020). Fear of harassment, sexual violence, verbal abuse, and unwanted surveillance often transforms everyday mobility into a continuous process of risk assessment and negotiation rather than an expression of freedom (Valentine, 1989).

Fear itself is increasingly understood not merely as an individual emotional response but as a socially produced phenomenon embedded within everyday urban life. Women's perceptions of

safety are influenced not only by personal experiences but also by family socialization, media representations, community narratives, and collective memories of violence. Consequently, many women develop precautionary routines such as avoiding isolated streets, restricting travel after dark, sharing their live location with family members, modifying travel routes, or limiting participation in public life. These behavioural adaptations illustrate that fear operates as an organizing principle of women's everyday mobility, shaping both their physical movement and their sense of belonging within the city (Pain, 1991).

Feminist geographers further argue that public space reflects broader gendered power relations operating within society. Women's presence in urban spaces is often subject to greater scrutiny, regulation and moral judgement than men's. Everyday experiences such as staring, verbal comments, sexual harassment and subtle forms of intimidation reinforce the perception that women's access to public space remains conditional rather than unconditional (Phadke, Ranade, & Khan, 2011). Consequently, women's relationship with the city is characterised by a continuous negotiation between opportunity and vulnerability, visibility and surveillance, freedom and fear.

The concept of the "right to the city" provides an important framework for understanding women's urban experiences. Originally proposed by Lefebvre (1996), the concept extends beyond physical access to include the right to participate, belong, and shape urban life. Feminist scholars have expanded this perspective by arguing that genuine urban citizenship requires women to experience public spaces without fear, discrimination, or restrictions imposed by patriarchal social norms (Fenster, 2005). Therefore, women's safety should not be viewed solely as an issue of crime prevention or policing but as a broader question of equality, inclusion, spatial justice, and citizenship.

Urban safety is influenced by both physical infrastructure and social environments. Research consistently demonstrates that adequate street lighting, reliable public transportation, mixed land use, active public spaces, visible policing, and pedestrian-friendly infrastructure contribute positively to perceptions of safety (Jacobs, 1961). However, infrastructure alone cannot eliminate gendered insecurity. Social attitudes, institutional responsiveness, community behaviour, and prevailing cultural norms continue to shape women's everyday experiences within public spaces. Consequently, understanding women's perceptions of safety requires examining the interaction between physical environments and broader social structures.

These issues acquire particular significance within the Indian urban context. Rapid urbanisation has expanded women's participation in higher education, employment, public transport, and civic life. Simultaneously, concerns regarding gender-based violence, street harassment, and unequal access to public spaces continue to persist across Indian cities. Although numerous studies have examined metropolitan cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, and Kolkata, comparatively limited research has explored women's everyday experiences of safety in medium-sized cities in southern India, particularly within Kerala.

Kerala presents an important sociological paradox. The state consistently ranks among the highest in India on indicators such as literacy, educational attainment, health outcomes, and gender development. Nevertheless, improvements in human development have not automatically translated into gender equality within public spaces. Women continue to encounter various forms of insecurity, harassment, and social regulation that influence their mobility and participation in urban life. This contradiction raises important questions regarding the relationship between social development, gender equality, and everyday urban experiences.

Thiruvananthapuram, the capital city of Kerala, provides an appropriate setting for examining these questions. The city has undergone significant transformation through the expansion of Technopark, educational institutions, commercial centres, improved transportation networks, and rapid urban growth. Increasing numbers of women now participate in higher education, professional employment, healthcare, retail, and service sectors, resulting in greater visibility within public spaces. However, alongside these opportunities, women continue to negotiate concerns related to personal safety, mobility, social expectations, and gendered surveillance. Their experiences reveal that access to urban opportunities often remains conditioned by perceptions of risk and the need for constant vigilance.

Against this background the present study, **"Between Fear and Freedom: Women's Experiences of Safety in the Urban Spaces of Thiruvananthapuram,"** investigates how women experience, interpret, and negotiate urban public spaces. Rather than treating women solely as victims of unsafe environments, the study recognizes them as active agents who develop strategies of adaptation, resilience and resistance while navigating everyday urban life. It explores how perceptions of safety are shaped by the interaction of infrastructure, social norms, institutional support, and lived experience, and how these factors influence women's mobility, participation, and sense of belonging within the city.

By highlighting women's voices and everyday experiences, this study contributes to sociological understandings of gender, urban space, and spatial justice. It seeks to provide empirical evidence that can inform gender-sensitive urban planning, public policy, policing, and governance, while contributing to broader discussions on creating safer, more inclusive, and equitable cities where women can exercise their right to the city without fear.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Urbanization has transformed cities into centres of education, employment, commerce and social interaction, creating new opportunities for women's participation in public life. In recent decades, Thiruvananthapuram has experienced rapid urban expansion through the growth of educational institutions, commercial establishments, residential developments and information technology corridors such as Technopark. These developments have significantly increased women's presence in public spaces as students, professionals, entrepreneurs, healthcare workers, service providers, and commuters. Consequently, women today engage with the city more actively than ever before, making urban public spaces an integral part of their everyday lives.

Despite these developments, increased participation in urban life has not necessarily translated into an equal experience of safety or freedom. As discussed in the preceding section, urban spaces continue to be experienced differently by women because gender influences how public environments are accessed, perceived and negotiated. For many women, everyday mobility remains accompanied by concerns about harassment, surveillance, social judgement and personal security. Public spaces that are theoretically open to all often-become sites where women continuously assess potential risks, regulate their behaviour, and negotiate their presence.

Women's experiences of urban safety extend beyond the occurrence of physical violence or criminal incidents. Feelings of insecurity are frequently shaped by everyday interactions, previous experiences, shared narratives, media representations, and prevailing gender norms. Consequently, many women adopt precautionary practices such as avoiding isolated areas, restricting travel after dark, choosing longer but perceived safer routes, sharing their location with family members, or modifying their daily routines. While these strategies demonstrate women's agency in navigating urban environments, they also reflect the unequal burden placed upon women to manage risks that are structurally and socially produced.

Existing research on women's safety has largely concentrated on measurable indicators such as crime rates, sexual harassment, violence against women, policing, surveillance technologies, transportation facilities, and urban infrastructure. Although these studies have made significant contributions to understanding physical dimensions of safety, they often overlook the subjective and experiential dimensions of women's everyday encounters with the city. Safety cannot be understood solely as the absence of crime. A public space may be physically secure yet remain emotionally uncomfortable or socially exclusionary because of persistent experiences of staring, verbal harassment, unwanted attention, moral policing, or subtle forms of intimidation. Such experiences influence women's confidence, mobility, sense of belonging, and ability to exercise their right to the city.

Furthermore, much of the existing literature treats women as a homogeneous social category, giving limited attention to the diversity of women's experiences across different social locations. Women's perceptions of safety are shaped by multiple intersecting factors, including age, occupation, socio-economic background, travel patterns, family responsibilities, and familiarity with particular urban environments. A college student, an information technology professional, a nurse working night shifts, a domestic worker, or a street vendor may experience the same urban space in fundamentally different ways. These variations remain insufficiently explored within existing research.

Within the context of Kerala, this gap becomes particularly significant. Despite the state's relatively high levels of literacy, educational attainment and human development, women's everyday experiences in public spaces continue to reflect complex negotiations between opportunity and vulnerability. Thiruvananthapuram is frequently perceived as one of India's comparatively safer cities; however, limited empirical research has examined how women themselves perceive and experience safety within its rapidly changing urban landscape. The city's continuing expansion, increasing mobility, changing employment patterns and evolving public spaces make it essential to understand how women negotiate issues of fear, safety, freedom, and belonging in their daily lives.

The present study emerges from this research gap. Rather than examining women's safety solely through the lens of crime or infrastructure, it seeks to understand safety as a multidimensional social experience shaped by physical environments, institutional arrangements, gender norms and everyday interactions. It recognises that women's relationship

with urban space is characterised by a continuous negotiation between fear and freedom, caution and autonomy, vulnerability and agency.

Accordingly, the central problem addressed in this study is the limited understanding of how women experience, interpret and negotiate safety within the urban public spaces of Thiruvananthapuram. Specifically, the study seeks to explore how women perceive different public spaces, the factors that influence their sense of safety and insecurity, the strategies they employ to navigate everyday urban environments, and the ways in which these experiences shape their mobility, participation, and sense of belonging within the city.

By addressing these issues through women's lived experiences, the study intends to contribute to sociological understandings of gender and urban life while generating knowledge that may support gender-sensitive urban planning, inclusive public policy, and the creation of safer and more equitable urban environments where women can exercise their right to the city without fear.

1.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Urban spaces are central to people's everyday lives as they provide opportunities for education, employment, social interaction, recreation, and civic participation. With rapid urbanization, women are increasingly participating in education, professional employment, business, and public activities, making their presence in urban spaces more visible than ever before. However, despite these changes, women continue to experience urban environments differently from men because of concerns related to safety, mobility, social attitudes, and gendered expectations. Understanding these experiences is essential for developing a sociological understanding of how gender shapes everyday life in contemporary cities.

The present study is significant because it examines women's experiences of safety from the perspective of their everyday lives rather than limiting the discussion to crime or violence. While many studies on women's safety focus primarily on issues such as harassment, crime, policing, or infrastructure, this research recognises that safety is also shaped by women's feelings of confidence, comfort, belonging, freedom, and social acceptance. By exploring these dimensions, the study provides a broader understanding of women's relationship with urban public spaces.

The study is particularly relevant in the context of Thiruvananthapuram, a city that has witnessed rapid urban growth through the expansion of educational institutions, commercial centres, residential areas, and information technology hubs such as Technopark. These developments have increased women's participation in public life, yet questions regarding safety, mobility, and equal access to urban spaces continue to remain important. The research therefore provides valuable insights into how women experience a rapidly changing urban environment and how these experiences influence their daily lives.

From a sociological perspective, the study contributes to the understanding of the relationship between gender and urban space. It highlights that public spaces are not experienced equally by everyone but are shaped by social norms, gender relations, and cultural expectations. Women's experiences demonstrate that access to public spaces is influenced not only by physical conditions but also by social interactions, perceptions of safety, and prevailing attitudes towards women's presence in public life. The study therefore contributes to discussions on gender inequality, urban sociology, and everyday social experiences.

Another important contribution of the research is its emphasis on women's lived experiences. Urban development is often assessed through physical infrastructure, transportation, and economic growth, but these indicators do not always reflect how people actually experience the city. By focusing on women's narratives, the study bridges the gap between urban development and everyday social reality, offering a more human-centred understanding of the city.

The findings of the study may also be useful for urban planners, local self-government institutions, policymakers, and law enforcement agencies. Understanding women's perceptions of safety can contribute to improving public transportation, pedestrian infrastructure, street lighting, public amenities, surveillance mechanisms, and the maintenance of public spaces. The study may therefore support the development of more gender-sensitive approaches to urban planning and governance.

The research further highlights the importance of recognising that women are not a homogeneous group. Their experiences vary according to factors such as age, occupation, socio-economic background, educational status, and patterns of mobility. By acknowledging these differences, the study provides a more comprehensive understanding of women's experiences in urban spaces and avoids generalisations that often characterise discussions on women's safety.

Academically, the study contributes to the existing literature in Sociology, Gender Studies, Urban Studies, and Development Studies, particularly within the context of Kerala. Although several studies have examined women's safety in major metropolitan cities, there is comparatively limited research focusing on women's everyday experiences of safety in Thiruvananthapuram. The findings of this research therefore add to the existing body of knowledge and provide a foundation for future studies on gender and urban life.

The study is also relevant from the perspective of social justice and gender equality. Equal access to public spaces is closely linked to women's opportunities for education, employment, recreation, and participation in public life. When women feel unsafe or restricted in their movement, their ability to fully participate in society is affected. By examining the factors that influence women's perceptions of safety, the study contributes to broader discussions on creating cities that are more inclusive, equitable, and responsive to the needs of all citizens.

Ultimately, the significance of this study lies in its attempt to understand the complex relationship between fear, safety, freedom, and urban space from women's perspectives. By bringing women's voices and lived experiences to the forefront, the research contributes to a better sociological understanding of gendered urban life and provides insights that may support the creation of safer, more inclusive, and gender-sensitive urban environments in Thiruvananthapuram and beyond.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 INTRODUCTION

A review of literature is an essential component of social science research as it enables the researcher to critically examine existing knowledge, identify theoretical and empirical developments, and locate the present study within a broader academic context. It provides an understanding of how a particular research problem has evolved over time, highlights the strengths and limitations of previous studies, and identifies gaps that warrant further investigation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In sociology, the review of literature serves not merely as a summary of earlier research but as a critical engagement with competing perspectives, theoretical debates, and methodological approaches that contribute to a deeper understanding of social phenomena (Bryman, 2016).

Research on gender and urban space has expanded considerably over the past four decades, particularly within the disciplines of sociology, geography, urban planning, gender studies, and development studies. Early urban research largely focused on physical infrastructure, economic development, and city planning, often overlooking the ways in which gender shapes people's experiences of urban environments. Feminist scholars challenged this perspective by arguing that cities are not gender-neutral spaces but are socially produced environments where power relations, cultural norms, and institutional structures influence who can access, occupy, and experience public spaces freely (Spain, 1992). Consequently, women's experiences of urban life became an important area of sociological inquiry, shifting attention from the physical characteristics of cities to the everyday realities of mobility, safety, belonging, and participation.

A significant body of literature has demonstrated that women's relationship with urban public spaces differs substantially from that of men. While cities provide opportunities for education, employment, recreation, and civic participation, women often experience these opportunities within the constraints of fear, surveillance, gendered expectations, and unequal access to public space (Pain, 1991). Rather than viewing safety solely as protection from crime, contemporary scholars increasingly conceptualise it as a multidimensional experience shaped by physical environments, social interactions, cultural practices, institutional arrangements, and emotional

well-being (Loukaitou-Sideris, 2014). This broader understanding has shifted academic discussions from crime prevention towards questions of urban citizenship, spatial justice, inclusion, and the "right to the city."

The existing literature also reveals that women's experiences of safety cannot be understood independently of broader social structures. Gender norms, patriarchal values, socialisation processes, and unequal power relations influence women's everyday mobility and shape how they perceive and negotiate public spaces. Many studies demonstrate that women continuously adapt their behaviour by avoiding particular routes, limiting travel after dark, relying on informal support networks, or modifying their routines in response to perceived risks (Phadke, Ranade, & Khan, 2011). Such practices indicate that women's experiences of urban space involve an ongoing negotiation between fear and freedom, vulnerability and agency.

Although extensive international literature examines women's safety in cities, relatively fewer studies have explored these issues within the context of Kerala, particularly in rapidly urbanising cities such as Thiruvananthapuram. Much of the available research focuses on metropolitan centres such as Delhi, Mumbai, London, or New York, where patterns of urbanisation, infrastructure, and social relations differ considerably from those found in medium-sized South Indian cities. Furthermore, previous studies have predominantly emphasised crime, violence, and physical infrastructure, while comparatively less attention has been given to women's lived experiences, emotional geographies, and everyday negotiations of urban space.

Against this background, the present review synthesises the existing literature under thematic categories rather than discussing studies individually. Such an approach facilitates a critical understanding of the major debates, areas of convergence, and existing gaps within the literature. The review is organised into five broad themes: (i) Gender, Urban Space and Feminist Perspectives; (ii) Women's Fear and Perceptions of Safety in Public Spaces; (iii) Urban Infrastructure and Women's Safety; (iv) Mobility, Freedom and Everyday Negotiations; and (v) Women's Agency, Resistance and Urban Citizenship. The chapter concludes with a critical reflection that identifies the research gaps addressed by the present study.

2.2 GENDER, URBAN SPACE AND FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES

The relationship between gender and urban space has emerged as a significant area of inquiry within sociology, feminist geography, and urban studies. Earlier approaches to urban research largely viewed cities as neutral physical environments designed to facilitate economic growth,

mobility, and public interaction. However, feminist scholars have challenged this assumption by arguing that urban spaces are socially constructed and reflect unequal power relations embedded within society. Rather than being equally accessible to all citizens, public spaces often reproduce existing social hierarchies based on gender, class, race, religion, and other forms of social difference (Massey, 1994).

One of the foundational contributions to understanding urban space comes from Henri Lefebvre (1991), who argued that space is socially produced rather than naturally existing. According to Lefebvre, urban environments are shaped by social relationships, political institutions, and economic structures that determine how space is organised, experienced, and controlled. His concept of the production of space challenged purely physical interpretations of cities by demonstrating that everyday practices and power relations influence who has access to public spaces and under what conditions. Lefebvre further introduced the concept of the right to the city, emphasising that all citizens should possess not merely the right to enter urban spaces but also the right to participate in, shape, and transform urban life (Lefebvre, 1996). Feminist scholars later extended this concept by arguing that women cannot fully exercise this right when their mobility and participation remain constrained by fear, discrimination, and gendered social expectations.

Building upon these ideas, Doreen Massey (1994) argued that space should be understood as relational rather than static. She rejected the notion of space as an empty physical container and instead conceptualised it as a product of social interactions and power relations. According to Massey, gender is an important dimension through which space is experienced because women and men occupy, negotiate, and interpret public environments differently. Women's experiences of mobility, access, and belonging are therefore inseparable from broader processes of social inequality.

Within urban sociology, Daphne Spain (1992) made a significant contribution by demonstrating that cities have historically reflected patriarchal social organisation. She argued that the separation between public and private spheres has confined women to domestic spaces while privileging men's participation in public life. Educational institutions, workplaces, transportation systems, and political spaces have traditionally been organised around male patterns of participation, thereby limiting women's access to opportunities and reinforcing gender inequality. Spain contended that the physical organisation of cities both reflects and

reproduces unequal gender relations, making urban space an important site for understanding broader social structures.

Similarly, Linda McDowell (1983) examined how the division between public and private spaces is socially produced through gendered expectations. She argued that women's experiences of urban environments cannot be separated from labour markets, household responsibilities, and cultural norms that continue to regulate women's mobility. Urban space therefore functions not merely as a physical environment but also as a social institution through which gender inequalities are reproduced. McDowell emphasised that women's access to public spaces is shaped by both economic participation and social expectations regarding femininity, respectability, and domestic responsibility.

The importance of adopting a gender lens in understanding urban development has been emphasised by Sylvia Chant (2013). While acknowledging that urbanisation has created significant opportunities for women through improved access to education, employment, healthcare, and public services, Chant argued that cities continue to reproduce multiple forms of gender inequality. Women often experience a "double burden" of paid employment and unpaid domestic labour, while simultaneously negotiating insecurity within public spaces. Chant therefore cautioned against viewing urbanisation as inherently empowering and instead advocated for gender-sensitive urban policies that recognise women's everyday realities.

