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## **'Delhi is a hopeful place for me!': young middle- class women reclaiming the Indian city**

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# 'Delhi is a hopeful place for me!': young middle-class women reclaiming the Indian city

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## **Abstract**

In a city where violence against women is an everyday reality and a highly contested subject, gendered claims to the city are also fraught with possibilities and problems. This paper evaluates some of these issues through speech act and resilience of young, unmarried, middle-class women in Delhi, India. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, this paper explores how these women navigate public spaces, respond to violence and fear, and claim their rights to the city. I argue that these women's speech act and resilience are forms of everyday resistance to the violent gender order in the city. The paper also demonstrates that violence, fear, speech act and resilience are interlaced into women's everyday lives. In turn, I argue, the divide between gendered violence and women's agency is not discreet spaces but are relationally produced in a city where pluralities, contradictions, and contestations are embodied realities for women. Speech act and resilience thus provide spaces for meaningful discussions on how women (re)articulate their place in the city amidst gendered violence and fear.

**Keywords:** Delhi; everyday resistance; resilience; speech act; violence against women

## **Introduction**

This paper focuses on young, unmarried, middle-class women's (young women, hereafter) practices of speech act and resilience against gendered violence in public spaces of Delhi, India. While speech act and resilience are often viewed as acts of reproduction of existing social orders and manageable lives, I argue that these practices signify gendered political acts of everyday, transient, and ordinary forms of resistance. This, I argue, becomes clear when we understand them within historical and contemporary political context of unequal and intersectional gendered power relations, violence against women (VAW, hereafter), gendered fear, gendered urban

infrastructures and the inadequate role of the Indian State in mitigating violence in the city (Kannabiran 2005; Kazi 2019; Datta and Ahmed 2020; Govinda 2020). I argue that to withstand pervasive gendered violence and fear, young women feel inclined to adopt certain strategies and tactics in their everyday lives to develop a sense of safety and sustain their presence in public space over a period. Sustained presence is crucial for young women to develop discursive and embodied sense of control and sense of place and belonging, which can challenge violent attempts to control women in public spaces. Furthermore, through these actions, young women challenge masculinist and patriarchal stereotypes of women's normative place within the home, and violence as women's normative experience in public space. In turn, I suggest that speech act and resilience are young women's everyday resistance to the violent gender order of the city, albeit of transient nature. These are not grand, masculinist, big P political actions but are everyday forms of routinised practices and vocabularies that become possible depending on the available resources and social networks in the city.

I use Butler's (1993) speech act and Katz's (2004) take on resilience as analytical tools to examine the ways in which young women articulate their relationship with urban public spaces amidst widespread VAW and fear in Delhi, India. I use speech act to analyse women's discursive performance of the *self* as legitimate and capable members of the public, and hence as rightful users of public space. I focus on women's verbal utterances as the primary form of speech act. I then use resilience to understand how women translate their verbal enactments into everyday tactics and embodied practices that resist violence and fear on a daily basis. Taken together, these two concepts, I argue, help develop nuanced, relational and political understanding of how young women challenge the barriers imposed by VAW and fear in Delhi.

While this paper focuses on narratives and practices that are spoken, done and thus are readily listenable and observable, I do not claim that these are the *only* ways in which women respond to violence in everyday life. Violence in fact evokes a range of emotions and responses, including but not limited to a sense of vulnerability, shame, guilt, desperation, and avoidance that women undergo in their lives. The practices and narratives presented in this paper are women's overt and readable responses which are born out of the painful process of going through different unspoken violations and emotions.