Feminist scholars have also questioned the assumption that women's presence in public spaces should always be purposeful. In their influential work *Why Loiter?*, Phadke, Ranade, and Khan (2011) argue that women's right to the city extends beyond safe mobility for work or education. They contend that genuine equality requires women to enjoy public spaces for leisure, recreation, and simply "being" in the city without fear or justification. The authors introduce the concept of loitering as a feminist political act that challenges patriarchal control over women's mobility. According to them, safety should not be achieved by restricting women's movement but by enabling women to claim public spaces as equal citizens.

This argument is further developed by Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris (2014), who conceptualises women's safety as an essential component of the right to the city. She argues that urban planning has historically overlooked women's needs, resulting in environments that inadequately address issues such as mobility, accessibility, surveillance, and personal security. Women's right to the city therefore encompasses not only physical safety but also dignity, participation, accessibility, and equal citizenship.

While these studies collectively demonstrate that urban spaces are deeply gendered, they also reveal important shifts within feminist scholarship. Earlier research largely emphasised women's exclusion and vulnerability, whereas more recent studies increasingly recognise women's agency, resilience, and active negotiation of public spaces. Contemporary feminist urban research therefore moves beyond portraying women solely as victims of unsafe environments and instead examines how women continuously negotiate, resist, and reshape urban life through their everyday practices.

Overall, the literature demonstrates that urban spaces cannot be understood independently of gender relations. Cities are social environments where access, mobility, participation, and belonging are structured through unequal power relations. Women's experiences of urban public spaces are therefore shaped by an interaction of physical infrastructure, cultural expectations, institutional arrangements, and everyday social practices. These theoretical perspectives provide the conceptual foundation for understanding women's experiences of safety in urban environments and establish the basis for examining how fear and insecurity influence women's everyday mobility.

The following section builds upon these theoretical discussions by examining the literature on women's perceptions of fear and safety in urban public spaces, focusing on how everyday experiences of insecurity shape women's mobility, participation, and use of the city.

2.3 WOMEN'S FEAR AND PERCEPTIONS OF SAFETY IN URBAN PUBLIC SPACES

The question of women's safety in urban public spaces has emerged as one of the most significant areas of inquiry within feminist sociology, urban geography, and gender studies. While earlier studies primarily focused on crime and victimisation, contemporary scholarship has broadened the understanding of safety by examining women's subjective perceptions of fear, vulnerability, and belonging. Researchers increasingly argue that women's experiences in urban environments are influenced not only by actual incidents of violence but also by the anticipation of potential risks, everyday interactions, and deeply embedded gender norms. Consequently, women's use of public spaces reflects a continuous negotiation between freedom and caution, making safety an important sociological issue that extends beyond law enforcement and crime prevention.

One of the pioneering contributions to this field is provided by Rachel Pain (1991), who argues that women's fear of crime is socially constructed rather than merely a response to objective

levels of victimisation. Pain contends that women often perceive public spaces as potentially threatening because gendered socialisation encourages them to remain constantly aware of possible dangers. From childhood onwards, women are frequently taught to avoid particular places, restrict their movements during certain times of the day, and adopt precautionary behaviours to reduce personal risk. As a result, fear becomes embedded within women's everyday experiences of the city, influencing how they interpret and interact with urban environments.

Expanding this perspective, Pain (2001) challenges the common assumption that public spaces are inherently more dangerous for women than private spaces. She demonstrates that although a considerable proportion of violence against women occurs within domestic settings, public spaces continue to be represented as dangerous through media portrayals, public discourse, and cultural narratives. This socially constructed image of urban danger contributes to women's heightened perception of risk, regardless of actual crime statistics. Pain therefore argues that women's fear should not be understood as irrational or exaggerated but as a consequence of unequal gender relations and broader structures of patriarchal power.

The literature consistently demonstrates that women's perceptions of safety are influenced by the interaction of physical and social environments. Lisanne van den Berg(2012) emphasises that women evaluate public spaces not only through visible environmental conditions but also through social cues such as the behaviour of other people, crowd composition, familiarity with a location, and previous experiences. Well-lit streets, active public spaces, visible pedestrian activity, and familiar surroundings generally create feelings of security, whereas deserted streets, abandoned buildings, poorly maintained infrastructure, and isolated transport facilities increase perceptions of vulnerability. These findings suggest that safety is a dynamic and context-dependent experience rather than a fixed characteristic of particular locations.

Several scholars have also highlighted the emotional dimensions of women's experiences in public spaces. Fear is increasingly understood as an emotional response shaped by everyday interactions rather than simply by extraordinary incidents of violence. Repeated experiences of staring, verbal comments, unwanted attention, inappropriate gestures, and subtle forms of intimidation often create an atmosphere of unease that influences women's confidence in using public spaces. Although these experiences may not always involve physical violence, they collectively contribute to a persistent sense of insecurity. Consequently, women frequently

describe urban environments as spaces requiring constant vigilance rather than spontaneous participation.

The relationship between fear and everyday mobility is further examined by Wesely and Gaarder (2004) who explore women's experiences in urban parks and recreational spaces. Their study demonstrates that outdoor environments simultaneously represent opportunities for leisure and sites of vulnerability. Women often express a desire to enjoy parks, walking trails, and open public spaces but remain cautious because of perceived threats associated with isolation, poor visibility, and the possibility of male violence. The authors argue that women constantly negotiate between their desire for freedom and the need for self-protection, illustrating that urban recreation itself becomes gendered through unequal perceptions of safety.

Similarly, Ruth Panelli, Jo Little, and Anna Kraack (2004) argue that fear should be understood as a community issue rather than an individual psychological problem. Their research demonstrates that women's perceptions of safety are shaped by broader community narratives, neighbourhood relationships, and collective experiences. Family members, friends, local communities, and media reports contribute to the development of shared understandings about which places are considered safe or unsafe. Consequently, women's behaviour is influenced not only by personal experiences but also by socially transmitted knowledge regarding urban risks. This finding reinforces the sociological understanding that fear is collectively produced through social interaction rather than individually experienced in isolation.

An important theme emerging across the literature is the distinction between actual victimisation and perceived vulnerability. Numerous studies indicate that women frequently report higher levels of fear than would be predicted by official crime statistics. Rather than interpreting this discrepancy as evidence of irrational fear, feminist scholars argue that women's perceptions reflect their awareness of structural inequalities and the potentially severe consequences of gender-based violence. Since women often experience harassment, stalking, verbal abuse, and unwanted attention in everyday public life, they develop heightened sensitivity to situations that may signal potential danger. This constant awareness shapes how women read and interpret urban environments, making perceptions of safety highly subjective yet socially meaningful.

The literature also highlights the significant influence of socialisation and gender norms on women's perceptions of safety. Across cultures, women are commonly encouraged to be

cautious, avoid unnecessary risks, and regulate their own behaviour in public spaces. Advice from parents, teachers, peers, and community members often reinforces the idea that women are personally responsible for preventing victimisation. Such messages contribute to the internalisation of precautionary practices, including avoiding isolated streets, dressing conservatively, informing family members about travel plans, carrying mobile phones for emergency situations, and remaining constantly alert while travelling alone. These practices gradually become normalised aspects of women's everyday lives, reflecting the unequal distribution of responsibility for maintaining personal safety.

Research further demonstrates that perceptions of safety vary considerably across different groups of women. Age, occupation, socio-economic status, educational background, physical ability, and familiarity with particular neighbourhoods all influence how urban environments are experienced. Students, nurses working night shifts, domestic workers, service-sector employees, and women employed in information technology frequently encounter distinct mobility patterns that shape their perceptions of safety differently. Women who depend heavily on public transportation or travel during late hours often report greater concerns regarding personal security than those with access to private transportation or flexible working conditions. These findings highlight the importance of adopting an intersectional perspective when examining women's experiences of urban public spaces.

Another significant contribution of the literature concerns the psychological consequences of persistent fear. Continuous exposure to perceived insecurity can generate stress, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and reduced confidence in public settings. Women often describe feeling mentally burdened by the need to constantly evaluate their surroundings, anticipate possible threats, and modify their behaviour accordingly. Such emotional labour is rarely recognised within discussions of urban safety but represents an important dimension of women's everyday experiences. Fear therefore functions not only as a constraint on physical mobility but also as a factor affecting psychological well-being and quality of urban life.

Recent scholarship has also challenged the tendency to portray women exclusively as vulnerable victims. Although women undoubtedly experience structural inequalities and gender-based insecurity, researchers increasingly recognise their active role in negotiating public space. Women develop practical strategies that enable them to continue participating in education, employment, recreation, and community life despite existing challenges. These strategies include travelling in groups, choosing familiar routes, using digital technologies for

communication and navigation, planning journeys carefully, and selectively occupying spaces perceived as safer. While such adaptations demonstrate women's resilience and agency, they simultaneously reveal the extent to which access to urban space continues to be shaped by unequal social conditions.

Collectively, the literature demonstrates that women's perceptions of safety are multidimensional, socially constructed, and deeply embedded within everyday urban life. Fear cannot be explained solely through crime statistics or physical infrastructure but must be understood within the broader context of gender relations, cultural norms, socialisation, emotional experiences, and institutional arrangements. Women's everyday experiences reveal that urban safety is closely connected to freedom of movement, social participation, dignity, and the ability to claim public spaces without fear or restriction.

2.4 URBAN INFRASTRUCTURE, THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT AND WOMEN'S SAFETY

The relationship between urban infrastructure and women's safety has become a significant area of research within urban sociology, environmental criminology, feminist geography, and urban planning. While women's experiences of safety are shaped by social and cultural factors, scholars increasingly argue that the physical design and organisation of urban environments also influence how women perceive and experience public spaces. The built environment affects not only the objective conditions of safety but also women's subjective perceptions of security, comfort, accessibility, and belonging. Consequently, contemporary research has moved beyond viewing infrastructure merely as a physical component of cities to recognising it as an important social determinant of women's mobility and participation in urban life.

One of the earliest scholars to establish the relationship between urban design and public safety was Jane Jacobs (1961). In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jacobs argued that vibrant, mixed-use neighbourhoods characterised by continuous public activity naturally promote safety through what she described as "eyes on the street." According to Jacobs, streets that remain active throughout the day and evening generate informal social surveillance, reducing opportunities for crime and increasing public confidence. Although Jacobs did not specifically focus on women, her work has been widely adopted within feminist urban studies because it highlights how environmental design influences people's willingness to occupy and move through public spaces.

Building upon these ideas, feminist urban planners have argued that women experience urban infrastructure differently because their patterns of mobility, daily routines, and safety concerns differ from those of men. Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris (2014) emphasises that conventional urban planning has historically overlooked women's needs by treating public spaces as gender-neutral. She argues that transportation systems, pedestrian networks, parks, commercial centres, and public facilities have often been designed without considering women's experiences of insecurity, harassment, and unequal access. As a result, women frequently encounter physical environments that do not adequately support their mobility or sense of safety.

A recurring finding across the literature is that street lighting significantly influences women's perceptions of safety. Numerous studies report that poorly illuminated streets, bus stops, pedestrian pathways, and parking areas create feelings of fear and vulnerability, particularly during evening and night-time hours. Adequate lighting enhances visibility, reduces uncertainty, and allows women to better assess their surroundings, thereby increasing confidence while travelling. However, researchers caution that lighting alone cannot eliminate women's fear because perceptions of safety are also shaped by broader social interactions occurring within those spaces.

The literature similarly identifies public transportation as one of the most important determinants of women's urban mobility. Safe, affordable, reliable, and accessible transportation enables women to participate fully in education, employment, healthcare, and social activities. Conversely, overcrowded buses, poorly maintained transport facilities, inadequate last-mile connectivity, and harassment during travel restrict women's access to urban opportunities. Several studies indicate that women frequently modify their travel schedules, avoid particular routes, or depend upon private transportation because of negative experiences associated with public transport systems. These adaptations reveal that mobility is influenced not merely by transport availability but also by women's confidence in using these services safely.

The importance of the built environment is comprehensively examined by Gupta, Ashtt, and Wankar in their critical review of women's safety within urban environments. Synthesising research from various urban contexts, they demonstrate that environmental characteristics such as poor lighting, isolated pathways, abandoned buildings, lack of pedestrian activity, inadequate maintenance, and weak surveillance contribute significantly to women's

perceptions of insecurity. Conversely, active streets, mixed land use, continuous pedestrian movement, visible commercial activity, and well-maintained public spaces increase women's confidence in navigating urban environments. Their review suggests that environmental design and social interaction operate together in shaping women's everyday experiences of safety.

Similar conclusions are presented by Sadeghi, Mousavi Sarvine Baghi, Shams, and Jangjoo, who argue that creating safe urban environments requires integrating gender-sensitive planning into broader urban development policies. Their review demonstrates that women evaluate public spaces not only according to physical characteristics but also through emotional and psychological responses generated by those environments. Features such as open visibility, clean surroundings, pedestrian accessibility, reliable transportation, active public spaces, and visible security measures collectively contribute to women's perception of safety. Importantly, the authors argue that infrastructure should promote not only protection from crime but also women's dignity, confidence, and equal participation in urban life.

The concept of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) has also influenced research on women's safety in public spaces. CPTED proposes that thoughtful environmental design can reduce opportunities for crime through natural surveillance, controlled access, territorial reinforcement, and effective maintenance of public spaces. Although originally developed within environmental criminology, feminist scholars have adapted CPTED principles to examine how design interventions may improve women's perceptions of safety. Open sightlines, unobstructed pedestrian routes, clearly defined public spaces, active commercial areas, and continuous maintenance are consistently identified as environmental features that encourage women's use of urban spaces. Nevertheless, scholars caution that environmental design alone cannot address gender inequalities without accompanying social and institutional changes.

Beyond physical infrastructure, researchers increasingly recognise the importance of maintenance and management in influencing women's experiences. Public spaces that are poorly maintained, littered, vandalised, or neglected often communicate social disorder and institutional neglect, increasing perceptions of insecurity. Conversely, clean, well-maintained parks, streets, public toilets, and transportation facilities convey a sense of care, public ownership, and social responsibility. Women frequently interpret such environmental conditions as indicators of how seriously public authorities prioritise citizens' well-being.

The literature further demonstrates that surveillance and policing have complex implications for women's safety. Visible police presence, CCTV cameras, emergency helplines, and public monitoring systems may enhance women's confidence in certain urban environments. However, several scholars argue that technological surveillance should complement rather than replace broader social and institutional reforms. Over-reliance on surveillance technologies may create an illusion of safety while leaving underlying issues such as gender discrimination, victim-blaming, and inadequate institutional responses unaddressed. Consequently, effective urban safety requires a combination of environmental improvements, responsive governance, and community participation.

Another important dimension emerging from the literature concerns the accessibility of public amenities. Women often require public infrastructure that accommodates their diverse everyday responsibilities, including access to clean public toilets, safe waiting areas, breastfeeding facilities, seating spaces, pedestrian crossings, and barrier-free mobility. The absence of such facilities disproportionately affects women, particularly elderly women, women with disabilities, caregivers, and those travelling with children. These findings demonstrate that inclusive infrastructure contributes not only to physical safety but also to dignity, comfort, and equal participation in public life.

The relationship between urban infrastructure and women's safety is further complicated by processes of rapid urbanisation. Cities experiencing accelerated economic growth frequently witness expanding commercial centres, transportation networks, and residential developments. While these transformations create new educational and employment opportunities, they may also generate unfamiliar spaces, increased anonymity, fragmented neighbourhoods, and changing mobility patterns that influence women's perceptions of safety. The literature therefore suggests that urban development should be evaluated not only in terms of physical expansion but also in terms of its social consequences for different groups of citizens.

A significant contribution of recent scholarship is its recognition that physical infrastructure and social behaviour are mutually reinforcing. Well-designed streets, public transport, and recreational spaces cannot guarantee women's safety if everyday interactions continue to involve harassment, discrimination, or social exclusion. Likewise, positive social attitudes alone cannot compensate for poorly designed or inaccessible urban environments. Researchers therefore increasingly advocate integrated approaches that combine gender-sensitive urban

planning with public awareness, institutional accountability, effective policing, and community engagement.

Collectively, the literature demonstrates that women's safety is influenced by the interaction of environmental design, infrastructure, governance, and everyday social relations. Urban planning should therefore move beyond conventional approaches centred exclusively on physical development and instead incorporate women's lived experiences into planning, policy formulation, and governance. Such an approach recognises that truly inclusive cities are not simply those that provide physical access but those that enable women to participate confidently, comfortably, and equally in public life.

The following section examines how women negotiate these infrastructural and social conditions through their everyday patterns of mobility, freedom, and use of urban public spaces, further exploring the relationship between safety and women's right to participate fully in urban life.

2.5 MOBILITY, FREEDOM AND THE RIGHT TO THE CITY

Mobility is a fundamental aspect of urban life, enabling individuals to access education, employment, healthcare, recreation, and social participation. In sociology, mobility is understood not merely as physical movement but as a reflection of social inclusion, citizenship, and the ability to participate equally in public life. For women, however, mobility is often shaped by gendered norms, safety concerns, and unequal power relations that influence when, where, and how they move within the city. Consequently, the literature increasingly argues that women's mobility should be understood as both a practical necessity and a social right, closely connected to questions of freedom, autonomy, and the right to the city.

The concept of the "right to the city," originally proposed by Henri Lefebvre (1996), has become central to contemporary discussions on gender and urban space. Lefebvre argued that all citizens should have the right not only to access urban spaces but also to participate actively in shaping and experiencing urban life. Feminist scholars have extended this concept by arguing that women cannot fully exercise this right when their movements are constrained by fear, harassment, discrimination, or social expectations. Women's freedom within cities therefore cannot be measured simply by their physical presence in public spaces but by their ability to occupy those spaces confidently, independently, and without constant negotiation.

One of the most influential contributions to this discussion is *Why Loiter? Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets* by Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan, and Shilpa Ranade (2011). The authors challenge conventional approaches to women's safety that focus primarily on protection from violence. They argue that safety should not be understood only as reducing risk but as enabling women to claim public spaces as equal citizens. According to the authors, women are often expected to justify their presence in public spaces through socially acceptable purposes such as work, education, or family responsibilities. In contrast, men are generally free to occupy streets, parks, cafés, and public spaces without explanation or scrutiny.

Phadke and her colleagues introduce the concept of "loitering" as a feminist political act. They argue that genuine gender equality requires women to enjoy public spaces without needing a specific purpose or destination. The ability to spend time in public spaces for leisure, recreation, observation, or simple relaxation represents an important expression of urban citizenship. Restricting women to purposeful mobility reinforces patriarchal assumptions that public space naturally belongs to men while women remain temporary or conditional users of the city. Thus, the authors redefine safety as the freedom to inhabit public spaces rather than merely the absence of violence.

The literature further demonstrates that women's mobility is frequently organised around behavioural adaptations designed to minimise perceived risks. Rachel Pain (1991) observed that women routinely modify their daily activities by choosing alternative routes, avoiding isolated streets, limiting travel after dark, or relying on companions during journeys. Such practices become deeply embedded within women's everyday lives, often appearing as ordinary or common-sense behaviour rather than responses to structural inequalities. Pain argues that these adaptations reveal how fear regulates women's mobility long before any actual incident of violence occurs.