## Middle-class women, economic liberalization and violence against women

Since liberalization of the Indian economy, the Indian middle-class has emerged as an aspirational group with significant economic and political influence (Fernandes 2000; Ghertner 2011; Brosius 2017). Yet middle-class women occupy a paradoxical position in cities like Delhi. On one hand, middle class women's presence and involvement in public spaces, especially for supervised consumption and socially approved employment are often encouraged in media and State discourses which help in maintaining a 'gender-friendly' image of the country (Ganguly-Scrase 2003; Dhawan 2010). Furthermore, there has been a significant increase in women's city-ward migration, educational and labor force participation and intra-urban mobilities since liberalization of the Indian economy. Existing research also demonstrate that middle-class women continually strive to improve their participation in social, political, and economic spaces in Indian cities (Dhawan 2010; Brosius 2017; Butcher 2018). Yet, their presence in public spaces continue to be framed within the normative public/private gender binary (Phadke 2013). Social discourses emphasize middle-class women's lack of need to access male-dominated public spaces other than for supervised employment and consumption, and their roles as a 'dutiful' daughter, wife, and mother as desirable and publicly respected life-choices (Unnithan-Kumar 2010; Bernroider 2018; Butcher 2018). These discourses act as social controls over everyday lives of women with significant implications for the conception of gender, violence, risk, and women's place in the city (see Phadke, Ranade, and Khan 2009; Chatterjee 2016; Sen, Kaur, and Zabiliūtė 2020). Public spaces are central to these gendered encounters and contestations (Sen, Kaur, and Zabiliūtė 2020).

Over the past decade, VAW in Indian cities has come under much media, social and political scanner. Among all the Indian cities, Delhi recorded the highest number of reported cases accounting for approximately 30% of the total crimes against women in India in 2019 (National Crime Records Bureau 2019). The paradigmatic expression of VAW is often understood as *exceptional* forms of violence, like rapes, abductions, and murders, while reported cases of domestic violence also remain high but less recognised. For instance, the gangrape and murder of a young unmarried woman - Jyoti Singh, popularly referred to as *Nirbhaya*,<sup>1</sup> on 16 December 2012 led to widespread public and media outcry nationally and internationally. Delhi was labelled as India's 'rape capital' and 'the most dangerous place for women to live' in the world (Thomson and Reuters Foundation 2017). These discourses of violent Delhi further classed inequalities whereby working-class men are predominantly seen as perpetrators of violence against middle-class women, even though these men undergo multiple levels of marginalization in their own lives (Govinda 2020).

My research on VAW in Delhi, of which this paper is a part, demonstrate that violence of multiple forms is normalized and rationalized as part of

women's everyday lives (Zahan 2020a). Women undergo countless instances of routine, banal and blatant forms of violence, harassment, and control that are integral to the spatial, social, and institutional structures that govern gendered urban life. The socio-legally most recognised form of violence is overt in nature and includes but not limited to sexual harassment, threats of physical harm, inappropriate touching, bullying, catcalling, stalking and intimidations, theft, and unwelcome interventions by strangers. This violence takes place in micro interactional public spaces like streets, pavements, markets, public parks, buses, metro trains, bus-stops, neighbourhoods. Violence also leads to significant levels of fear and social discourses around women's vulnerability in public spaces, which reproduce norms of gendered exclusion as part of social efforts to *protect* women. Social discourses maintain women's subjecthood as victims and are a form of discursive violence embedded in women's everyday interactions in the city. Social institutions like women's hostels, further take up these discourses and formalise them as regulations that control women's mobility, bodies, and social lives in the name of protection from violence (see Zahan 2020b).

Furthermore, existing research demonstrate that gender inequality is endemic in urban structures and processes. Issues, such as inadequate and costly public transport, overcrowding, lack of interconnectivity, lack of infrastructures like sewage, water and so on create significant insecurities for women who are vulnerable to sexual violence (Desai, Parmar, and Mahadevia 2018). Datta and Ahmed (2020) argue that the inadequacies of 'urban infrastructures can enable and embody multiple forms of violence against women' (p. 67). Using the concept of 'intimate city' Datta (2016) argues that women's experiences of intimate partner violence in slums are intricately connected to their experiences of violence of the exclusionary city. Similarly, drawing on Muslim women's experiences of violence in a slum in Hyderabad, India, Piedalue (2017) argues that violence must be understood as structural rather than a product of culture, which simplifies, fixes, and homogenises violence and victimhood to underdeveloped and non-Western contexts. Violence is thus a *process* of gendered urban structuring, rather than stand-alone events, shaped by pluralities of spaces, socio-spatial relations and actors that young women are connected to in the city. In turn, violence needs to be understood as historically inscribed onto young women's bodies, minds, and social and intimate spaces through everyday processes that are rationalized and normalized.

Young women's speech act and resilience need to be understood within this context of historical and deeply rooted gendered violence and fear, and emergent socio-economic changes that mark middle-class women both as a desirable and at-risk social group in the city. These contested processes frame women's subjectivities wherein they juggle the boundaries between safety and violence, belongingness, desire and out-of-placeness in complex ways. As I demonstrate later in the paper, despite the violence and fear women often associate public space with a sense of emancipation, desire, and freedom that they enjoy through experiences of employment, pleasure,

and social networks. Speech act and resilience make life more manageable in pragmatic ways within the particular social context and materialities of Delhi. In fact, women recognise the violence and fear that pervade their everyday life, and yet continually negotiate to produce safer geographies using discursive and embodied practices. These practices challenge the restrictions imposed by violence and provide useful analytical insights into how women challenge patriarchies and negotiate urban spaces in their everyday lives.

### **Methodological approaches**

Data for this paper draw on a larger research project, which examined young women's experiences of public spaces in Delhi. Data was collected between December 2016 and September 2017, with multiple revisits in 2018 and 2019 where I focused on women in the age group of 25-35 years. I employed a feminist mixed-method ethnographic approach to fieldwork. I used in-depth interviews, walking-in-the-city sessions, time-space diaries, and participant observations to develop critical insights on women's use of public spaces, such as public parks, bus stops, open markets, streets, neighbourhoods, metro-railway stations, hang-out spots, malls and cafes. I followed the research participants using walking as a method as they moved around in the city for work, leisure, and other purposes.

Instead of focusing on one neighbourhood, the research focused on the whole city of (metropolitan) Delhi. The research also focused on a generalised understanding of public spaces. I chose this approach as I was aware of the highly diverse nature of public spaces in Delhi which vary in terms of social-spatial and material characteristics. These fieldwork approaches were beneficial in capturing the experiences and narratives of the women in different and complex settings, allowing me to develop a plural, relational and intersectional understanding of young women's lives in the city.

The research participants came from diverse social backgrounds. I included women who represented Delhite (born and brought-up), migrants from Northeast India, and migrants from North India. These three groups provided perspectives on how caste, ethnicity/race, religion and migration intersected with gendered and classed experiences of the city. The participants occupied a diversity of middle- and lower-middle class residential locations in the city. These women were highly mobile. All of them worked in the city in some professional capacities as full-time and part time employees, business owners and trainees.

### **Speech act and resilience: conceptual framings**

Judith Butler defines 'speech act' as a 'discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names' (1993, 13). For instance, when a doctor utters

the phrase 'It is a girl'. at the birth of a child it produces a ripple effect. Butler argues that this seemingly inconsequential utterance performs an indispensable act, in this case, of gendering a newborn. This speech act subjects the newborn to a regime of gendered ideologies, practices, and norms prevalent in the society. In other words, the 'utterance wield the power' to name, define, and subjectivize the child into a gendered being situated within particular discourses (Butler 1993, 122). Speech act is thus 'an instance of power', which is 'performative' of the social context it is uttered in (Butler 1999, xxv). In turn, speech act is not only a linguistic performance but also a 'corporeal presentation', a 'deed'. In other words, utterances do not stay in the realm of language but invoke and lead to certain bodily actions and consequences.

According to Butler, speech act is performative and takes place in reference to existing laws and social norms (1999). In other words, speech act reproduces an already established social order. However, Marks (2014, 497) argues that when speech act is used in 'non-authorized ways and change the realm of what is acceptable', it produces a potential space for political action. The subject thus might act in contradiction to the law or the social order, and in doing so expresses their agency to oppose the law and remake itself. Speech act in turn can hold transformative power with significant effect on one's subjectivities, practices, and ways of being.