Similarly, Wesely and Gaarder (2004) found that women constantly negotiate between the desire for independence and concerns about personal safety while using urban recreational spaces. Their research demonstrates that women develop practical strategies such as travelling in groups, carrying mobile phones, informing family members about their whereabouts, and remaining highly alert while using public spaces. These strategies enable women to continue participating in urban life while simultaneously illustrating the unequal emotional and cognitive labour involved in managing everyday mobility.

An important sociological insight emerging from the literature is that mobility involves not only movement but also freedom of choice. Women frequently describe making decisions based on perceived safety rather than personal preference. They may choose longer but better-lit routes, avoid particular modes of transportation, decline social activities during evening hours, or return home earlier than desired. Although such decisions appear voluntary, scholars argue that they represent constrained choices shaped by unequal social conditions rather than genuine freedom. Consequently, women's mobility often reflects negotiated participation rather than unrestricted access to urban opportunities.

Research also indicates that time plays a significant role in shaping women's experiences of mobility. Public spaces that appear safe during daylight hours may become sources of anxiety after dark. Streets, parks, bus stops, railway stations, and commercial areas undergo social transformations throughout the day, altering women's perceptions of safety. This temporal dimension demonstrates that women's relationship with urban space is dynamic rather than fixed. Safety is continuously reassessed according to changing environmental conditions, social interactions, and previous experiences.

The literature further emphasises that women's mobility is influenced by social expectations regarding femininity and respectability. Across many societies, women are expected to demonstrate caution, modesty, and responsibility while occupying public spaces. Deviations from these expectations may result in moral judgement or victim-blaming when incidents of harassment occur. Consequently, responsibility for ensuring safety is often shifted from society to individual women, reinforcing the expectation that women should regulate their own behaviour rather than challenging unsafe social environments. This unequal distribution of responsibility reflects broader patriarchal power relations that continue to shape women's experiences of urban life.

The relationship between mobility and employment has also received increasing scholarly attention. Rapid urbanisation has expanded educational and professional opportunities for women, particularly in sectors such as healthcare, education, retail, hospitality, and information technology. These developments require women to travel longer distances, commute during early morning or late evening hours, and occupy public spaces more frequently than in previous decades. Sylvia Chant (2013) argues that although cities provide new opportunities for women's economic participation, they also expose women to additional challenges associated

with transportation, insecurity, and unequal access to urban resources. Consequently, increased mobility does not necessarily guarantee increased freedom.

The changing nature of women's work is further examined by Dhar and Thuppilikkat, who analyse women employed in digital labour platforms. Their research demonstrates that app-based employment has expanded women's participation in urban economies while simultaneously creating new forms of vulnerability associated with unsafe travel, irregular working hours, and insecure working conditions. Women engaged in platform-based work often travel independently across unfamiliar neighbourhoods, highlighting the importance of urban safety for emerging forms of employment. Their findings illustrate that mobility is increasingly connected to labour rights, economic security, and gender equality within contemporary cities.

Another important theme emerging from the literature is the concept of everyday negotiation. Women are neither passive victims of unsafe environments nor entirely free agents. Instead, they continuously negotiate their relationship with urban space by balancing aspirations for independence with concerns about personal safety. These negotiations involve assessing environmental conditions, interpreting social interactions, and making practical decisions regarding movement and participation. Such strategies demonstrate women's agency while simultaneously revealing the structural inequalities that necessitate these adaptations.

Contemporary feminist scholarship increasingly argues that women should not be viewed solely through the lens of vulnerability. Rather, women actively reshape urban spaces through their everyday presence, participation, and resistance. Regular use of public transportation, independent travel, leisure activities, professional employment, and participation in community life gradually challenge traditional assumptions regarding women's place within the city. As more women occupy public spaces, they contribute to redefining the social meaning of urban environments and expanding opportunities for future generations.

Nevertheless, researchers caution against interpreting increased visibility as evidence of complete equality. Women's participation in public spaces continues to occur within contexts characterised by unequal power relations, gender stereotypes, and institutional limitations. Consequently, genuine urban freedom requires not only increased mobility but also broader transformations in social attitudes, public policies, and urban governance. The right to the city therefore involves recognising women as equal citizens whose presence in public spaces should be ordinary rather than exceptional.

Collectively, the literature demonstrates that mobility is a multidimensional concept encompassing movement, freedom, citizenship, participation, and social inclusion. Women's everyday experiences reveal that mobility cannot be understood simply through transportation systems or physical accessibility. Rather, it is shaped by interactions between environmental conditions, gender norms, institutional arrangements, and individual agency. Women's negotiations between fear and freedom illustrate both the persistence of gender inequalities and the resilience through which women continue to claim urban spaces.

2.6 WOMEN'S AGENCY, RESISTANCE AND URBAN CITIZENSHIP

While much of the early literature on women's safety emphasised vulnerability and victimisation, contemporary feminist scholarship increasingly recognises women as active agents who negotiate, challenge, and transform urban spaces through their everyday practices. Rather than viewing women solely as passive recipients of gendered inequalities, recent studies demonstrate how women exercise agency by developing adaptive strategies, forming support networks, resisting exclusionary norms, and asserting their right to participate in urban life. This shift represents an important theoretical development because it highlights women's resilience while simultaneously acknowledging the structural constraints within which such agency operates.

One of the most influential discussions of women's agency is presented by Phadke, Ranade, and Khan (2011), who argue that women's presence in public spaces itself constitutes a form of resistance. They contend that activities such as travelling alone, spending leisure time in parks, visiting cafés, or simply occupying streets without a specific purpose challenge patriarchal assumptions regarding women's appropriate place within society. Such everyday actions gradually normalise women's visibility in public spaces and contribute to broader processes of social change.

Similarly, Wesely and Gaarder (2004) argue that women continuously negotiate fear rather than allowing it to determine their lives completely. Women selectively occupy spaces, modify routines, seek companionship when necessary, and cultivate familiarity with urban environments. These practices represent forms of practical agency that enable women to balance caution with participation. Although such strategies do not eliminate structural inequalities, they demonstrate that women actively respond to challenges rather than remaining passive victims.

The literature also highlights the importance of collective action in promoting women's urban rights. Dhar and Thuppilikkat demonstrate that women working in digital labour platforms organise collectively to demand safer working conditions, improved labour protections, and institutional accountability. Their findings illustrate that women's resistance increasingly extends beyond individual coping strategies to include collective mobilisation for structural change.

Research on women's shelters by Marcus Lauri, Johanna Lauri, and Ida Linander similarly emphasises that safety should be understood not only as physical protection but also as empowerment, dignity, and social support. Women's shelters provide environments where survivors of violence rebuild confidence, develop social networks, and regain control over their lives. The authors argue that long-term safety requires broader transformations in social attitudes, institutional practices, and gender relations rather than relying solely on emergency interventions.

Collectively, this body of literature demonstrates that women's experiences of urban life involve a continuous interplay between vulnerability and agency. While structural inequalities continue to shape women's mobility and participation, women actively negotiate, resist, and redefine the meaning of public space through their everyday actions. These perspectives are particularly relevant to the present study because they move beyond narratives of victimhood and recognise women as active participants in shaping urban life.

The following section critically evaluates the existing body of literature, identifies major theoretical and empirical gaps and establishes the rationale for the present research.

2.7 CRITICAL REFLECTION AND RESEARCH GAP

The review of literature demonstrates that women's safety in urban spaces has evolved into a multidisciplinary area of research encompassing sociology, feminist geography, urban studies, criminology, and urban planning. The existing scholarship has substantially contributed to understanding the relationship between gender, mobility, fear, and public space by demonstrating that women's experiences in cities are shaped by a complex interaction of physical environments, social structures, cultural norms, and institutional arrangements. Collectively, the literature establishes that urban spaces are not gender-neutral but are socially produced environments in which power relations influence access, participation, and everyday experiences.

A major strength of the existing literature lies in its movement beyond narrow understandings of safety based solely on crime and violence. Early studies primarily examined women's fear of crime and victimisation, whereas more recent research has conceptualised safety as a multidimensional experience encompassing physical security, emotional well-being, social acceptance, freedom of movement, and the right to occupy public spaces. Scholars such as Rachel Pain (1991; 2001), Phadke, Ranade, and Khan (2011), and Loukaitou-Sideris (2014) have successfully demonstrated that women's fear is not simply an individual response but a socially produced phenomenon embedded within everyday urban life. This shift has significantly enriched sociological understandings of women's relationship with public space by recognising the importance of lived experiences, perceptions, and everyday negotiations.

The literature also highlights the important contribution of feminist perspectives in challenging the assumption that cities are neutral spaces equally accessible to all citizens. Theoretical works by Henri Lefebvre (1991, 1996), Daphne Spain (1992), Linda McDowell (1983), and Sylvia Chant (2013) demonstrate that urban spaces are socially constructed through unequal power relations and gendered social expectations. Their contributions have broadened the discussion from issues of physical infrastructure to broader concerns of citizenship, spatial justice, inclusion, and the right to the city. Similarly, studies examining women's mobility reveal that freedom of movement is closely connected to women's opportunities for education, employment, recreation, and participation in public life.

Another significant contribution of the literature is its emphasis on the relationship between urban infrastructure and women's perceptions of safety. Research consistently demonstrates that street lighting, pedestrian accessibility, public transportation, surveillance, mixed land use, and active public spaces influence women's confidence in navigating urban environments. These studies have provided valuable recommendations for gender-sensitive urban planning and have encouraged policymakers to consider women's experiences while designing public spaces.

Despite these important contributions, several limitations remain within the existing body of literature. One of the most significant limitations is the continued emphasis on physical infrastructure and crime prevention. Although recent scholarship acknowledges emotional and social dimensions of safety, many studies still evaluate women's safety primarily through measurable indicators such as crime rates, policing, surveillance technologies, and environmental design. Comparatively less attention has been given to understanding how

women interpret, negotiate, and emotionally experience public spaces in their everyday lives. Women's perceptions of dignity, belonging, confidence, and comfort remain relatively underexplored, particularly within sociological research.

A second limitation concerns the geographical concentration of existing research. Much of the available literature has been conducted in Western countries or in major metropolitan cities such as London, New York, Delhi, Mumbai, and other large urban centres. While these studies provide valuable theoretical insights, their findings cannot be automatically generalised to medium-sized Indian cities with distinct historical, cultural, and socio-economic contexts. Kerala, despite its relatively high levels of literacy, human development, and women's educational attainment, has received comparatively limited scholarly attention in studies examining women's everyday experiences of urban public spaces. In particular, there is a noticeable lack of empirical research focusing on Thiruvananthapuram, a rapidly expanding capital city that has undergone significant transformation through the growth of Technopark, educational institutions, commercial centres, and transportation networks.

Another limitation identified in the literature is the tendency to treat women as a relatively homogeneous social category. Although some recent studies acknowledge intersectionality, many continue to present women's experiences in general terms without adequately examining how age, occupation, socio-economic status, educational background, mobility patterns, and familiarity with urban environments shape perceptions of safety. Women employed in healthcare, information technology, education, retail, domestic work, and informal occupations often experience urban spaces differently because of variations in working hours, travel patterns, economic resources, and access to transportation. These differences require greater sociological attention to capture the diversity of women's lived realities.

The review further reveals that many studies continue to conceptualise women primarily as victims of unsafe urban environments. Although documenting violence and harassment remains essential, such an approach risks overlooking women's agency, resilience, and everyday strategies of negotiation. Contemporary feminist scholarship has increasingly recognised that women actively interpret, adapt to, and reshape urban spaces through their daily practices. However, empirical research examining these processes of negotiation remains relatively limited, particularly within Indian urban contexts. Understanding how women balance fear with aspirations for independence provides a more comprehensive understanding of women's relationship with the city than approaches focusing exclusively on vulnerability.

An additional limitation concerns the methodological orientation of previous research. A considerable proportion of existing studies employ quantitative surveys, crime statistics, or environmental assessments to examine women's safety. While these approaches generate valuable information regarding patterns of victimisation and infrastructural deficiencies, they often fail to capture the complexity of women's lived experiences. Qualitative approaches that explore women's narratives, emotions, perceptions, and everyday practices remain comparatively fewer, especially in the Indian context. Since experiences of safety are deeply subjective and socially constructed, qualitative inquiry offers important opportunities to understand meanings that cannot be adequately captured through numerical indicators alone.

The review also indicates that comparatively little attention has been devoted to understanding the relationship between fear and freedom as interconnected dimensions of women's urban experiences. Existing studies frequently discuss fear as a limiting force and mobility as a practical concern; however, relatively few examine how women simultaneously negotiate both fear and freedom while participating in everyday urban life. Women's experiences are characterised neither by complete restriction nor by unrestricted autonomy. Rather, they involve continuous negotiations through which women exercise agency while responding to structural constraints. Examining this relationship is particularly relevant in rapidly changing urban environments where expanding opportunities coexist with persistent gender inequalities.

The present study seeks to address these gaps by examining women's lived experiences of safety in the urban spaces of Thiruvananthapuram. Unlike many previous studies that primarily emphasise crime, infrastructure, or environmental design, this research adopts a sociological perspective that views safety as a multidimensional social experience shaped by physical environments, social interactions, gender norms, institutional arrangements, and individual perceptions. By employing a qualitative research design, the study focused on women's voices and explores how they experience, interpret and negotiate urban public spaces in their everyday lives.

The study further contributes by recognising the diversity of women's experiences across different age groups, occupations, and patterns of mobility. Rather than treating women as a homogeneous category, it acknowledges that perceptions of safety vary according to individual circumstances and everyday interactions with the city. It also examines women's agency by exploring the practical strategies through which they negotiate fear, exercise mobility, and claim public spaces despite existing constraints.

Ultimately, the present research contributes to the growing sociological literature on gender and urban space by shifting attention from safety as merely the absence of crime to safety as an experience of freedom, belonging, dignity, mobility, and urban citizenship.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Research methodology refers to the systematic process used to collect, analyse, and interpret data for a research study. It provides the framework through which the researcher investigates a particular issue and arrives at meaningful conclusions. The present study focuses on understanding women's experiences of safety in urban public spaces in Thiruvananthapuram. The study explores how women perceive public spaces, the challenges they face, the factors that influence their sense of safety, and the strategies they adopt while navigating the city. This chapter explains the research design, study area, sampling method, sources of data, tools used for data collection, data analysis procedure, ethical considerations, and limitations of the study.

3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN

The present study adopted a qualitative research design. Qualitative research is useful for understanding people's experiences, perceptions, feelings, and social realities in depth. Since the study aims to explore women's lived experiences in urban public spaces, a qualitative approach was considered the most suitable method.

The study used a case study approach. The case study method helped the researcher gather detailed information from individual participants regarding their experiences of safety, mobility, freedom, and belonging in public spaces. Through this approach, it was possible to understand the different ways women experience urban environments and how these experiences influence their daily lives.

The qualitative approach allowed participants to freely express their opinions, emotions, and personal experiences. This provided a deeper understanding of issues that cannot be measured through numerical data alone.

3.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

3.3.1 General Research Question

- How do women experience and negotiate safety, fear and freedom in the urban spaces of Thiruvananthapuram?

3.3.2 Specific Research Questions

- How do women perceive and understand safety in different public spaces of Thiruvananthapuram?
- What social, cultural and environmental factors shape women's experiences of fear and security in urban spaces?
- How do concerns about safety influence women's mobility, choices and participation in everyday city life?
- What strategies do women adopt to navigate and negotiate safety concerns while using public spaces?
- How do women's experiences of safety vary according to their age, occupation, and daily patterns of urban interaction?

3.4 STUDY AREA

The study was conducted in Thiruvananthapuram district, Kerala. Thiruvananthapuram is the capital city of Kerala and one of the most important urban centres in the state. The city has experienced significant growth in recent years through the development of educational institutions, commercial centres, residential areas, transportation networks, and information technology hubs such as Technopark.

The rapid urbanization of the city has increased women's participation in education, employment, and public life. Women regularly use roads, bus stops, markets, shopping centres, workplaces, educational institutions, and public transportation systems. As a result, the city provides an appropriate setting for examining women's experiences of safety and mobility in urban public spaces.

3.5 UNIVERSE OF THE STUDY

The universe of the study consisted of women living in and regularly using urban public spaces in Thiruvananthapuram district. These women use public spaces for various purposes such as education, employment, shopping, recreation, social interaction, and daily travel.

The study focused on understanding the experiences of women who actively engage with urban spaces and therefore have direct knowledge of the opportunities and challenges associated with them.

3.6 SAMPLING METHOD

The study adopted purposive sampling as the sampling technique. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling method in which participants are selected based on their relevance to the research objectives and their ability to provide meaningful information regarding the topic under study.

Women who regularly used public spaces and were willing to share their experiences were selected for participation. The researcher intentionally chose participants from different backgrounds so that a variety of perspectives could be included in the study. This helped in understanding the diverse ways in which women experience safety and insecurity within urban environments.

3.7 SAMPLE SIZE

The study consisted of seven female participants. The participants belonged to different age groups, occupations, and social backgrounds. Their varied experiences helped provide a broader understanding of women's interactions with public spaces.

For ethical and confidentiality purposes, participants were identified using codes such as P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, and P7 during the analysis. In some sections of the study, participants' names were used with their consent to provide context to their experiences. However, all information collected during the study was treated with confidentiality and used only for academic purposes.

3.8 SOURCES OF DATA

The study used both primary and secondary sources of data.

3.8.1 Primary Data

Primary data were collected directly from the participants through semi-structured interviews. The interviews provided first-hand information regarding women's experiences, perceptions, fears, challenges, coping strategies, and opinions related to safety in public spaces.

The participants shared their personal experiences regarding travel, public transportation, public infrastructure, harassment, social attitudes, family influence, and institutional support. These responses formed the main source of information for the study.

3.8.2 Secondary Data

Secondary data were collected from books, academic journals, research articles, government reports, websites, and other published materials related to women's safety, gender studies, urban sociology, urban development, and public spaces.

The review of literature helped the researcher understand existing knowledge on the topic and identify gaps that justified the need for the present study.

3.9 TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES OF DATA COLLECTION

The primary tool used for data collection was the semi-structured interview schedule. An interview guide consisting of open-ended questions was prepared based on the research questions of the study.

Semi-structured interviews were selected because they provide flexibility while ensuring that all important topics are discussed. The participants were encouraged to speak freely about their experiences, thoughts, and opinions. At the same time, the interview guide helped maintain consistency across all interviews.

The interviews focused on several important areas, including women's perceptions of safety in public spaces, experiences of fear and insecurity, incidents of harassment, use of public transportation, influence of urban infrastructure, role of police and government institutions, family restrictions, social attitudes, and suggestions for improving women's safety.

The interviews were conducted individually in a comfortable environment. Participants were given sufficient time to express themselves without interruption. The information obtained through these interviews formed the foundation of the study.

3.10 DATA ANALYSIS

The data collected through interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method used to identify, organize, and interpret patterns within data. After completing the interviews, the researcher carefully read and reviewed all responses multiple times. Important statements, recurring ideas, and common experiences were identified and coded. Similar codes were then grouped together to form categories and broader themes.

The thematic analysis resulted in four major themes:

1. Everyday Experiences and Perceptions of Safety
2. Harassment, Fear and Behavioral Adaptations
3. Urban Infrastructure, Public Transport and Institutional Support
4. Social Attitudes, Gender Norms and Diverse Experiences

Each theme contained several sub-themes that reflected different dimensions of women's experiences in urban public spaces. Thematic analysis helped organize the data systematically and allowed the researcher to identify common patterns while also recognising differences among participants' experiences.

3.11 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical principles were strictly followed throughout the research process. Before conducting the interviews, participants were informed about the purpose and objectives of the study. Their participation was completely voluntary, and they were free to withdraw from the study at any stage if they wished.

Personal information was protected, and participants were assured that their responses would be used only for academic purposes. Respect, dignity, and sensitivity were maintained while discussing personal experiences related to safety and insecurity.

The researcher also ensured that participants were not subjected to any physical, emotional, or psychological harm during the research process.

3.12 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Like any research study, the present study has certain limitations. The sample size was limited to seven participants, which may not represent the experiences of all women in Thiruvananthapuram. The findings are based on the personal experiences and perceptions of the participants and therefore cannot be generalized to all women. The study mainly focused on qualitative experiences rather than statistical measurements. Time constraints and limited resources also restricted the number of participants included in the study. In addition, women's experiences may vary depending on factors such as age, occupation, socio-economic

background, and location. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into women lived experiences in urban public spaces and contributes to a better understanding of the social, cultural, and structural factors that influence their sense of safety.

3.13 CONCLUSION

This chapter explained the methodology adopted for the study. A qualitative research design using a case study approach was employed to understand women's experiences of safety in urban public spaces in Thiruvananthapuram. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with seven participants and analysed using thematic analysis. The methodology provided an appropriate framework for exploring women's perceptions, experiences, and challenges in urban environments. The findings generated through this process contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between gender, safety, mobility, and urban public spaces.

CHAPTER IV

CASE PRESENTATION, THEMATIC ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Thematic analysis is a qualitative method used to identify, organize, and interpret patterns within data. After completing the interviews, the researcher carefully read and reviewed all responses multiple times. Important statements, recurring ideas, and common experiences were identified and coded. Similar codes were then grouped together to form categories and broader themes.

The thematic analysis resulted in four major themes:

1. Everyday Experiences and Perceptions of Safety
2. Harassment, Fear and Behavioral Adaptations
3. Urban Infrastructure, Public Transport and Institutional Support
4. Social Attitudes, Gender Norms and Diverse Experiences

Each theme contained several sub-themes that reflected different dimensions of women's experiences in urban public spaces. Thematic analysis helped organize the data systematically and allowed the researcher to identify common patterns while also recognising differences among participants' experiences.

4.2 CASE STUDY 1: ATHIRA A.

Athira A., a 29-year-old resident of Kazhakuttom, Thiruvananthapuram, is currently employed as a staff nurse at KIMS Hospital. Her profession requires her to travel regularly between her home and workplace, often during early morning and late evening hours. In addition to her work-related travel, she frequently visits markets, shopping center's, banks, pharmacies, and other public spaces within the city. As someone who spends a considerable amount of time in public spaces, Athira has developed a clear understanding of the opportunities and challenges women face while navigating urban environments.

During the interview, Athira explained that public spaces are an essential part of her daily life. However, she also emphasized that concerns about safety continue to influence how women use and experience these spaces. According to her, she generally feels comfortable in crowded and active areas where people are present and where public facilities are well maintained. At the same time, she admitted that her sense of security changes depending on the surroundings and the time of day.

Reflecting on her daily experiences, she stated,

"During the day I can travel without thinking much about safety. But once it gets dark, I become more alert and start paying attention to everything around me."

She explained that poorly lit roads, isolated streets, and deserted bus stops often make her feel uncomfortable, especially when she is travelling alone. For Athira, safety is not determined by one factor alone but by a combination of environmental conditions and social circumstances.

Athira believes that women experience public spaces differently from men because women are often more vulnerable to harassment and unwanted attention. She shared that she has personally experienced incidents such as staring, inappropriate comments, and verbal harassment while travelling. Although these incidents were not severe enough to cause physical harm, they affected her confidence and sense of comfort in public places.

Speaking about these experiences, she remarked,

"Sometimes it is not a major incident, but even small things like staring or unwanted comments can make a woman feel uncomfortable and cautious."

She also mentioned that she has witnessed similar experiences faced by other women, which further strengthened her concerns regarding safety in public spaces.

As a result of these experiences, Athira has developed certain precautionary habits. She prefers travelling through familiar and crowded routes whenever possible and avoids isolated places during late hours. She explained that safety concerns occasionally affect her social activities and personal plans. According to her,

"There are times when I avoid going somewhere or decide to return early because I don't feel completely comfortable travelling alone at night."

This indicates how concerns about safety can influence women's freedom of movement and participation in public life.

Athira identified street harassment, inadequate lighting, poor maintenance of public spaces, and insufficient security measures as some of the major challenges faced by women in urban areas. She believes that many women constantly assess their surroundings and take extra precautions while travelling. In her opinion, public transport plays a crucial role in supporting women's mobility, but certain issues continue to create difficulties.

She explained that buses and other forms of public transport are necessary for many women, particularly students and working professionals. However, overcrowding and inappropriate behavior by some passengers can make women feel uneasy. Discussing this issue, she stated,

"Public transport is necessary for everyday life, but there are situations where women do not feel completely safe, especially when buses are overcrowded."

She believes that stronger monitoring and better security measures would improve women's confidence while using public transportation.

The importance of urban infrastructure was another issue highlighted during the interview. Athira stressed that the physical condition of public spaces has a significant influence on women's feelings of safety. She pointed out that proper street lighting, CCTV surveillance, clean public toilets, safe bus stops, and regular police patrolling can contribute to a safer urban environment. On the other hand, neglected public spaces and poorly maintained infrastructure can create fear and insecurity.

Athira also observed that many women have developed precautionary habits as part of their daily routine. Informing family members about travel plans, carrying a mobile phone, avoiding isolated routes, and staying alert have become common practices. Speaking about this, she stated,

"These are things we do without even thinking about it anymore. It has become part of our daily routine."

Her statement shows how safety concerns have become normalized in the everyday lives of many women.

According to her,

"Simple improvements like better lighting and safer bus stops can make a big difference in how comfortable women feel while travelling."

Her response reflects the close relationship between urban planning and women's everyday experiences in the city.

She remarked,

"Sometimes people think women worry too much, but these concerns come from our experiences and from what we see happening around us."

She added that women often share their experiences with one another, which increases awareness but can also contribute to feelings of caution while using public spaces.

Athira also discussed the influence of social attitudes and family expectations on women's mobility. She observed that many women are advised to avoid travelling alone at night or visiting certain places. While such advice is often given out of concern, it can also place restrictions on women's independence. She further noted that women from different age groups and social backgrounds may face different challenges and experiences in public spaces.

When discussing her profession, Athira pointed out that many women working in healthcare face similar challenges. Nurses, doctors, and other healthcare workers frequently travel during unusual hours because of their work schedules. According to her,

"After a long shift, all you want is to reach home safely. At that time even small things can make you feel uncomfortable or anxious."

This highlights the additional challenges faced by women whose jobs require regular travel during early morning or late-night hours.

Regarding institutional responses, Athira acknowledged that both the government and police have introduced measures aimed at improving women's safety. However, she believes that

additional efforts are necessary. Although she has never formally reported any incident, she feels that many women hesitate to file complaints because they are uncertain about the outcome or effectiveness of the process. Therefore, she suggested that complaint mechanisms should be made simpler, more accessible, and more responsive to women's concerns.

To improve women's safety, Athira recommended better street lighting, increased police visibility, wider CCTV coverage, safer public transportation, and awareness programmes that address harassment and gender sensitivity. In her view, a truly safe city is one where women can travel freely without constantly worrying about their safety.

Towards the end of the interview, Athira expressed hope for future improvements. She stated,

"I hope there will come a time when young girls can move around freely without carrying the same fears that many women experience today."

This reflects her desire for a city where women can enjoy equal freedom, confidence, and opportunities in public spaces.

Summarising her perspective, Athira stated,

"A city becomes truly safe when women can move around confidently at any time without fear."

Her experiences demonstrate that women's safety is influenced not only by physical infrastructure but also by social attitudes, institutional support, and the overall design of urban spaces. The case highlights the need for a combined effort from government authorities, law enforcement agencies, urban planners, and the public to create safer and more inclusive cities for women.

4.3 CASE STUDY 2: GOPIKA V.J.

Gopika V.J., a 26-year-old resident of Sreekaryam, Thiruvananthapuram, is currently working at Techno park, Kazhakuttom, as a software professional. She travels daily between her home and workplace and also visits shopping center's, supermarkets, restaurants, and other public places in the city. Due to her job, she sometimes travels during late evening hours. She stated that public spaces are an important part of her daily life, but safety remains a major concern while moving around the city.

According to Gopika, she generally feels safe in crowded places during the daytime. However, she feels uncomfortable in isolated areas, poorly lit streets, and deserted bus stops, especially at night. She said that the time of day greatly affects her feeling of safety. During the day, she can travel with confidence, but at night she becomes more cautious and alert. She believes that women experience public spaces differently from men because women often have to think more about their personal safety while travelling alone.

During the interview, Gopika shared that she has faced incidents such as unwanted staring and inappropriate comments in public spaces. Although these incidents were not serious crimes, they made her feel uncomfortable and affected her confidence while travelling alone. Because of such experiences, she prefers to use familiar routes and avoid isolated places. She also tries to travel with friends or colleagues whenever possible, especially after work. She mentioned that safety concerns sometimes affect her social activities and travel plans.

Speaking about these experiences, she remarked,

“Some people may think these are small issues, but when it happens repeatedly, it affects your confidence. It makes you feel like you always have to be careful.”

She explained that even though she has not faced any major incident, such experiences have influenced the way she uses public spaces

Gopika believes that harassment, lack of security, poor lighting, and inadequate public facilities are some of the common problems faced by women in urban areas. She said that women often need to be extra careful while using public spaces. Regarding public transport, she feels that buses and other transport services are useful and affordable, but overcrowding and the behaviour of some passengers can make women feel unsafe. She believes that improving safety measures in public transport would help women travel more freely.

Discussing public transport further, she stated,

“Public transport is necessary because not everyone can depend on private vehicles. But women should be able to travel comfortably without worrying about harassment or inappropriate behaviour.”

She believes that better monitoring and stronger safety measures would encourage more women to use public transport confidently.

She also highlighted the importance of urban infrastructure in ensuring women's safety. According to her, proper street lighting, CCTV cameras, clean public toilets, safe bus stops, and regular police patrolling can make women feel more secure. On the other hand, poorly maintained roads and isolated public spaces can create fear and insecurity. She admitted that she avoids certain roads and public places at night because she does not feel completely safe there.

When discussing social factors, Gopika explained that family and society still influence the way women use public spaces. In many cases, women are advised to avoid travelling alone at night or visiting certain places. She also pointed out that safety experiences can differ depending on a woman's age, occupation, and social background. For example, students, young women, and women who work night shifts may face different challenges compared to others.

She further explained that women often adjust their behaviour because of safety concerns.

"There are times when I avoid staying out late or change my plans because I don't want to travel alone at night,"

she said. Although such decisions are made for personal safety, she feels that they sometimes limit women's freedom to enjoy public life fully.

Gopika feels that the government and police have taken some steps to improve women's safety, but more action is needed. She has never reported any incident herself, but she believes that many women hesitate to report problems because they are unsure whether effective action will be taken. She suggested that authorities should make complaint procedures easier and more accessible for women.

Gopika also reflected on the emotional impact of constantly thinking about safety. She explained that women often share their live location, inform family members about their whereabouts, and remain alert even during ordinary journeys. According to her, "Many women are always thinking one step ahead about safety. It becomes such a normal part of life that we hardly notice it anymore."

To improve women's safety, Gopika recommended better street lighting, increased police presence, more CCTV cameras, safer public transport, and awareness programmes against harassment. According to her, a safe city is one where women can travel freely and confidently at any time of the day without fear. She believes that urban planning should consider women's needs and safety concerns. In conclusion, Gopika stated that improving women's safety requires the combined efforts of government authorities, police, urban planners, and the public so that cities become safer and more inclusive for all women.

Speaking about her vision of a safer city, Gopika stated,

“Women should be able to travel, work, meet friends, and enjoy public spaces without always thinking about safety. That is what real freedom in a city means to me.”

She expressed hope that future urban development would pay greater attention to women's needs and experiences

4.4 CASE STUDY 3: SMITHA RAJESH

Smitha Rajesh is a 39-year-old woman residing in Manacaud, Thiruvananthapuram. She works as a cleaner at Lulu Mall and travels daily by public bus. As a working woman who depends heavily on public transport, she regularly uses various public spaces such as roads, bus stops, markets, shopping centres, and other crowded areas in the city. Her daily routine requires her to spend a significant amount of time outside her home, which has given her firsthand experience of the challenges and realities women face in public spaces.

During the interview, Smitha spoke openly about her experiences and perceptions regarding women's safety. She explained that her sense of safety often depends on the place, time, and situation. According to her, she generally feels comfortable during the daytime when public spaces are crowded and active. However, her feelings change once it becomes dark. She stated,

“During the day, I feel safer because there are people around. But when it gets late, I become more careful. Sometimes I feel nervous, especially if I am alone.”

She explained that certain places make her feel more vulnerable than others. Roads with poor lighting, deserted bus stops, and isolated areas create a feeling of insecurity. She said that women often have to think twice before travelling alone at night.

“Men and women do not experience public spaces in the same way. Women always have to be alert and aware of what is happening around them,”

she remarked. According to Smitha, this constant need to remain cautious can be mentally exhausting.

When discussing her personal experiences, Smitha shared that she has faced situations that made her uncomfortable while travelling. She recalled instances where men stared at her continuously or made comments that she found inappropriate. Although these incidents were not physically threatening, they affected her sense of safety and confidence. She explained,

“Some people think staring or making comments is a small thing, but it makes women uncomfortable. It stays in our minds and makes us feel unsafe.”

She believes that such experiences are common among women and are often ignored because they are not considered serious enough to report.

Smitha noted that these experiences have changed the way she behaves in public spaces. Over time, she has developed certain habits to protect herself. She tries to avoid travelling alone whenever possible and prefers staying in crowded places. She explained,

“If I know I will be travelling late, I plan carefully. I choose places where there are more people and avoid lonely roads.”

These precautions have become a regular part of her daily life.

The interview revealed that safety concerns have a direct impact on her routine and freedom of movement. Smitha stated that she usually prefers to return home immediately after work. She avoids staying outside unnecessarily, particularly during the evening.

“Sometimes I would like to spend more time outside or go shopping after work, but I usually go home because I feel more comfortable there,”

she said. According to her, many women modify their schedules and movements because of safety concerns.

A major issue highlighted by Smitha was the condition of public transport. Since she travels by bus every day, she has observed several challenges that affect women's comfort and safety. She mentioned that overcrowded buses can create situations where women feel uncomfortable. In addition, inappropriate behaviour by some passengers can make travelling stressful.

“Public transport is important for working women like me. But sometimes buses are overcrowded, and women do not feel comfortable,” she explained.

She also spoke about her experiences while waiting at bus stops. According to Smitha, waiting alone at a bus stop during the evening can be an unpleasant experience. She said,

“When the bus is late and there are very few people around, I feel anxious. I keep looking around and checking if anyone is watching me.”

She added that the presence of other women or families nearby often makes her feel safer. This highlights how the social environment of public spaces influences women's sense of security.

Smitha strongly believes that public infrastructure plays an important role in improving women's safety. During the interview, she repeatedly emphasized the need for better facilities in public spaces. She stated that proper street lighting can significantly improve women's confidence when travelling after dark.

“A well-lit road feels much safer than a dark road. Even if the distance is the same, good lighting makes a big difference,” she explained.

Apart from lighting, she stressed the importance of CCTV cameras, clean and well-maintained bus stops, and visible police patrols. According to her, the presence of security measures not only helps prevent crime but also reassures women that help is available if needed. She said, *“When police officers are visible in public places, women feel that someone is there to help them if a problem occurs.”*

In contrast, neglected and poorly maintained spaces often create fear and discourage women from using them freely.

The interview also explored the influence of family and society on women's experiences. Smitha stated that her family often worries about her when she travels alone, especially at night.

She believes that these concerns are common in many households because safety remains a major issue for women.

“My family always asks me to be careful and reach home safely. They worry because they know the problems women face,” she said.

Another important issue raised by Smitha was the relationship between economic status and safety. She pointed out that women from lower-income backgrounds often have fewer choices when it comes to transportation. Unlike those who can afford private vehicles or taxis, many working women depend entirely on buses and other forms of public transport.

“Women who depend on public transport cannot always choose the safest option. We use what is available,” she explained.

She believes that every woman, regardless of her economic background, deserves equal access to safe public spaces.

When asked about government efforts to improve women’s safety, Smitha acknowledged that some positive changes have taken place over the years. However, she feels that there is still a long way to go. She admitted that she has never reported incidents such as staring or verbal harassment to the police. *“I felt those incidents were too small to report, and I was not sure anything would happen if I complained,”* she said.

Nevertheless, she believes that authorities should encourage women to report such experiences and ensure that every complaint is taken seriously.

Towards the end of the interview, Smitha shared several suggestions for improving women’s safety in public spaces. She recommended better street lighting, increased police presence, wider CCTV coverage, safer public transport facilities, and stricter action against harassment. She also emphasized the need for awareness programs that encourage people to respect women in public places. According to her, improving infrastructure alone is not enough; society’s attitude towards women must also change.

Reflecting on her own experiences, Smitha concluded that true safety means being able to move freely without fear. She stated,

“A safe city is one where women can travel, work, shop, and live their lives without constantly worrying about their safety.”

She believes that women’s safety should be treated as a basic right rather than a privilege. Her experiences demonstrate how safety concerns continue to influence women’s everyday lives and highlight the need for both social and structural changes to create safer public spaces for all women

4.5 CASE STUDY 4: PARTICIPANT P4 (NAME WITHHELD FOR CONFIDENTIALITY)

Participant P4 is a 33-year-old woman from Venjaramoodu who works as a salesgirl in a textile shop in Thiruvananthapuram. Her job requires her to travel long distances every day using public transport. She leaves home early in the morning and returns in the evening after completing her work. Because of her daily commute, she spends a considerable amount of time in public spaces such as bus stops, roads, buses, and commercial areas. Through these experiences, she has developed a strong understanding of the safety challenges faced by women in public spaces.