The second analytical term 'resilience' is used in this paper to understand the 'effects and responses' to VAW in public spaces. I draw on Cindi Katz's conceptualization of Resilience as part of her 3R's framework used to analyze the countertopographies of neoliberal reforms and their impact on children's lives in Howa and Harlem. In Katz's original framing, resilience exists in a continuum with reworking and resistive practices (Katz 2004, 241). Practices of resilience are 'small acts' that 'not only enable material and spiritual survival, but also the recuperation of dignity in a range of small transactions', when explicit resistance is not always possible (*ibid*, 246). Resilience is thus not resistance to power relations, but it helps people 'get by each day' using 'innumerable small acts' in the face of adversity. Yet, Katz argues that 'resilient acts are self-reinforcing, and inasmuch as they are fortifying, they offer the possibility of fostering something beyond recuperation'. She further adds that '[i]n many historical geographies, recuperation itself is an achievement' when resistance, especially against deeply rooted structures of inequalities and violence, is not possible (*ibid*). Katz thus uses the 3R's framework to provide a nuanced and constructive understanding of how people, in her case children, affected by neoliberal political-economic changes emerge as 'social actors' in these processes.

Over the years, the concept of resilience has also emerged as an 'idiom of global governance' (MacKinnon and Derickson 2013, 254), used as a top-down approach to *develop* capacities of people, places and infrastructures



to withstand external threats. Much of this literature engages with resilience from a top-down governance perspective wherein threats are framed as exogenous. These forms of resilience are considered pragmatic and apolitical, which privilege existing social relations and reproduce exclusionary social systems and marginality. For instance, Grove, Cox, and Barnett (2020) argue that governance driven by resilience framework often ‘defuse moral radical environmental initiatives’ and at the same time ‘recalibrate techniques of racialism’. In turn, resilience produces new forms of exclusions even when the initial focus is on reducing exclusions. Focusing on the spatial politics of resilience, MacKinnon and Derickson (2013, 254) argue that ‘spaces that are periodically reinvented to meet the changing demands of capital accumulation’ are the same spaces that are marginalized by the very conditions of the ‘globalized economy’ that make resilience a requirement for survival. In turn, a social system that is truly resilient requires ‘disruptions’ that destabilize the very structures that make resilience necessary for survival (*ibid*, 254). In response to these critiques, emerging research argues for a need to understand resilience within the context of historical inequalities in the social, economic, political, and institutional structures, which produce deeply rooted vulnerabilities over time. Sou (2022) argues that the externalization of threats produces a ‘myopical’ focus on actors as merely adapting and/or recovering from a disruption (see also Chandler 2012). By contrast, historically rooted vulnerabilities *necessitates* vulnerable groups to be resilient, in the absence of other options, and live under circumstances beyond their control due to historical and contemporary asymmetries of power. In this context, resilience provides ‘a middle ground between victim and vanguard, when social actors cannot alter circumstances but still show agency, self-organization and adeptness in coping and adaptation’ (Deverteuil and Golubchikov 2016, 147). This paper engages with this idea of resilience as a form of everyday resistance, and not merely an adaptive tactic, against historically rooted inequalities and everyday expressions of these inequalities, like gendered violence and fear in Delhi.

Taken together, this conceptual apparatus helps us develop a nuanced and political understanding of how marginalized social groups produce discursive and embodied struggles against historically embedded disruptions, violence, and exclusions on a daily basis. As discussed earlier, VAW is a process that emerges through complex structures of direct, discursive, and institutional forms of violence in India. Everyday violence against women also lead to widespread and effective social discourses around women’s vulnerability to violence (Govinda 2020). Consequently, as I demonstrate in this paper, women’s speech act and resilience defy the limitations generated by gendered violence and fear in the city. In the absence of structural interventions against violence and emergent nature of resistance, women’s speech act and resilience form significant parts of daily life that allow them

continued safer access to public space. Their speech act and resilience occupy the in-between space left empty by the lack of structural change and emerging feminist-oriented negotiations and struggles for gendered inclusion in the city. In turn, these everyday struggles are politically oriented in their effect producing greater autonomy for women, which can be a 'necessary precursor to resistance and transformation' (Deverteuil and Golubchikov 2016, 149). Furthermore, the shared nature of speech act and resilient practices and experiences of violence and fear also produces a sense of solidarity among women from different social backgrounds. By extension, I argue, these are performances and practices of gendered urban citizenship even when their impact in urban society, in terms of scale and temporality, might remain contextual and localised (Fenster 2005; Peake 2009; Vacchelli and Peyrefitte 2018).