During the interview, Participant P4 described herself as an independent and hardworking woman who enjoys her job. However, she admitted that concerns about safety are always present in her mind while travelling. She stated, *“I like working and earning my own income, but sometimes travelling alone makes me worried. Women have to think about many things that men usually don’t think about.”*

When asked about her overall feeling of safety, she explained that she generally feels comfortable during the daytime because public places are crowded and active. However, her confidence decreases significantly after sunset. She stated,

“In the daytime, there are people everywhere, so I feel safer. But once it gets dark, I become more alert. I keep checking my surroundings and avoid standing alone.”

The participant shared an unpleasant experience that changed the way she viewed public spaces. She recalled an incident that occurred while she was returning home from work. After a tiring day at the textile shop, she was waiting at a bus stop when a group of men began making

inappropriate comments and attempted to follow her for a short distance. Although the incident did not become physically violent, she remembered feeling extremely frightened.

Speaking about the experience, she said, *“At that moment, I felt helpless. I did not know what they would do next. I just wanted to get on the bus and go home safely.”* She explained that the incident remained in her memory for a long time and affected her confidence while travelling. *“Before that day, I never paid much attention to these things. After it happened, I started being more careful everywhere I went.”*

According to Participant P4, such experiences may seem minor to others, but they can have a lasting emotional impact on women. She stated,

“People often say nothing serious happened, but the fear stays with us. Even after reaching home, I kept thinking about what happened.”

The experience made her more cautious and changed some of her daily habits.

She explained that she now avoids waiting alone at bus stops whenever possible. If she reaches a bus stop and finds very few people around, she prefers standing near shops or other crowded places. She also keeps family members informed about her travel schedule. *“Now I call my family when I leave work and when I reach home. It gives me some peace of mind, and it also makes them worry less,”* she explained.

When discussing women’s experiences in public spaces, Participant P4 strongly felt that women and men experience public environments differently. She stated,

“A man can travel alone at night without thinking much about it. For women, it is different. We have to think about safety before making even simple decisions.” According to her, women often plan their movements based on safety concerns rather than convenience.

She further explained that safety concerns sometimes limit women’s freedom. As a salesgirl, she occasionally has opportunities to stay back with colleagues, shop after work, or attend social gatherings. However, she often chooses not to because of concerns about travelling home late. She stated,

“There are times when I would like to spend some time outside after work, but I usually avoid it because I don’t want to travel late at night.”

The participant also discussed the challenges women face while using public transportation. Since buses are her primary mode of travel, she has observed various situations that make women uncomfortable. She mentioned that overcrowded buses can create difficulties, especially during peak hours. According to her, inappropriate behaviour sometimes goes unnoticed because of the crowded environment.

“Buses are necessary for people like me because we cannot afford expensive travel options every day,” she explained. ”

Most of the time the journey is normal, but sometimes women feel uncomfortable because of the behaviour of a few people.” She believes that stronger monitoring systems and quicker responses to complaints could make public transport safer for women.

Participant P4 also highlighted the importance of public infrastructure in ensuring women’s safety. She pointed out that several roads and bus stops in her area lack proper lighting. According to her, dark and isolated locations create fear and anxiety, particularly for women travelling alone. *“A well-lit place immediately feels safer. When a road is dark and empty, I just want to leave that area as quickly as possible,”* she said.

She further explained that CCTV cameras and visible police patrols increase her confidence while travelling. She believes that the presence of security measures discourages inappropriate behaviour and reassures women that help is available if required. *“When I see police officers nearby, I feel that someone is there to protect us if a problem happens,”* she stated.

During the interview, Participant P4 expressed frustration about certain attitudes in society regarding women’s safety. She observed that women are often advised to avoid travelling alone or to return home early, while less attention is given to addressing the behaviour of those responsible for creating unsafe environments. She stated, *“Whenever something happens, people tell women to be careful. But why don’t we talk more about teaching people not to harass women?”*

She believes that awareness and education are essential for creating long-term change. According to her, respect for women should be taught from a young age and promoted

throughout society. She stated, *“Women should not have to change their lives because of fear. The real solution is changing the mindset of people who make public spaces unsafe.”*

When discussing institutional support, Participant P4 admitted that she never reported the incident she experienced. She explained that she could not identify the individuals involved and was unsure whether any action would be taken. However, she believes that authorities should create a more supportive environment for women who wish to report harassment. *“Many women stay silent because they think nothing will happen. If women feel supported, more people may come forward and report these incidents,”* she explained.

Towards the end of the interview, Participant P4 suggested several measures to improve women’s safety in public spaces. These included better street lighting, increased police patrolling, wider CCTV coverage, safer public transport facilities, and stricter action against harassment. She also stressed the importance of creating public awareness about respecting women and ensuring equal access to public spaces.

Reflecting on her experiences, she concluded by saying, *“A safe city is a place where women can travel freely without fear, whether it is morning or night. We should not have to plan our lives around safety concerns.”* Her experiences demonstrate how safety issues influence the daily lives of working women and highlight the importance of creating public spaces that are safe, inclusive, and accessible for everyone.

4.6 CASE STUDY 5: REJIMOL

Rejimol is a 48-year-old woman from Puthenthope, a coastal area in Thiruvananthapuram. She works as a domestic worker in several nearby apartment flats and houses. Her day usually begins very early in the morning. She wakes up before sunrise, completes her household responsibilities, and then leaves for work. Depending on the location of the houses where she works, she either walks or uses local buses for transportation. Most of her daily movement takes place within residential areas, local roads, markets, bus stops, and nearby neighbourhoods. As someone who has spent many years working outside her home, she has developed her own understanding of women’s safety based on her everyday experiences.

During the interview, Rejimol spoke in a simple and practical manner. Rather than discussing safety in terms of crime statistics or government policies, she described it through situations

she encounters in her daily life. According to her, safety means being able to go from one place to another without fear, worry, or discomfort. She stated,

“For me, safety means reaching work and coming back home without any problems. Women should be able to travel peacefully.”

When asked whether she feels safe in public spaces, Rejimol explained that it depends on the place and the people around her. She generally feels comfortable in familiar areas where people know each other. Since she has been living and working in the same locality for many years, many residents recognize her and often stop to greet her. This familiarity gives her a sense of security.

“In my area, many people know me. If I have any problem, there will be someone to help. That makes me feel safe,” she explained.

However, she admitted that she feels less confident when she has to travel alone to unfamiliar places. According to her, not knowing the people around her creates uncertainty.

“If I go somewhere I don’t know, I become more careful. I keep looking around because I don’t know who is there or what kind of people are around me,” she said.

During the discussion, Rejimol reflected on how public spaces have changed over the years. She explained that when she was younger, fewer women worked outside the home. Most women stayed close to their families and neighbourhoods. Today, she sees women travelling to offices, schools, hospitals, shops, and many other workplaces every day.

“Things are different now. Women are working everywhere. My daughters’ generation goes to many places for studies and jobs. That is a good thing,” she said.

Although she views these changes positively, she believes that safety concerns have not disappeared. According to her, women still need to be cautious while travelling alone, especially during the early morning or late evening hours. “Women have more freedom now, but they still have to be careful. We still hear about problems happening to women,” she remarked.

When asked about her own experiences, Rejimol stated that she has never faced any major incident of harassment or violence. However, she recalled several occasions when strangers made comments or behaved in ways that made her uncomfortable. She explained that these incidents may appear minor to others, but they affect how women feel in public spaces.

“Sometimes people say unnecessary things when women walk past. They may laugh or make comments. It may look like a small thing, but it doesn’t feel good,” she said.

She explained that many women choose to ignore such behaviour because they do not want arguments or attention. *“Most women just walk away and continue their work. We don’t want trouble. We just want to finish our work and go home,”* she added.

As the interview progressed, Rejimol spoke about how her concerns have changed as she has grown older. Earlier in life, she worried more about unwanted attention from strangers. Today, she is equally concerned about the condition of public spaces themselves. Because she begins work very early in the morning, she often walks through roads that are quiet and poorly lit.

“Some days I leave home before sunrise. At that time, the roads are almost empty. When it is dark and there is nobody around, I don’t feel comfortable,” she explained.

Although she has never experienced a serious incident during these walks, she admitted that deserted roads can make women feel vulnerable. *“Nothing may happen, but still there is fear. You just want to reach your destination quickly,”* she said.

According to Rejimol, proper street lighting is one of the most important factors that influence women’s sense of safety. She repeatedly mentioned that a well-lit road feels safer than a dark one. *“If there are lights, we can see clearly and feel more confident. Dark roads make people nervous,”* she explained.

The interview also explored her experiences with public transportation. Although she often walks to nearby workplaces, she depends on buses whenever she needs to travel longer distances. She described buses as an important service for working women because they are affordable and easily available.

“People like me depend on buses every day. We cannot spend money on taxis or other expensive transport,” she said.

At the same time, she acknowledged that buses can sometimes be uncomfortable, particularly during busy hours. She explained that overcrowding can create situations where women feel uneasy.

“When buses are very crowded, women may not feel comfortable. Sometimes there is not enough space even to stand properly,” she stated.

Rejimol also highlighted the condition of bus stops. Since many women spend considerable time waiting for buses, she believes that these spaces should receive greater attention from authorities.

“Bus stops should have proper lights and places to sit. Many women, elderly people, and workers use them every day,” she said.

One of the strongest themes that emerged during the interview was the importance of community support. Rejimol repeatedly emphasized that safety is not only the responsibility of the police or government. According to her, ordinary people also play a major role in creating safe environments.

“If people help each other, many problems can be avoided. When someone is in trouble, others should not ignore it,” she said.

She explained that in neighbourhoods where residents know one another and look out for each other, women generally feel safer. She recalled instances where local shopkeepers or neighbours assisted people who were stranded or facing difficulties. Such experiences strengthened her belief that community support is essential.

“When people care about each other, women feel less afraid. It is good to know that someone will help if needed,” she remarked.

When discussing government efforts, Rejimol acknowledged that some improvements have taken place over the years. She noted that roads in certain areas have improved and that police officers are more visible than before. However, she believes there is still room for improvement.

“Some places are better now than before, but there are still roads without enough lights. Those places need more attention,” she said.

She also stressed that authorities should think about the needs of working women who travel early in the morning or return home after work. According to her, many safety measures focus on busy city areas while smaller residential roads are often overlooked.

Towards the end of the interview, Rejimol was asked to describe what a safe city would look like. Her answer reflected the practical realities of her everyday life.

“A safe city is a place where women can go to work, wait for a bus, walk on the road, and come back home without fear. We should not have to worry all the time,” she said.

She also emphasized the importance of respect. In her opinion, physical safety measures alone cannot solve every problem. She believes that people must learn to treat women with dignity.

“Street lights and police are important, but respect is also important. If people respect women, many problems will reduce,” she explained.

In conclusion, Rejimol’s interview highlights the everyday realities of women’s safety from the perspective of a domestic worker. Her experiences show that safety is not only about protection from serious crimes but also about feeling comfortable, respected, and confident while moving through public spaces. Her concerns are shaped by her occupation, age, and daily routine, particularly her early morning travel and dependence on local roads and public transport. Through her reflections, it becomes clear that creating safer public spaces requires better infrastructure, stronger community support, and greater respect for women in society. Her story demonstrates that women from all backgrounds deserve to move freely and confidently in public spaces without fear or discomfort.

4.7 CASE STUDY 6: PARTICIPANT P6 (NAME WITHHELD FOR CONFIDENTIALITY)

Participant P6 is a 35-year-old woman from Kaniyapuram who works as a fish vendor. For more than ten years, she has been involved in selling fish in local markets and nearby areas. Her work begins much earlier than most people's day. She usually wakes up before dawn and travels to fish landing centres and markets to purchase fish for sale. Depending on the day's business, she spends long hours in crowded markets, public roads, bus stops, and transportation

hubs. Because of the nature of her occupation, she interacts with a wide range of people every day, including customers, traders, transport workers, and vendors. These daily experiences have strongly shaped her views about women's safety in public spaces.

During the interview, Participant P6 spoke openly and confidently about the challenges women face in public spaces. Unlike some participants who focused mainly on infrastructure such as roads and street lights, she repeatedly emphasized that the biggest problem women face is the behaviour of certain men. According to her, women often feel unsafe not because of the physical space itself but because of how some men behave in those spaces.

She stated, "A road is just a road. A market is just a market. The problem comes when some men think they can say or do whatever they want to women."

The participant explained that her work requires her to travel frequently and spend most of the day in public places. She visits fish markets, wholesale centres, shops, and residential areas where she sells fish. Because of this, she has observed how women experience public spaces differently from men.

"I leave home when it is still dark. Many times I am travelling when most people are sleeping. As women, we always have to be careful. Men don't have to think about these things the way we do," she explained.

When asked about her overall feeling of safety, Participant P6 stated that she never feels completely relaxed when travelling alone. Although she has become strong and independent through years of work, she believes that women constantly have to remain alert.

"Even after doing this work for many years, I still look around when I travel alone. It has become a habit. Women cannot simply switch off their minds and relax outside," she said.

Throughout the interview, she repeatedly spoke about how women are forced to remain cautious because they cannot predict the behaviour of strangers. According to her, this constant alertness becomes emotionally exhausting over time.

"Sometimes people ask why women are always careful. We are careful because we have seen things happen. We hear stories from friends, neighbours, relatives. We cannot ignore these things," she remarked.

The participant shared several experiences that contributed to her views. Although she had not experienced serious physical violence, she recalled numerous incidents involving unwanted staring, inappropriate comments, and disrespectful behaviour. Many of these incidents occurred while she was travelling to markets or waiting for transportation.

"I have lost count of how many times men have stared at me or made comments. For them, it may be a joke. For women, it is not a joke," she said.

As she spoke about these experiences, her frustration became evident. She explained that many people dismiss such incidents as minor issues, but they leave a lasting emotional impact on women.

"People say nothing happened. But something did happen. If a woman feels uncomfortable, that itself is a problem. Why should women feel scared when they are only trying to do their work?" she asked.

According to Participant P6, these experiences have changed the way she uses public spaces. She now pays close attention to her surroundings and avoids certain situations whenever possible.

"If I see a place that looks isolated, I avoid it. If I feel uncomfortable around someone, I move away. Women learn these things because we have no choice," she explained.

One of the most emotional parts of the interview occurred when she discussed the different freedoms enjoyed by men and women. She strongly felt that men rarely understand the restrictions women face every day.

"A man can leave home late at night without thinking twice. A woman starts thinking about safety even before stepping outside. That is the difference," she stated.

She explained that women often make decisions based on safety concerns rather than personal convenience. According to her, many women avoid certain roads, return home early, or change travel plans because they are worried about harassment.

"Sometimes women miss opportunities because of fear. We don't go to certain places. We don't stay out late. We change our plans. Men don't realise how often women do this," she said.

As a fish vendor, Participant P6 spends much of her time in busy markets where large numbers of people gather. She explained that markets can be both empowering and challenging for women. On one hand, they provide women with opportunities to earn an income and become financially independent. On the other hand, they expose women to unwanted behaviour from strangers.

"Markets are crowded places. Most people are good. But there are always a few people who make women uncomfortable. One person's behaviour can spoil your whole day," she explained.

The participant also discussed public transportation, which she uses regularly for work. She expressed particular concern about overcrowded buses. According to her, many women have experienced uncomfortable situations while travelling but choose not to speak about them.

"Women stay silent because they just want to reach home. They don't want arguments. They don't want attention. So many incidents go unreported," she said.

She described situations where women felt trapped by circumstances because they depended on public transport for their livelihood.

"For many working women, buses are the only option. We cannot stop travelling because of fear. We still have to go to work and earn money for our families," she explained.

The discussion also focused on social attitudes towards women's safety. Participant P6 expressed strong frustration about the tendency to blame women or place restrictions on them whenever incidents occur.

"Whenever something happens, people start advising women. Don't go there. Don't go alone. Don't stay out late. Why is the advice always for women?" she asked.

She argued that society often focuses on controlling women's behaviour instead of addressing the behaviour of those responsible for creating unsafe environments.

"Nobody asks why some men behave badly. Instead, women are expected to adjust their lives. That is not fair," she stated.

Her comments reflected deep frustration and disappointment with attitudes that place responsibility for safety primarily on women.

“Women already have enough responsibilities. We work, take care of our families, and manage many things. On top of that, we are expected to constantly worry about our safety,” she remarked.

When discussing government and police responses, Participant P6 acknowledged that improvements have been made in some areas. However, she felt that authorities still need to do more to support women.

“Many women don't report incidents because they think nothing will happen. People need confidence that their complaints will be taken seriously,” she explained.

She suggested that police should be more visible in public spaces and that action should be taken quickly whenever women report harassment.

The participant also emphasized the importance of infrastructure. According to her, good street lighting, CCTV cameras, and regular police patrols can help women feel safer.

“When a road is well lit and there are people around, women feel more confident. Darkness and isolation create fear,” she said.

However, she repeatedly returned to the argument that infrastructure alone cannot solve the problem.

“You can put cameras everywhere, but cameras cannot change a person's mindset. The real problem is how some people think about women,” she stated.

Towards the end of the interview, Participant P6 reflected on what a truly safe city would look like. *Her answer combined practical concerns with deeper social issues.*

“A safe city is a place where women can go anywhere without constantly worrying. We should be able to work, travel, and live our lives freely.”

She further added, “Women should not have to prove that they deserve safety. Safety is a basic right. It should not depend on where we go, what time it is, or what work we do.”

As the interview concluded, Participant P6 expressed hope that future generations of women would not have to face the same challenges. She wants young girls to grow up feeling confident and free rather than fearful.

“I have a daughter, and I want her to have more freedom than I had. I don't want her to spend her life worrying about safety every time she leaves the house,” she said emotionally.

In conclusion, Participant P6 presented one of the strongest and most emotionally charged perspectives among all the participants interviewed. As a fish vendor who spends much of her life in public spaces, her understanding of women's safety is rooted in everyday experiences rather than abstract ideas. Her interview highlighted the emotional burden of constant vigilance, the impact of harassment on women's freedom, and the frustration many women feel when responsibility for safety is placed on them rather than on those who create unsafe environments. While she acknowledged the importance of better infrastructure and stronger law enforcement, she firmly believed that lasting change will only happen when society begins to challenge disrespectful behaviour and treat women with dignity and respect. Her experiences demonstrate that true safety is not simply the absence of crime but the presence of freedom, confidence, and equality in everyday life.

4.8 CASE STUDY 7: PARTICIPANT P7 (NAME WITHHELD FOR CONFIDENTIALITY)

Participant P7 is a woman who regularly uses public spaces for work, shopping, social activities, and other daily purposes. During the interview, her views were somewhat different from those expressed by many other participants. While she acknowledged that women's safety is an important issue, she explained that her personal experiences in public spaces have mostly been positive.

When discussing her overall perception of safety, P7 stated that she generally feels comfortable travelling alone and using public spaces. She frequently visits markets, shopping malls, restaurants, public offices, and other places without feeling unsafe.

She explained, *“Personally, I have not faced any major problems while going out alone. I usually feel comfortable in public places and I don't constantly worry about my safety.”*

Unlike several other participants, P7 reported that she had never personally experienced harassment, discrimination, or threatening behaviour in public spaces. She also mentioned that her family has always encouraged her to travel independently and manage her daily activities on her own.

While discussing women's safety in general, she acknowledged that incidents of harassment do happen and that many women face genuine challenges. However, she felt that her own experiences had shaped a more positive view of public spaces.

She said, *“I know that many women have had bad experiences, but for me, public spaces have mostly felt safe. I think experiences can be very different from one person to another.”*

P7 stated that she often travels during both daytime and evening hours and has rarely encountered situations that made her feel seriously unsafe. Because of this, she believes that women's experiences cannot be viewed from a single perspective.

During the interview, P7 also shared her opinions about factors that may influence how women experience public spaces. She felt that behaviour, self-awareness, and clothing choices can sometimes affect how people are perceived in society. At the same time, she strongly emphasised that harassment is never acceptable.

She explained, *“People often judge others based on appearance. Dressing according to the situation may help avoid unwanted attention, but that never means someone is responsible for being harassed. The blame always lies with the person who behaves inappropriately.”*

Another important theme in her responses was the role of confidence. According to P7, women should be encouraged to participate freely in public life without constantly living in fear.

She stated, *“Women should be able to move around confidently. If we are always afraid, it can stop us from enjoying opportunities and participating fully in society.”*

She further added that being aware of one's surroundings and having confidence can help women feel more secure while using public spaces.

Regarding public transportation, P7 described her experiences as mostly positive. She regularly uses buses and other forms of transport and has not faced significant safety concerns. Although

she acknowledged that overcrowding can sometimes be uncomfortable, she did not consider public transportation to be a major source of insecurity in her daily life.

Speaking about urban infrastructure, P7 agreed that factors such as proper street lighting, cleanliness, and police visibility contribute to women's safety. However, she also felt that many public spaces have improved in recent years.

She noted, *“There have been improvements in many places. Better lighting and more visible security make people feel safer, and these efforts should continue.”*

When discussing the role of government and police authorities, P7 expressed moderate confidence in the existing systems. While she believed that further improvements are needed, she felt that women's safety is receiving increasing attention from authorities.

According to her, *“There is still room for improvement, but I think authorities are becoming more aware of women's safety issues. Awareness programmes can also help create positive change.”*

Towards the end of the interview, P7 highlighted the importance of recognising different experiences when discussing women's safety. She felt that research should include both positive and negative perspectives in order to present a balanced understanding of the issue.

She explained, *“Not every woman has the same experience. Some may feel unsafe, while others may feel comfortable. Both experiences are important and should be included in discussions about safety.”*

In conclusion, Participant P7 presented a perspective that differed from the other respondents. While acknowledging that safety concerns exist for women, she reported largely positive experiences in public spaces and expressed confidence in her ability to travel independently. Her responses highlight the diversity of women's experiences and demonstrate that perceptions of safety are shaped by personal experiences, social environments, confidence, and individual viewpoints.

4.9 CASE ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

4.9.1 THEME 1: PERCEPTIONS OF SAFETY AND FEAR IN PUBLIC SPACES

One of the central themes emerging from the study was women's perception of safety in urban public spaces. Although participants regularly accessed streets, markets, public transport, educational institutions, workplaces, and commercial centres as part of their daily lives, their experiences of these spaces were not uniform. Their narratives revealed that perceptions of safety were dynamic and context-dependent, shaped by factors such as time of day, crowd density, familiarity with the locality, previous experiences, and the physical characteristics of the environment. Rather than viewing safety as merely the absence of crime, participants described it as a feeling of confidence, comfort, and freedom while using public spaces.

The findings demonstrate that women's perceptions of safety are socially constructed and continuously negotiated through everyday experiences. Participants rarely described themselves as completely safe or unsafe; instead, they constantly evaluated their surroundings, interpreted environmental cues, and adjusted their behaviour accordingly. This suggests that women's relationship with urban public spaces is characterised by a continuous negotiation between fear and freedom, reflecting the broader gendered nature of urban life.

These findings support the arguments of Rachel Pain (1991), who contends that women's fear is not simply a reaction to actual crime but is socially produced through gendered socialisation and everyday experiences. Similarly, van den Berg (2012) argues that women's perceptions of safety are shaped by the interaction of physical surroundings, social interactions, and previous experiences rather than objective crime rates alone. The findings also reinforce the observations of Loukaitou-Sideris (2014) that women's experiences of urban safety are multidimensional, involving physical, emotional, and social aspects of everyday life.

Sub-theme 4.9.1.1: Feeling Safe During Daytime

A consistent finding across the interviews was that most participants perceived urban public spaces as relatively safe during the daytime. Busy roads, shopping centres, markets, workplaces, educational institutions, and public transport were generally described as comfortable environments because they contained large numbers of people engaged in everyday activities. Participants associated daytime with visibility, social interaction, and the presence of potential assistance in the event of an emergency.

Athira explained that she usually travels comfortably during the day and rarely thinks about safety concerns while commuting. Similarly, Gopika stated that she feels confident travelling

during daylight hours because public places remain active and populated. Smitha likewise observed that crowded spaces make her feel safer because there are always people nearby who could provide assistance if necessary.

These narratives indicate that participants associated safety with social presence rather than physical infrastructure alone. The presence of families, students, office workers, vendors, and commuters generated a sense of collective security that reduced feelings of vulnerability. Crowded public spaces were therefore interpreted as environments where inappropriate behaviour was less likely to occur because of increased public visibility and informal social surveillance.

This finding closely reflects Jane Jacobs' (1961) concept of "eyes on the street," which argues that active public spaces naturally create informal surveillance through the continuous presence of people. Jacobs maintained that lively streets promote public safety because the activities of ordinary citizens discourage deviant behaviour. Similarly, Gupta, Ashtt, and Wankar emphasise that active streets, mixed land use, and continuous public activity significantly improve women's perception of safety in urban environments. The present findings further support Sadeghi et al., who argue that women experience greater confidence in public spaces characterised by visibility, accessibility, and social interaction.

Another important aspect emerging from the interviews was the role of familiarity and community relationships. Rejimol explained that she feels secure within her neighbourhood because many people know her personally.

"In my area, many people know me. If I have any problem, there will be someone to help. That makes me feel safe."

Her statement demonstrates that safety is not determined solely by physical surroundings but is also embedded within social relationships. Familiarity with neighbours, local shopkeepers, and regular commuters created a sense of belonging and trust that enhanced her confidence while using public spaces.

This finding is consistent with Panelli, Little, and Kraack (2004), who argue that women's perceptions of safety are strongly influenced by community cohesion and neighbourhood relationships. According to these authors, supportive social networks reduce fear by increasing confidence that assistance will be available when needed. Similarly, van den Berg (2012) found that women generally report greater feelings of safety in familiar environments than in

unfamiliar locations, even when the physical characteristics of the two environments are similar.

However, the findings also demonstrate that women's experiences are not homogeneous. Participant P7 presented a contrasting perspective by reporting that she generally feels comfortable using public spaces and rarely experiences fear while travelling independently.

"Personally, I have not faced any major problems while going out alone. I usually feel comfortable in public places and I don't constantly worry about my safety."

Her account highlights the diversity of women's experiences and cautions against portraying all women as uniformly fearful. Differences in personal experiences, family background, self-confidence, occupation, familiarity with urban environments, and previous encounters all contribute to variations in perceptions of safety.

This observation supports the argument made by Sylvia Chant (2013) that women's urban experiences are shaped by multiple social and economic factors rather than gender alone. Similarly, McDowell (1983) argues that women's experiences of urban environments differ according to their social positions, responsibilities, and patterns of everyday mobility. The contrasting experience of Participant P7 therefore reinforces the importance of recognising diversity within women's lived experiences rather than treating women as a single homogeneous category.

Overall, the findings suggest that daytime safety is produced through an interaction of physical visibility, social activity, familiarity, and community support. Participants' confidence during daylight hours illustrates that safety is experienced as both a physical and a social phenomenon, reflecting broader sociological understandings of urban public space.

Sub-theme 4.9.1.2: Fear and Anxiety During Night-Time Travel

While daytime was generally associated with confidence and comfort, participants consistently reported a significant shift in their perceptions of safety after sunset. Fear and anxiety during night-time travel emerged as one of the strongest themes across the interviews. Almost all participants explained that darkness transformed otherwise familiar public spaces into environments characterised by uncertainty, caution, and heightened awareness.

Athira described this transition clearly:

"During the day I can travel without thinking much about safety. But once it gets dark, I become more alert and start paying attention to everything around me."

Similarly, Gopika explained that poorly lit streets and isolated roads generated feelings of discomfort, while Smitha associated deserted bus stops and empty roads with nervousness and insecurity.

These findings indicate that women's perceptions of safety are highly temporal, changing according to the time of day rather than remaining fixed. Public spaces that appear safe during daylight hours become associated with vulnerability after dark because of reduced visibility, fewer pedestrians, and diminished opportunities for informal social surveillance.

This finding strongly supports Rachel Pain's (1991) argument that women's fear is shaped not only by actual risks but also by environmental cues that signal vulnerability. Likewise, Wesely and Gaarder (2004) found that women frequently associate darkness, isolation, and reduced public activity with increased fear of violence, leading them to avoid parks, recreational areas, and public spaces during evening hours.

Participant P4's experience further demonstrates how previous encounters influence future perceptions of safety. After being verbally harassed while waiting at a bus stop, she reported becoming significantly more cautious while travelling alone.

"The incident stayed in my mind for a long time. After that, I never felt the same while waiting alone."

This finding illustrates that fear often extends beyond the original incident itself. The psychological consequences of harassment continue to shape women's future interactions with urban environments.

Pain (2001) similarly argues that women's fear is frequently maintained through memories of previous experiences and awareness of violence experienced by other women. Even when no further incidents occur, women continue to anticipate possible risks, leading to long-term changes in behaviour and confidence.

Participants such as Rejimol and P6, who travel before sunrise because of work commitments, further highlighted that darkness itself creates uncertainty.

Rejimol explained:

"Nothing may happen, but still there is fear. You just want to reach your destination quickly."

Her statement reflects what van den Berg (2012) describes as perceived vulnerability, where women experience fear because of uncertainty rather than direct victimisation.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that fear during night-time travel is socially produced through the interaction of environmental conditions, previous experiences, cultural narratives, and gendered socialisation. Darkness functions not merely as a physical condition but as a social symbol associated with vulnerability and restricted mobility.

The findings demonstrate that women's perceptions of safety are dynamic, relational, and socially constructed rather than fixed or solely determined by crime. Participants interpreted public spaces by considering visibility, crowd density, familiarity, community support, previous experiences, and the time of day. Their narratives reveal that safety is experienced as a multidimensional phenomenon involving physical environments, emotional responses, and social relationships.

These findings strongly support the works of Rachel Pain (1991; 2001), Jane Jacobs (1961), van den Berg (2012), Panelli et al. (2004), Wesely and Gaarder (2004), and Loukaitou-Sideris (2014), all of whom argue that women's experiences of urban safety are shaped by an interaction of environmental design, social context, and gendered power relations. Rather than perceiving fear as an individual weakness, the findings indicate that women's caution reflects broader social realities that continue to influence their everyday engagement with urban public spaces.

Sub-theme 4.9.1.3: Constant Vigilance and Precautionary Behaviour

One of the most significant findings of the study was that participants consistently described engaging in precautionary behaviours while using urban public spaces. These practices had become integrated into their everyday routines and were often viewed as normal aspects of travelling rather than exceptional responses to danger. The findings indicate that women rarely move through the city without consciously evaluating their surroundings. Instead, they remain continuously alert to environmental cues, social interactions, and potential risks.

Most participants explained that they consciously avoided isolated roads, preferred well-lit and crowded areas, informed family members about their travel plans, shared their live location through mobile applications, carried mobile phones for emergencies, and remained attentive to the behaviour of people around them. These practices demonstrate that women actively

negotiate urban spaces by balancing their desire for independence with the need to minimise perceived risks.

Athira described this constant state of awareness:

"Whenever I travel alone, especially in the evening, I keep checking who is around me. Even if nothing happens, I remain alert."

Similarly, Gopika explained:

"Before leaving, I tell my parents where I am going. If I am travelling late, I keep them informed until I reach home."

These responses illustrate that precautionary behaviour has become embedded within women's everyday mobility. Rather than perceiving such actions as unusual, participants regarded them as necessary routines for ensuring personal safety.

The findings strongly support Rachel Pain's (1991) argument that women's fear is socially produced through continuous socialisation rather than solely through direct victimisation. Pain argues that women internalise precautionary practices from an early age through advice from parents, family members, educational institutions, and society. Consequently, women often regulate their own behaviour before any threatening incident actually occurs.

Similarly, Pain (2001) explains that fear functions as an organising principle of women's everyday mobility. Women frequently plan their activities around perceived safety, avoiding situations that might expose them to risk. The present findings clearly demonstrate this phenomenon, as participants routinely modified their behaviour even when they had never personally experienced harassment.

Another common strategy reported by participants involved route selection. Several women explained that they deliberately chose longer routes if they perceived them to be safer than shorter but isolated roads.

Participant P5 stated:

"Sometimes there is a shortcut, but I don't use it if it is deserted. I prefer taking the main road even if it takes more time."

This finding demonstrates that women's mobility is often determined by perceived safety rather than convenience. Time, distance, and efficiency become secondary considerations when compared with personal security.

This observation is consistent with van den Berg (2012), who found that women frequently choose routes characterised by greater visibility, commercial activity, and pedestrian movement, even when these routes require additional travel time. Likewise, Gupta et al. argue that environmental characteristics significantly influence women's travel behaviour, with active and well-maintained streets generating greater confidence than isolated spaces.

The findings further reveal the growing importance of digital technologies in women's safety practices. Several participants reported using mobile phones to share their live location, make emergency calls, or remain in constant contact with family members during travel.

Participant P8 explained:

"Whenever I travel at night, I share my live location with my sister. It makes both of us feel more comfortable."

Although digital technology provides reassurance, it also reflects the extent to which women feel responsible for continuously managing their own safety. Mobile applications become tools for reducing uncertainty rather than guaranteeing freedom.

This finding resonates with Dhar and Thuppilikkat's discussion of women's experiences within digital labour platforms. The authors argue that technological resources increasingly function as coping mechanisms that enable women to negotiate urban mobility while simultaneously highlighting continuing structural inequalities.

An equally important finding concerns the emotional labour associated with constant vigilance. Participants described continuously scanning their surroundings, observing strangers' behaviour, remaining mentally alert, and anticipating possible threats. Such vigilance often continued even when no immediate danger was present.

Rejimol remarked:

"Even when everything seems normal, I keep thinking about what I would do if something happened."

This statement demonstrates that vigilance extends beyond physical behaviour to include emotional and cognitive processes. Participants were not only physically navigating the city but were also mentally preparing themselves for possible risks.

This finding supports Wesely and Gaarder (2004), who argue that women expend considerable emotional energy managing fear while occupying public spaces. Their study shows that women experience urban environments through continuous mental calculations regarding safety, demonstrating that fear affects psychological well-being as much as physical mobility.

From a sociological perspective, these precautionary behaviours illustrate how gender norms shape women's everyday experiences. Participants rarely questioned why these precautions were necessary; instead, they accepted them as ordinary responsibilities associated with being women. This normalisation reflects broader patriarchal expectations that women should regulate their own behaviour to avoid victimisation.

McDowell (1983) argues that such expectations reproduce gender inequality by shifting responsibility for safety from society to individual women. Rather than transforming unsafe environments, women are expected to alter their own behaviour. Similarly, Spain (1992) observes that gendered socialisation encourages women to perceive public space as requiring constant negotiation rather than unrestricted participation.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that precautionary behaviour has become a routine aspect of women's urban lives. Although these strategies enable women to continue participating in education, employment, and public life, they also reveal the unequal burden placed upon women to manage risks that arise from broader structural inequalities.

4.9.2 THEME 2: HARASSMENT AND ITS IMPACT ON WOMEN'S MOBILITY

Sub-theme 4.9.2.1: Experiences of Staring, Comments and Verbal Harassment

Another major theme emerging from the study concerns women's experiences of harassment and the ways in which these experiences influence their mobility and participation in urban life. Although participants reported varying levels of direct victimisation, almost every respondent had either experienced harassment personally or knew someone who had encountered similar situations. These experiences extended beyond physical violence to include staring, verbal comments, unwanted conversations, inappropriate gestures, following, and other subtle forms of intimidation.

The findings indicate that harassment should not be understood only as isolated incidents but as a recurring feature of women's everyday engagement with public spaces. Many participants explained that even seemingly minor incidents had lasting emotional consequences because they created feelings of discomfort, embarrassment, and vulnerability.

Smitha explained:

"Sometimes people just keep staring. They may not say anything, but it makes you uncomfortable."

Similarly, Athira observed:

"There have been situations where people passed comments while I was walking. It may seem small to others, but it affects your confidence."

These narratives illustrate that harassment extends beyond physical violence and includes everyday interactions that communicate exclusion and unequal power relations.

This finding strongly supports Phadke, Ranade, and Khan (2011), who argue that everyday forms of harassment function as mechanisms through which patriarchal societies regulate women's presence in public spaces. According to the authors, staring, unsolicited comments, and questioning women's presence contribute to an environment where women feel that public spaces do not fully belong to them.

Similarly, Rachel Pain (1991) argues that repeated experiences of minor harassment often produce greater long-term behavioural changes than isolated incidents of severe violence. Women develop heightened awareness because even seemingly insignificant encounters reinforce perceptions of vulnerability.

Several participants described how experiences of harassment resulted in long-term changes to their mobility patterns.

Participant P6 stated:

"After one incident, I stopped using that particular bus stop. Even now I avoid that place."

Likewise, Gopika explained:

"I don't like travelling alone after dark anymore. If possible, I wait until someone can come with me."

These findings demonstrate that harassment affects women's future behaviour rather than remaining confined to the original incident. Participants altered routes, changed travel schedules, avoided particular locations, and limited independent movement because of previous experiences.

This finding is consistent with Pain (2001), who argues that fear persists long after incidents have ended because women continue to anticipate future risks. Similarly, Panelli, Little, and Kraack (2004) found that community narratives and previous experiences contribute to long-term behavioural adaptations.

Sub-theme 4.9.2.2: Emotional and Psychological Impact of Harassment

The findings further reveal that harassment often produces psychological consequences extending beyond immediate fear. Participants described feeling anxious, losing confidence, and becoming more cautious in unfamiliar environments.