### **Speech act: reclaiming the self and the city through gendered discursive performances**

In this section, I focus on how young women enact speech act by articulating and positioning themselves in the city alternatively. Their speech act, I argue, immediately disrupts dominant social discourses of women's vulnerability and implicitly resist historically rooted structures of gender inequalities. Young women's desires to live, aspire, hope, and thrive in the city is an essential driver of their speech act, which also demonstrate the frustration and the challenges that violence places on them. Abha, a resident living in a west Delhi middle-class neighbourhood, poignantly expresses the paradoxical nature of her relationship with public spaces. At the time of the interviews Abha worked as a part-time consultant psychologist at a private clinic and was waiting to find a better job. While Abha was approaching 30 years of age and was expected to get married soon by her family who was planning an arranged marriage, she wanted to continue higher education and grow in her career. As a result, Abha valued her access to public spaces, and the city for her job while continuing to negotiate with her family regarding marriage. However, VAW in public spaces often pose severe constraints on her capacity to access the city. Abha suggests that public spaces are her 'worst enemy' but also her 'best friend'. She elaborates:

Public spaces have a possibility of harm to my life, my sense of security. Yet, it is in these places I find my freedom. It is in these places I can assert my identity, that I can build an identity. It is in these places that I can truly find myself. My home does not provide me with that sort of nurturing atmosphere...I cannot be myself if I do not have public spaces in my life. No matter how unsafe they are I need them to build myself. I cannot build myself within the four walls of my home. (Abha/28/Delhite)

Evidently, Abha values access to public spaces as an essential part of *being* an urban woman, claim her identity and to be *her* in the city. Here, Abha utilises two dominant narratives about women's position in the city, first violence as a norm, and second the binary of public/private gendered spaces, to eventually turn the normative and dominant discourses on its head. By reversing the meanings Abha undermines gendered spatial hierarchies and potentially re-signify social norms regarding women's out-of-placeness in public spaces. Culturally, Indian women's role continues to be defined within the home as daughters, wives and mothers despite an increase in their economic participation (Abraham 2010; Datta 2016). The notion that women's place is in the home continues to be reinforced by right-wing populist forces in recent times. Abha elaborates that her parents do not support her choices to delay marriage and instead pursue a career, which reflect the impact of wider social expectations of women within the intimate spaces of home and family. In this context, Abha's reversal of spatial and social meanings emerges as a resistive act, both within the home and outside. This is Abha's speech act which contests dominant narratives and establishes the value public spaces hold for women like her who chooses to move away from familial identities and networks.

Many participants echoed Abha's desires and aspirations in relation to public space. The value that public space offered to these women varied considerably. For instance, Meera, a Delhite equated public spaces with 'tranquillity' and 'solitude', which helped her move away from the 'overwhelming' environment of the home and institutional gaze that controlled her mobilities and social life. Meera divides her week between home and a women's hostel in Delhi. She lives with her family during the weekend and in the hostel on weekdays to be near her workplace. Meera agreed to this arrangement on the insistence of her mother who did not 'trust' her to spend 'free-time' on her own during the weekend and suspected that Meera might form romantic relationships with men in the city, although she identifies as queer. The hostel where Meera lived also produces 'suffocating' environment for queer persons. In turn, public spaces assume particular significance and meaning for Meera, as she shares:

Even if there is nobody [to go with], I will just take my bag and then roam around. I will just roam around in a circle, just look around, at people, even if I do not need to buy [anything]. You know there is so much of tranquillity as well as solitude (Meera/26/Delhite).