One participant explained:

"It makes you question whether you should go out alone. You start thinking twice before doing simple things."

This finding reflects what Wesely and Gaarder (2004) describe as the emotional burden associated with occupying public space. Fear becomes internalised, influencing women's self-confidence and limiting their spontaneous participation in everyday activities.

An important sociological observation emerging from the interviews concerns the normalisation of harassment. Several participants indicated that unwanted comments, staring, or inappropriate behaviour had become so common that they no longer considered these incidents exceptional.

This normalisation reflects broader patriarchal structures in which everyday gender-based harassment becomes socially tolerated. Spain (1992) argues that such experiences reinforce unequal gender relations by reminding women that their presence in public spaces remains subject to scrutiny and regulation.

Sub-theme 4.9.2.3: Restrictions on Freedom of Movement and Social Participation

The findings also suggest that women often rely upon avoidance rather than formal reporting. Most participants explained that they preferred leaving the situation, changing routes, or ignoring the behaviour instead of approaching police or other authorities.

This tendency supports Loukaitou-Sideris (2014), who argues that women frequently perceive formal complaint mechanisms as ineffective or inaccessible. Consequently, women adopt individual coping strategies rather than institutional responses.

Collectively, the findings indicate that harassment significantly influences women's mobility, confidence, and sense of belonging in urban public spaces. Even when incidents do not involve physical violence, their cumulative effect contributes to behavioural restrictions and reinforces unequal gender relations within the city.

The findings reveal that harassment constitutes a significant factor shaping women's everyday experiences of urban life. Participants described harassment as a routine rather than exceptional experience, influencing their mobility, confidence, and engagement with public spaces. Consistent with Phadke et al. (2011), Pain (1991; 2001), Wesely and Gaarder (2004), and Loukaitou-Sideris (2014), the findings demonstrate that everyday harassment functions as a mechanism through which women's access to urban space is subtly regulated. Rather than merely producing fear, these experiences reshape women's behaviour, limit spontaneous mobility, and reinforce the continuous negotiation between fear and freedom that characterises women's relationship with the city.

4.9.3 THEME 3: URBAN INFRASTRUCTURE AND INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

Urban infrastructure emerged as one of the most influential factors shaping women's perceptions of safety in Thiruvananthapuram. Although participants acknowledged that the city has undergone considerable urban development in recent years, they also identified several infrastructural deficiencies that affected their confidence while using public spaces. Their narratives suggest that women's experiences of safety are not determined solely by individual behaviour or social interactions but are also closely connected to the quality, accessibility, and maintenance of urban infrastructure.

Sub-theme 4.9.3.1: Importance of Street Lighting and Safe Public Spaces

Participants consistently highlighted the importance of adequate street lighting, well-maintained roads, reliable public transportation, active public spaces, visible police presence, CCTV surveillance, and emergency support systems. These physical and institutional features were frequently associated with greater confidence, reduced anxiety, and increased willingness to travel independently.

Athira observed:

"If the roads are well lit and there are people around, I feel much more confident travelling alone."

Similarly, Smitha explained:

"Even if the place is unfamiliar, good lighting and regular movement of people make me feel safer."

These responses indicate that women interpret infrastructure not merely as physical facilities but as indicators of institutional care and public accountability. Well-maintained public spaces communicate that the environment is actively monitored and socially occupied, thereby enhancing women's sense of security.

This finding supports Jane Jacobs' (1961) theory of "eyes on the street," which argues that vibrant public spaces characterised by continuous activity naturally generate informal surveillance. According to Jacobs, the presence of ordinary citizens discourages deviant behaviour and creates safer neighbourhoods. The participants' emphasis on crowded, active streets clearly reflects this principle.

Similarly, Loukaitou-Sideris (2014) argues that gender-sensitive urban planning requires attention to women's everyday experiences rather than relying solely on crime statistics. The present findings reinforce this argument by demonstrating that women evaluate public spaces through environmental cues such as visibility, accessibility, maintenance, and opportunities for assistance.

Sub-theme 4.9.3.2: Safety Concerns in Public Transportation

Several participants specifically discussed public transportation as a critical determinant of safety. Although buses remain the primary mode of transport for many women, respondents reported concerns regarding overcrowding, inadequate lighting at bus stops, irregular services during evening hours, and occasional experiences of harassment while travelling.

Participant P4 explained:

"Waiting alone at the bus stop late in the evening is uncomfortable because there are very few people around."

Likewise, another participant observed:

"Sometimes the problem is not inside the bus but waiting for the bus."

These narratives demonstrate that women's travel experiences extend beyond transportation itself and include the surrounding infrastructure. Bus stops, pedestrian pathways, and connecting roads become important sites where women negotiate safety.

These findings correspond with Gupta et al., who identify transport infrastructure as one of the most important environmental determinants of women's mobility. Similarly, Sadeghi et al. (2022) argue that transportation systems should be evaluated not only by efficiency but also by accessibility, visibility, and users' perceptions of safety.

Sub-theme 4.9.3.3: Role of CCTV, Police Presence and Government Measures

Another recurring issue concerned maintenance of public spaces.

Participants noted that abandoned buildings, poorly maintained roads, overgrown vegetation, and neglected public facilities often generated feelings of insecurity.

Rejimol commented:

"Places that look abandoned automatically make you uncomfortable because you don't know who might be there."

This finding reflects the broader sociological understanding that environmental neglect communicates social disorder. Participants associated poorly maintained environments with reduced institutional presence and increased uncertainty.

This observation supports Gupta et al., who argue that neglected urban environments often reduce women's willingness to occupy public spaces. Likewise, Jacobs (1961) emphasised that lively, well-maintained neighbourhoods strengthen informal social control and encourage public participation.

The interviews further revealed that participants viewed visible policing positively, particularly during evening hours. Police patrols were perceived not merely as mechanisms for controlling crime but as symbols of institutional support and public reassurance.

However, participants also expressed reservations regarding the effectiveness of formal complaint mechanisms.

Athira stated:

"Many women do not report small incidents because they feel nothing will happen."

This finding suggests that physical infrastructure alone cannot create safe cities. Institutional responsiveness and public trust remain equally important.

Loukaitou-Sideris (2014) similarly argues that surveillance technologies and policing should complement broader institutional reforms rather than function as isolated solutions. Women's confidence depends not only on the availability of security measures but also on the belief that institutions will respond effectively when problems arise.

Overall, the findings indicate that urban infrastructure significantly shapes women's experiences of safety. However, infrastructure alone cannot eliminate fear unless accompanied by responsive governance, gender-sensitive planning, and positive social interactions.

THEME 4.9.4: SOCIAL ATTITUDES, GENDER NORMS, FREEDOM AND BELONGING

Perhaps the most significant finding of the study is that women's experiences of safety extend beyond physical security to encompass broader questions of freedom, dignity, belonging, and citizenship. Participants repeatedly indicated that their experiences within urban public spaces were influenced not only by infrastructure but also by prevailing social attitudes towards women.

Sub-theme 4.9.4.1: Family Influence and Gendered Restrictions

Many respondents explained that women continue to experience greater social scrutiny than men while occupying public spaces. Activities such as travelling alone at night, spending leisure time in parks, or remaining outdoors for extended periods were often viewed differently when performed by women.

Gopika reflected:

"People often question why a woman is outside late at night. They don't usually ask the same question about men."

This statement illustrates that women's mobility continues to be regulated through cultural expectations regarding appropriate feminine behaviour.

These findings strongly support Phadke, Ranade, and Khan (2011), who argue that women are often expected to justify their presence in public spaces, whereas men enjoy greater freedom to occupy the city without explanation. According to the authors, genuine urban equality requires women to enjoy the same freedom to "loiter" as men.

Participants also described experiencing subtle forms of social judgement that influenced their behaviour even in the absence of direct harassment.

Smitha explained:

"Sometimes you don't feel afraid of crime. You feel uncomfortable because people keep watching you."

This observation demonstrates that safety involves emotional comfort as much as physical protection.

Similarly, **Rachel Pain (2001)** argues that fear is socially produced through everyday interactions rather than simply through violent incidents. Women's perceptions of insecurity therefore emerge through repeated experiences of observation, judgement, and gendered expectations.

Sub-theme 4.9.4.2: Responsibility, Victim-Blaming and Social Attitudes

The interviews further revealed that participants frequently experienced a tension between independence and responsibility.

Although women increasingly pursue higher education, employment, and independent mobility, many continued to feel personally responsible for preventing harassment.

Participant P5 explained:

"We are always told to be careful. We change our behaviour instead of expecting society to change."

This finding reflects the internalisation of gender norms.

McDowell (1983) argues that women often become responsible for regulating their own mobility because patriarchal societies locate responsibility for safety within individual behaviour rather than structural inequalities.

Similarly, Spain (1992) observes that urban environments continue to reproduce gendered divisions of public and private space, making women responsible for negotiating boundaries that men rarely encounter.

Sub-theme 4.9.4.3: Community Support and Respect for Women

Despite these challenges, participants also demonstrated significant agency.

Many women described confidently pursuing education, employment, travel, and leisure despite existing concerns regarding safety.

Athira remarked:

"I don't want fear to stop me from living my life. I take precautions, but I continue doing what I need to do."

This finding is particularly significant because it demonstrates that women should not be understood solely as victims of unsafe environments.

Rather, participants actively negotiated urban life through practical strategies, confidence, resilience, and informed decision-making.

This observation strongly supports Wesely and Gaarder (2004), who argue that women constantly negotiate between fear and freedom rather than allowing fear to determine their lives completely.

Similarly, Phadke et al. (2011) argue that women's continued presence in public spaces itself represents a form of resistance against patriarchal restrictions.

Sub-theme 4.9.4.4: Diverse Experiences of Safety

The findings further indicate that women increasingly perceive urban public spaces as spaces to which they have a legitimate right.

Several participants rejected the idea that women should avoid public spaces because of safety concerns.

Instead, they argued that cities should become safer without requiring women to restrict their own mobility.

This perspective reflects Lefebvre's (1996) concept of the Right to the City, which emphasises that all citizens should possess equal opportunities to access, participate in, and shape urban life.

The findings therefore suggest that women increasingly frame safety not simply as protection from violence but as an issue of citizenship, equality, and social justice.

The findings of this study demonstrate that women's experiences of safety in the urban spaces of Thiruvananthapuram are shaped through the interaction of physical environments, social relationships, institutional arrangements, cultural expectations, and individual agency.

Consistent with Rachel Pain (1991; 2001), the study demonstrates that fear is socially constructed and continuously negotiated rather than merely determined by crime statistics.

Supporting Jane Jacobs (1961) and Loukaitou-Sideris (2014), the findings indicate that environmental characteristics such as visibility, active streets, transportation infrastructure, and maintenance significantly influence women's perceptions of safety.

In agreement with Phadke, Ranade, and Khan (2011), the study demonstrates that women's safety cannot be understood solely as protection from violence. Rather, it is fundamentally connected to freedom of movement, equal participation, and the right to occupy public spaces without fear or justification.

The findings also support Spain (1992), McDowell (1983), and Chant (2013) by illustrating that women's experiences remain shaped by gendered social norms despite increasing educational and professional opportunities.

At the same time, the study extends previous research by demonstrating that women in Thiruvananthapuram are neither passive victims nor completely unrestricted citizens. Instead, they continuously negotiate between fear and freedom, adopting adaptive strategies while simultaneously asserting their right to participate in urban life.

4.10 CONCLUSION

This chapter analysed women's experiences of safety in the urban spaces of Thiruvananthapuram through four interrelated themes: perceptions of safety and fear, precautionary behaviour and mobility, urban infrastructure and institutional support, and social attitudes, freedom, and belonging. The findings revealed that women's experiences of safety are dynamic and shaped by the interaction of environmental, institutional, social, and cultural factors. While participants adopted numerous strategies to navigate urban life safely, they also demonstrated resilience and agency in claiming public spaces.

The discussion shows that women's safety extends beyond crime prevention to encompass mobility, dignity, belonging, participation, and the right to the city. These findings provide an important sociological understanding of how women experience and negotiate urban spaces in Thiruvananthapuram and form the basis for the conclusions and recommendations presented in the following chapter.

CHAPTER V

FINDINGS, SUGGESTIONS AND CONCLUSION

5.1 MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The present study explored women's experiences of safety in the urban public spaces of Thiruvananthapuram, focusing on the relationship between fear, freedom, mobility, and everyday urban life. Through qualitative interviews with seven women from diverse age groups, occupations and socio-economic backgrounds, the study revealed that women's perceptions of safety are shaped by an interaction of physical, social, cultural and institutional factors. The findings demonstrate that safety is not merely the absence of crime but a multidimensional experience that influences women's mobility, confidence, participation and sense of belonging within the city.

One of the most significant findings is that women's perceptions of safety are highly contextual and dynamic rather than fixed. Participants did not perceive the city as entirely safe or unsafe; instead, their feelings of safety varied according to the time of day, the nature of the location, crowd density, familiarity with the area, and previous personal experiences. Most participants expressed confidence while travelling during the daytime, particularly in crowded commercial areas, educational institutions, workplaces, and busy roads where public visibility and social interaction were high. However, the same spaces were often perceived as unsafe after dark due to reduced pedestrian activity, poor lighting, and feelings of isolation. This finding indicates that women's experiences of urban space are shaped by both environmental and social conditions.

The study further revealed that fear plays a central role in regulating women's everyday mobility. Although not all participants had personally experienced serious incidents of violence or harassment, almost all described remaining continuously alert while travelling alone. Fear was often influenced by previous experiences, stories shared by family and friends, media reports, and broader social perceptions regarding women's vulnerability in public spaces. Consequently, fear functioned not simply as an emotional response but as a social reality that shaped women's decisions regarding when, where, and how they travelled. This finding suggests that women's mobility is influenced as much by perceived risk as by actual experiences of victimisation.

Another important finding is that women routinely adopt precautionary strategies to navigate public spaces. Participants reported avoiding isolated roads, preferring well-lit and crowded areas, choosing longer but safer routes, sharing their live location with family members, remaining in constant communication while travelling, and informing relatives about their movements. Many women also avoided travelling alone late at night whenever possible. These behavioural adjustments have become normalised aspects of everyday life rather than exceptional responses to danger. While such strategies demonstrate women's resilience and agency, they also reveal the unequal burden placed on women to manage risks associated with public spaces.

The study also found that everyday harassment significantly influences women's experiences of the city. Participants described encountering behaviours such as persistent staring, verbal comments, unsolicited conversations, following, inappropriate gestures, and other subtle forms of intimidation. Although these incidents were often considered "minor" by society, participants reported that they produced lasting emotional consequences by reducing confidence, increasing anxiety, and influencing future travel decisions. Several respondents explained that after experiencing harassment, they avoided specific locations, changed travel routes, or restricted their independent movement. These findings demonstrate that even non-physical forms of harassment contribute to women's perceptions of insecurity and shape their relationship with urban public spaces.

Urban infrastructure emerged as another important determinant of women's perceptions of safety. Participants consistently identified adequate street lighting, active public spaces, reliable public transportation, CCTV surveillance, visible police presence, and well-maintained public facilities as factors that increased their confidence while travelling. Conversely, deserted bus stops, poorly lit roads, abandoned buildings, neglected public spaces, and inadequate transport facilities generated feelings of fear and vulnerability. Women interpreted well-maintained environments as indicators of institutional care and social order, whereas neglected spaces were associated with uncertainty and potential risk. This finding highlights the importance of gender-sensitive urban planning in creating safer and more inclusive cities.

The study further revealed that institutional support alone is insufficient unless accompanied by public trust and responsiveness. While participants appreciated the presence of police patrols and surveillance systems, many expressed reluctance to report incidents of harassment because they believed that complaints would not receive adequate attention. As a result, women

often relied on avoidance and self-protection rather than formal institutional mechanisms. This finding suggests that improving women's safety requires strengthening institutional accountability alongside physical infrastructure.

An important sociological finding concerns the continued influence of gender norms and social attitudes on women's experiences of public spaces. Participants explained that women often face greater scrutiny than men while travelling alone, particularly during evening hours. Many reported feeling judged for being outdoors at night or questioned about their reasons for occupying public spaces. Such attitudes reinforce traditional expectations regarding women's behaviour and place the responsibility for safety primarily upon women themselves. Participants indicated that they were frequently advised to be cautious, modify their behaviour, or avoid particular situations rather than expecting broader social change. This demonstrates that women's safety is influenced not only by environmental conditions but also by deeply embedded cultural norms and patriarchal attitudes.

Despite these challenges, the findings also highlight women's agency and resilience. Participants did not allow fear to completely restrict their participation in urban life. Instead, they continued pursuing education, employment, professional careers, shopping, recreation, and social activities while adopting practical strategies to manage perceived risks. Many women expressed confidence in their ability to navigate the city and emphasised that public spaces belong equally to women and men. Their narratives reflect a growing assertion of women's right to mobility, participation, and urban citizenship. Rather than portraying themselves solely as victims, participants demonstrated determination to balance caution with independence.

Another important finding is that women's experiences are diverse and cannot be generalised. Differences were observed according to age, occupation, patterns of mobility, previous experiences, and familiarity with different urban environments. Students, nurses, IT professionals, domestic workers, sales employees, and self-employed women experienced the city in different ways because of variations in working hours, travel requirements, and social circumstances. Some participants reported relatively high levels of confidence while others experienced persistent anxiety and restriction. These findings emphasise the importance of recognising the heterogeneity of women's experiences rather than treating women as a single homogeneous group.

The study highlights that women's safety in urban public spaces extends far beyond protection from crime. It encompasses freedom of movement, emotional well-being, confidence, dignity, participation and the ability to access public spaces without fear or discrimination. Women's everyday experiences reveal a continuous negotiation between fear and freedom, where aspirations for independence coexist with the need for constant vigilance. The findings therefore reinforce the argument that creating safer cities requires not only improvements in physical infrastructure but also institutional responsiveness, gender-sensitive urban planning, public awareness, and broader social transformation aimed at challenging discriminatory gender norms.

By documenting the lived experiences of women in Thiruvananthapuram, the study contributes to sociological understanding of the relationship between gender and urban space. It highlights that inclusive urban development must be evaluated not only through physical growth and infrastructure but also through the extent to which women are able to exercise their right to the city with safety, confidence and equal citizenship.

5.2 SUGGESTIONS

The findings of the present study indicate that improving women's safety in urban public spaces requires a comprehensive approach that extends beyond physical security measures. Women's experiences of safety are shaped by the interaction of urban infrastructure, institutional support, social attitudes and gender relations. Based on the findings, the following suggestions are proposed.

5.2.1. Promote Gender-Sensitive Urban Planning

Urban planning should incorporate women's perspectives while designing and maintaining public spaces. Local authorities and urban planners should ensure adequate street lighting, well-maintained pedestrian pathways, accessible public toilets, proper signage, and barrier-free infrastructure. Bus stops, parks, parking areas, and other public facilities should be designed to maximise visibility and encourage continuous public activity. Gender audits of public spaces may be conducted periodically to identify locations where women feel unsafe and to prioritise infrastructural improvements.

5.2.2. Strengthen Public Transportation Safety

Since public transport is widely used by women for education and employment, improving its safety should be a priority. Authorities should ensure adequate lighting at bus stops and railway stations, regular public transport services during early morning and late evening hours, and the

installation and maintenance of CCTV cameras in buses and transport terminals. Public transport staff should receive training on gender-sensitive practices and protocols for responding promptly to incidents of harassment. Emergency helpline numbers should be clearly displayed in all public transport facilities.

5.2.3. Enhance Community Policing and Institutional Responsiveness

The findings reveal that women value visible police presence but often hesitate to report incidents because of limited confidence in institutional responses. Community policing initiatives should therefore be strengthened to improve trust between citizens and law enforcement agencies. Police personnel should receive regular training in gender-sensitive policing, victim-centred approaches, and effective handling of complaints related to harassment and violence against women. Simple, confidential, and accessible complaint mechanisms should be established to encourage reporting and ensure timely action.

5.2.4. Improve Surveillance While Respecting Privacy

The installation of CCTV cameras in high-risk locations such as isolated streets, bus stops, parking areas, pedestrian underpasses, and public parks may enhance women's confidence while travelling. However, surveillance should complement rather than replace broader social and institutional interventions. CCTV systems should be regularly monitored and maintained to ensure their effectiveness while respecting citizens' privacy and legal safeguards.

5.2.5. Promote Public Awareness and Gender Sensitisation

The study demonstrates that women's experiences of insecurity are influenced not only by infrastructure but also by prevailing gender norms and social attitudes. Public awareness campaigns should therefore promote respect, equality, and shared responsibility for creating safe public spaces. Educational institutions, workplaces, resident associations, and civil society organisations should organise programmes on gender equality, respectful behaviour, bystander intervention, and the prevention of sexual harassment. Such initiatives can contribute to changing discriminatory attitudes that restrict women's freedom in public spaces.

5.2.6. Encourage Shared Responsibility for Women's Safety

The findings indicate that women often assume the primary responsibility for ensuring their own safety by modifying their behaviour and restricting their mobility. Public discourse should move away from victim-blaming approaches that place responsibility solely on women. Instead, families, communities, educational institutions, employers, transport authorities, and

government agencies should work collectively to create environments where women can participate freely without unnecessary restrictions. Safety should be recognised as a shared social responsibility rather than an individual burden.

5.2.7. Increase Women's Participation in Urban Governance

Women's experiences should be incorporated into urban planning and local governance processes. Municipal corporations, resident welfare associations, and planning committees should actively involve women in consultations related to transportation, infrastructure development, neighbourhood planning, and public safety initiatives. Women's participation in decision-making can ensure that urban policies reflect the realities of everyday life and respond effectively to their concerns.

5.2.8. Strengthen Safety Measures in Educational Institutions and Workplaces

Since many participants were students and working women, educational institutions and employers should develop comprehensive safety policies. These may include safe transportation facilities, well-lit campuses, functional grievance redressal mechanisms, Internal Committees under the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, emergency contact systems, and regular awareness programmes on gender equality and personal safety. Institutions should also encourage reporting without fear of stigma or retaliation.

5.2.9. Promote Inclusive Urban Spaces

Urban spaces should be designed not only to reduce crime but also to encourage women's participation in recreation, leisure, and community activities. Parks, cultural centres, waterfronts, and public gathering spaces should be inclusive, accessible, and welcoming to women of all ages. Encouraging greater participation by women in public life can contribute to increased visibility, stronger community ownership, and a greater sense of belonging within urban environments.

5.2.10. Encourage Further Research

The present study focused on women's lived experiences of safety in Thiruvananthapuram using a qualitative approach. Future research may adopt mixed-method or comparative research designs to examine women's experiences across different cities, socio-economic groups, and cultural contexts. Studies may also explore the experiences of elderly women, women with disabilities, migrant women, transgender persons, and other marginalised groups

to develop a more comprehensive understanding of gender and urban safety. Longitudinal studies examining the impact of changing urban infrastructure and government initiatives on women's perceptions of safety would also make valuable contributions to sociological research.

Creating safer urban spaces requires moving beyond a narrow focus on crime prevention towards a holistic understanding of women's everyday experiences. The findings of this study suggest that women's safety is closely linked to freedom of movement, dignity, equal citizenship and the right to participate fully in urban life. Therefore, sustainable improvements in women's safety require the integration of gender-sensitive urban planning, responsive governance, effective law enforcement, inclusive public policies, community participation, and broader social transformation that challenges discriminatory gender norms. Such an integrated approach will contribute to building urban environments where women can exercise their rights, pursue opportunities, and engage in public life with confidence, security, and equal access to the city.

5.3 CONCLUSION

The present study, "Between Fear and Freedom: Women's Experiences of Safety in the Urban Spaces of Thiruvananthapuram," examined the complex realities of women's safety within the urban public spaces of Thiruvananthapuram. The study was undertaken with the objective of understanding how women perceive safety in public spaces, identifying the factors that shape these perceptions, exploring the challenges women encounter in their everyday mobility, and examining the strategies they adopt to negotiate urban environments. By employing a qualitative research design and collecting data through semi-structured interviews with women from diverse socio-economic and occupational backgrounds, the study was able to capture the lived experiences, perceptions and everyday realities that often remain invisible in official statistics and policy discussions.

The findings reveal that women's experiences of urban public spaces are shaped by a complex interaction of physical, social, cultural and institutional factors. The study confirms that urban public spaces cannot be understood as gender-neutral environments. Instead, they are socially constructed spaces where gender relations, cultural expectations, and power structures influence women's mobility, participation, and sense of belonging. Although Thiruvananthapuram has witnessed significant urban development through expanding educational institutions, commercial centres, transportation networks, and information technology hubs, these developments have not entirely eliminated the challenges women

continue to encounter while accessing and using public spaces. Women's experiences demonstrate that urban development and gender inclusion do not necessarily progress at the same pace.

One of the major conclusions emerging from the study is that women's understanding of safety extends far beyond protection from physical violence or crime. Participants consistently described safety as a multidimensional experience involving freedom of movement, emotional security, confidence, dignity, comfort, accessibility and the ability to occupy public spaces without fear. This finding reinforces the sociological understanding that safety is both an objective and subjective phenomenon. Women evaluate public spaces not only by the likelihood of physical harm but also by the extent to which they feel welcomed, respected, and free to participate in everyday urban life.

The study further demonstrates that fear remains a defining feature of women's relationship with urban public spaces. However, fear is not experienced as an isolated emotional response; rather, it is socially produced through everyday experiences, gendered socialisation, cultural expectations, media narratives, and previous encounters with harassment or insecurity. Participants described how fear influenced their travel behaviour, daily routines, and decision-making processes. The findings indicate that women continuously assess their surroundings, interpret environmental cues, and evaluate potential risks before making decisions regarding mobility. This constant process of risk assessment illustrates that women's access to the city involves continuous negotiation rather than unrestricted freedom.

An important finding of the study is the widespread adoption of precautionary and adaptive strategies by women. Participants reported avoiding isolated locations, choosing well-lit and crowded routes, informing family members about their travel plans, sharing live locations through mobile applications, avoiding travel during late-night hours, and remaining constantly alert while travelling. These precautionary practices have become normalised aspects of everyday life rather than exceptional responses to danger. While such strategies reflect women's resilience and capacity to negotiate urban environments, they also reveal the unequal burden placed upon women to ensure their own safety. The findings therefore suggest that women often exercise agency within structurally unequal environments where responsibility for safety is disproportionately transferred onto them.

The study also highlights the significant impact of everyday harassment on women's experiences of urban life. Participants described encounters involving staring, verbal

harassment, inappropriate comments, unsolicited interactions, and intimidating behaviour in public spaces and public transportation. Although many of these incidents did not escalate into physical violence, they nevertheless produced long-lasting psychological effects, reducing women's confidence and altering their mobility patterns. The findings demonstrate that repeated experiences of seemingly "minor" harassment contribute to a cumulative sense of insecurity, reinforcing self-imposed restrictions and limiting women's spontaneous use of public spaces. Thus, women's experiences of safety are influenced not only by serious criminal incidents but also by everyday practices that reproduce unequal gender relations.

Another important conclusion concerns the role of urban infrastructure and the built environment in shaping women's perceptions of safety. Participants consistently associated well-lit streets, active commercial areas, maintained public spaces, reliable transportation, visible policing, and functional surveillance systems with greater confidence and security. Conversely, poorly lit roads, deserted bus stops, isolated pathways, neglected public spaces, and inadequate transport facilities generated feelings of vulnerability and uncertainty. These findings demonstrate that the design, maintenance, and management of urban environments significantly influence women's willingness to access and use public spaces. The study therefore reinforces the importance of gender-sensitive urban planning that incorporates women's lived experiences into infrastructure development and public policy.

Public transportation emerged as another critical dimension of women's everyday mobility. As many participants relied on buses and other forms of public transport for education, employment, and daily activities, concerns regarding overcrowding, inadequate facilities, poorly maintained bus stops, and inappropriate behaviour by fellow passengers affected their perceptions of safety. The findings suggest that ensuring safe, reliable, and accessible public transportation is essential not only for women's mobility but also for their equal participation in education, employment, and public life. Improving transportation systems therefore represents an important step towards promoting gender-inclusive urban development.

The study further reveals that institutional support plays a vital role in strengthening women's confidence while using public spaces. Participants generally viewed CCTV surveillance, police patrols, emergency helplines, and government safety initiatives positively, recognising their contribution to creating safer urban environments. However, several participants also expressed hesitation in reporting incidents because they were uncertain about institutional responsiveness and the effectiveness of complaint mechanisms. This finding highlights that physical security

measures alone are insufficient unless supported by efficient governance, timely action, and public confidence in institutional systems. Women's safety requires institutions that are not only visible but also accessible, responsive, and accountable.

A significant contribution of the study lies in its examination of the continuing influence of social attitudes and gender norms. Participants reported that family members frequently advised them to avoid travelling alone at night, remain cautious in public places, and modify their behaviour to reduce potential risks. While these concerns were often motivated by care and protection, they also reflected broader patriarchal expectations that place responsibility for safety primarily upon women. The study demonstrates that women continue to experience greater social regulation of their mobility than men. This unequal distribution of responsibility reinforces gendered inequalities by requiring women to adapt their behaviour rather than encouraging society to address the conditions that create insecurity.

Closely related to this finding is the issue of victim-blaming, which emerged repeatedly throughout the interviews. Participants expressed concern that public discussions surrounding women's safety often focus on women's clothing, behaviour, travel choices, or presence in public spaces rather than challenging the attitudes and actions of perpetrators. Such perspectives reinforce harmful stereotypes and shift responsibility away from broader structural and institutional failures. The findings suggest that sustainable improvements in women's safety require changes not only in infrastructure and policing but also in social attitudes, gender relations, and public discourse.

An equally important contribution of the study is its recognition of the diversity of women's experiences. The findings demonstrate that women cannot be treated as a homogeneous social category. Differences in age, occupation, educational background, family support, patterns of mobility, familiarity with urban environments, and previous experiences resulted in varying perceptions of safety. While some participants described frequent fear and behavioural restrictions, others reported greater confidence and positive experiences while navigating public spaces. These variations highlight the importance of adopting an intersectional perspective when examining women's experiences of urban life and caution against making broad generalisations regarding women's safety.

The study also confirms many of the theoretical and empirical insights discussed in the review of literature. The findings support feminist perspectives that conceptualise urban spaces as socially produced environments shaped by unequal gender relations. They are consistent with

previous studies demonstrating that women's experiences of safety are influenced by fear, everyday harassment, urban infrastructure, and social expectations. At the same time, the study extends existing knowledge by providing context-specific evidence from Thiruvananthapuram, a rapidly urbanising city that has received comparatively limited sociological attention. By foregrounding women's voices and lived experiences, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of gender and urban space within the Kerala context.

Finally, the study concludes that women's safety is fundamentally linked to freedom, mobility, citizenship and the right to the city. Safety cannot be reduced to the absence of crime or the presence of surveillance mechanisms alone. Rather, it encompasses women's ability to move confidently, participate equally, access opportunities without fear, and experience public spaces as places of inclusion rather than exclusion. Building safer cities therefore requires an integrated approach that combines gender-sensitive urban planning, accessible public transportation, responsive institutions, effective law enforcement, community participation, and sustained efforts to transform discriminatory gender norms and social attitudes.

In conclusion, this study highlights the importance of placing women's lived experiences at the centre of urban planning, policy formulation, and governance. Women's voices provide valuable insights into the everyday realities of urban life and reveal dimensions of safety that are often overlooked in conventional approaches focused solely on crime and infrastructure. By recognising safety as an issue of social justice, gender equality, and inclusive urban citizenship, the study advocates for the creation of cities where women can exercise their rights, pursue opportunities, and participate fully in social, economic, cultural, and political life without fear. Such cities are not only safer for women but are also more democratic, inclusive, equitable, and sustainable for all citizens.

REFERENCES

- Bryman, A. (2016). *Social research methods* (5th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Chant, S. (2013). Cities through a "gender lens": A golden "urban age" for women in the Global South? *Environment and Urbanization*, 25(1), 9–29.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0956247813477809>
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). Sage.
- Dhar, D., & Thuppilikkat, A. A. (2023). Gendered labour's positions of vulnerabilities in digital labour platforms and strategies of resistance: A case study of women workers' struggle in Urban Company, New Delhi.
- Fenster, T. (2005). The right to the gendered city: Different formations of belonging in everyday life. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 14(3), 217–231.
- Gupta, M., Ashtt, R., & Wankar, M. (2024). Women's safety in the built environment: A critical literature review. *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(1), 1015–1028.
<https://doi.org/10.53555/kuey.v30i1.5902>
- Jacobs, J. (1961). *The death and life of great American cities*. Random House.
- Kern, L. (2020). *Feminist city: Claiming space in a man-made world*. Verso.
- Lauri, M., Lauri, J., & Linander, I. (2025). Women's shelters and private shelters discursive struggle: Separatism, security and social change. *Nordic Social Work Research*, 15(3), 438–450. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2156857X.2023.2297984>
- Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space* (D. Nicholson-Smith, Trans.). Blackwell.
- Lefebvre, H. (1996). *Writings on cities* (E. Kofman & E. Lebas, Trans.). Blackwell.
- Loukaitou-Sideris, A. (2014). Fear and safety in the city: Theories and measurement. In V. Ceccato (Ed.), *The urban fabric of crime and fear* (pp. 37–48). Springer.
- Loukaitou-Sideris, A. (2014). Women's safety and the right to the city. In A. Larsson, A. Jalakas, & K. Tydén (Eds.), *The right to the city: Urban development from a gender perspective* (pp. 129–147). Nordic Centre for Spatial Development.
- Massey, D. (1994). *Space, place and gender*. Polity Press.

- McDowell, L. (1983). Towards an understanding of the gender division of urban space. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 1(1), 59–72.
- Pain, R. (1991). Space, sexual violence and social control: Integrating geographical and feminist analyses of women's fear of crime. *Progress in Human Geography*, 15(4), 415–431.
- Pain, R. (1997). Whither women's fear? Perceptions of sexual violence in public and private space. *International Review of Victimology*, 4(4), 297–312.
- Pain, R. (2001). Gender, race, age and fear in the city. *Urban Studies*, 38(5–6), 899–913.
- Panelli, R., Little, J., & Kraack, A. (2004). A community issue? Rural women's feelings of safety and fear in New Zealand. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 11(3), 445–467.
- Phadke, S., Khan, S., & Ranade, S. (2011). *Why loiter? Women and risk on Mumbai streets*. Penguin Books India.
- Sadeghi, A. R., Mousavi Sarvine Baghi, E. S., Shams, F., & Jangjoo, S. (2023). Women in a safe and healthy urban environment: Environmental top priorities for the women's presence in urban public spaces. *BMC Women's Health*, 23, Article 163. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12905-023-02281-8>
- Secor, A. J. (2002). The veil and urban space in Istanbul: Women's dress, mobility and Islamic knowledge. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 9(1), 5–22.
- Spain, D. (1992). *Gendered spaces*. University of North Carolina Press.
- Valentine, G. (1989). The geography of women's fear. *Area*, 21(4), 385–390.
- Van den Berg, L. (2012). *Women's perception of safety in urban public space* (Master's thesis). Utrecht University.
- Wesely, J. K., & Gaarder, E. (2004). The gendered "nature" of the urban outdoors: Women negotiating fear of violence. *Gender & Society*, 18(5), 645–663.

APPENDIX

INTERVIEW GUIDE

BETWEEN FEAR AND FREEDOM: WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE OF SAFETY IN THE URBAN SPACES OF THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

Section A: Background Information

1. Age
2. Educational Qualification
3. Occupation
4. Marital Status
5. Place of Residence
6. How long have you been living in Thiruvananthapuram?
7. What are your regular reasons for travelling within the city?

Section B: Experiences of Urban Public Spaces

1. Everyday Use of Public Spaces

1. Can you describe your everyday use of public spaces in Thiruvananthapuram?
2. Which public places do you visit most frequently?
3. How often do you travel alone?

2. Understanding Safety

4. What does the word "safety" mean to you?
5. When do you usually feel safe in public spaces?
6. What makes you feel unsafe?

3. Experiences of Safety and Fear

7. Can you describe a situation when you felt particularly safe in a public place?
8. Can you describe a situation when you felt unsafe?
9. How did that experience affect you?

4. Public Spaces and Mobility

- 10. Do concerns about safety influence your daily travel?
- 11. Have you ever avoided a place because you felt unsafe?

5. Freedom of Movement

- 13. Do you feel free to move around the city whenever you want?
- 14. Are there places you avoid?
- 15. Why?
- 16. Do you think women and men experience public spaces differently?

6. Experiences of Harassment

- 17. Have you ever experienced or witnessed harassment in a public space?
- 18. If yes, would you like to describe what happened?
- 19. How did you respond?
- 20. Did that experience influence your future behaviour?

7. Behavioural Adaptations

- 21. What precautions do you usually take while travelling?
- 22. Why do you take these precautions?

8. Public Transport

- 23. How safe do you feel while using public transportation?
- 24. Have you faced any difficulties while travelling by bus or other public transport?
- 25. What improvements would make public transport safer?

9. Urban Infrastructure

- 26. How do the following influence your sense of safety?
- 27. Are there any places in Thiruvananthapuram that you consider unsafe?Why?
- 28. Are there places where you always feel safe?Why?

10. Social and Cultural Influences

- 29. Do your family members advise you about travelling?
- 30. What kind of advice do they usually give?
- 31. Do you think society places different expectations on women regarding safety? Please explain.

11. Suggestions