While for Delhite women public space symbolise a sense of occasional relief from the dominant restrictive discourses, migrant women often associate their desires to access public space with transformative potentials. For example, Sonia, a migrant from Northeast India, see the city itself with a sense of hope and love despite the fear and violent experiences. Sonia

who has a law degree migrated to Delhi to practice law and is currently working in a legal consultancy company after a stint in a Delhi court. For her, opportunities to work define her perception of the city and how she views her relationship with public spaces. Sonia formed strong and positive image about Delhi and what the city could offer even before she migrated. Sonia shares:

Delhi was more of like a hopeful place for me. I saw a lot of opportunities in Delhi. As time went by, I started experiencing a lot of good and bad things which taught me a lot because of which I'm stronger. I owe a lot to Delhi personally. I look at Delhi in terms of love. I would never choose any other place [to live].  
(Sonia/29/Migrant)

Many migrant women share similar sense of emotional belonging with Delhi. Like Sonia, most migrant women identify 'opportunities' as key drivers for their decision to migrate, which are not limited to only employment, but encompass a wide range from possibilities to form friendships (Advaita/27), volunteering and teaching underprivileged children (Anushka/23), political participation (Anjali/31) to opportunities to be part of the cosmopolitanism of the city (Emily/25). In turn, they had made significant investments - economically, socially, and personally - to migrate to the city which required careful and elaborate negotiations with families.

These narratives illustrate how young women attach alternative meanings to public spaces providing them with a sense of belonging, pride, and confidence to claim these spaces. Their conceptualization of public spaces stands in stark contrast with the socio-cultural discourses that emphasize women's need to maintain gendered boundaries to avoid violence in public space. Notwithstanding the violence experienced, these women continually strive to reorient themselves as capable, confident young women in control of their lives, note Indrani's and Frieda's narratives below:

I have benefited because if we are in our comfort zone then you never learn. You must be out from your comfort zone then you will learn good things also bad things also. In one way it is better because we are stronger-mentally and emotionally. (Indrani/37/Migrant)

I have grown, I have matured, I know so many things that I bet that my contemporaries out there in [place-name] do not know. They would not be able to handle so many issues. I have gained knowledge, knowledge by experiences, everyday experiences, be it dealing with someone, talking to someone. (Frieda/32/Migrant)

Indrani and Frieda migrated to Delhi from Northeast India at different points of their lives in search of work and higher education, respectively. They have spent somewhere between 6-10 years in Delhi and have had extensive experiences, including everyday forms of violence. Yet, instead of speaking from a position of victimhood, Indrani and Frieda associate the city and the

violence with a sense of growth and maturity. Their narratives, like Abha's, expose the paradoxical position that public spaces hold in women's lives. Public spaces are spaces where the women face violence yet are necessary for the fulfilment of their material and emotional needs, sense of self and purpose in the city. In the absence of critical resources to eliminate violence from everyday life, these women refashion their experiences of violence and fear into more workable, adjustable, and manageable narratives. In doing so these women effectively redefine themselves and their connection with the city. The process of redefining spatial meanings is a process of 'shifting inner worlds...[and] is intimately connected to imagination, that is, imaginary connections to new opportunities, to new social roles, to new affiliations' (Butcher 2011). Young women's narratives are thus not mere utterances. Instead, these are women's speech acts that provide a reinterpretation of their location in the city. This form of speech act enables women to develop subjectivities that frame their efforts to *be* themselves as *essentially* a spatial experience. In turn, speech act gets firmly intertwined with embodied ordinary experiences of women in public spaces. By associating spatial experiences with their speech in particular ways, these women produce speech act that does not remain in the realm of discourses but becomes much more substantial and tangible.

### **Young women's resilient practices to claim the city**

In this section, I discuss how young women transform their speech acts into embodied resilient practices, with a focus on violence and fear in the city. I argue that speech act and resilient practices reinforce one another. Resilient practices not only translate young women's speech act into legible actions but also aid in recovering their control and dignity in the aftermath of violence and fear in public spaces. Without using public space physically and in everyday life, speech act remains less effective and unrecognised.

Violence and gendered fear are rampant in Delhi. All participants of the research experienced some degree of violence and/or knew someone who had experienced violence in the city at some time. Violent experiences leave deep physical, mental and emotional marks on women. Yet, these women do not have access to infrastructures, and robust social and legal support systems to deal with everyday forms of violence in the city. In turn, individual practices of resilience form a significant part of women's efforts to adapt and avoid violence and fear in Delhi. Young women undertake multiple forms of resilient practices - from embodied to spatial and social practices - which help them manoeuvre and contest the restrictions placed by violence and fear in public spaces. Resilient practices allow women to access the city for various purposes in much safer ways. By extension, many of the participants believe that they must and indeed have the capacity to *be* resilient

and claim public spaces despite the violence and fear, which are expressed in their narratives discussed earlier.

Since violence is an embodied and affective experience, young women's resilient practices primarily focus on maintaining bodily integrity and emotional safety. The women undertake practices to maintain socio-spatial control by manoeuvring, modifying, and managing their interactions in public spaces and with other urban dwellers. Adapting the way one talks, walks, dresses, makes eye contact (or not), and overall behavior are some of the widely used embodied practices in public space. Frieda, a migrant woman from Northeast India suggests:

I don't reveal much. That does not mean that I always drape myself in a sari and come. But there are other smart dresses. I just try to make the other person [unknown] feel comfortable with what I am wearing...When I am in the public space talking, I try not to jump around, like attraction seeker. I try not to attract any attention in the public. (Frieda/32/Migrant)

Anjali (31/Northeastern migrant) also feels that her ability to enjoy public space is dependent on her 'dressing sense, or how you are talking'. Similarly, Ruana (33/Delhite) avoid eye contact with mostly male strangers and walk fast in public spaces. Riya (28/North Indian migrant) try to 'look busy' to 'deflect attention' from her.

Many participants also use personal safety devices and apps, such as pepper sprays, knives, safety pins, GPS trackers and safety apps like SafetiPin and Safecity as part their everyday safety arrangements. Most participants rely on GPS mobile technologies to keep track of their travel routes in taxis and autos which form dominant modes of mobility in Delhi. Additionally, many participants rely on their social networks to keep each other safe. For instance, they create WhatsApp groups with their friends to keep track of each other's location and mobility, which in turn add to their sense of safety and at times facilitate interventions in cases of emergencies in the city.

We have a girls group chat. If one of us is running late, or maybe we are not with each other, we put up on this group chat. If we were together, and we all must go back home, we tell each other to text when we reach back. (Meher/29/Delhite)

These forms of individualized safety arrangements and care are gaining traction in the city in recent years, which ultimately reduces the State's responsibility and cost to produce safe spaces for *all* women. However, these practices become resources for these women in producing territoriality that maintain boundaries with potentially violent others in public space while asserting their place in the city. Here, the gendered body becomes an instrument of social communication (Grosz 1995) and a coded and situated practice that either constrains or enables these women's public presence. While women's resilient practices might reproduce social discourses such as victim-blaming and individualism, nonetheless these practices are crucial for

women's sustained presence in public space. In turn, resilient practices are, in effect, resistive to the affect violence and fear aim to produce i.e. withdrawal of women from public space to maintain public spaces as masculine and violent geographies. Acting in socially acceptable manner these women produce legitimacy in public spaces which ultimately extend their claim to these spaces. In this sense, these women relocate 'agency in the ordinary' rather than 'escaping' from it (Das 2006, 7).

However, I do not suggest that these women have uncritical engagements with these practices. Instead, many women question the effectiveness of resilient practices in keeping them safe but are aware of the important social and individual role that they play. On one hand, resilient practices reduce their dependency on others while ensuring a sense of safety in public spaces, and on the other, they provide social legitimacy especially within the family. For example, Meher (29/Delhite) a Muslim woman working as a journalist with many night-shifts recognize this dualism: 'My brother bought me a pepper spray. He insists on it, and I do keep it in my bag, although I am not sure this is enough'. The participants' families often play a key role as a site of resilience. Indian families are sites of gendered control (Butcher 2018; Caulfield 2009; Kōu and Bailey 2017). It is a space where questions are asked and 'moral [gendered] demands are relayed' (Sali and Butler 2004, 130). Yet, it can also enable women's access to public spaces, as acceptance of women's lives by the families often produces social acceptance. As Emily (25/Migrant) puts it: 'If your family is on board, nobody dares to say anything'. This awareness leads many women to engage with their families in ways that forge more freedom for them. Resilient practices provide the material basis for these engagements with the families in transformative ways while continuing to claim public spaces. Sandhya who works in a non-governmental organisation (NGO) told me:

When Nirbhaya case happened, my father asked me to leave the job. Imagine! I told him if we all start sitting at home, then people will be encouraged more to do all these things. He was like 'are you the only one who is in-charge of changing the world?' I understand their fear, but I also feel that if we stop accessing public spaces the situation is not going to change. So, we should take care of ourselves, as in use a pepper spray, things like that and try and push the boundaries. (Sandhya/31/Delhite)

Thus, the management of the body in public space and the family at home using resilient practices becomes self-reinforcing. How one manages everyday experiences in public space can become a necessary precursor of familial (dis)approval. As a result, Sandhya's sense of responsibility to resist gendered violence through her undeterred presence in public spaces justifies her use of a pepper spray which helps her convince and gain support from her family and ease their as well as her own anxieties. Thus, women's struggles in public space are not independent of their struggles in the private space.

Women's negotiations in one space reflect and support negotiations in the other. In turn, success in one space reinforces success in the other. For many women, these practices are not just about creating greater freedom for themselves but are contributions to the future and aspirations of women in the city, as seen in the case of Sandhya, who felt that her individual claims to public spaces contribute to the larger picture of gender equality.

I feel it is only I who can change it by accessing spaces even more. Not accessing them, sometimes is for the peace at my home is good, but if I look at the larger picture, I do not think that is going to help it much. But the government also has its bit to do, I feel. (Sandhya/31/Delhite)

Resilience to violent experiences is thus produced with the consent and support of others in the city, such as families, friends, and emerging structures of smart governance that reach women's lives through apps and devices. However, women are deeply aware of the shortcomings of individual resilience and the role of structures and institutions in mitigating VAW in the city. Sandhya's statement about the government's role in doing 'its bit' is a testimony of this awareness. Similarly, Abha termed her practices of resilience as 'the tricks of the trade' of survival in Delhi:

I think I have learned the *tricks of the trade*. I have learned to survive by myself. It is all about keeping yourself safe. You will not stop going to work. Rape happens...So, if I am going to an unknown place, I use GPS on my phone so that I know where the auto or the cab driver is taking me. I can, with these small, little things, I learned to keep myself safe, but yeah I do enjoy a single life in Delhi. (Abha/28/Delhite, *emphasis mine*)

Meera also pointed out that while knowing the city has helped her get rid of her socialization as a 'fearful' woman, her capacity to know, act and change the gender relations is limited:

If you are smart enough to know the system, its gimmicks, and your way, at what time who will be there, I guess you can enjoy being out in public space. By choosing certain places, and not choosing others, I realised that public spaces were not as haunting as they were in my mind. It is very liberating in certain manners. But you must know the *contours of that liberation*. They are also very limited. (Meera/26/Delhite, *emphasis mine*)

While these women use different embodied and spatial tactics to find respite, and to produce safety, these practices reflect the structural constraints within which agentic ordinary gendered lives are lived. The oppressive structures produced by fear and violence are interweaved in women's everyday life and their resilient practices. The structures of gendered violence, fear and inequalities continue to linger on in the face of individualised agency. This is evident in the continued cases of VAW, and the State's apathy towards issues of gender equality and justice (Butalia 2000; Kannabiran 2005; Chakravarti 2016). Women's resilient practices also echo emerging trends of protests that focus on



collective occupation of public spaces as a way of claiming one's rights to safety in the city (Roy 2017; Taneja 2019). These protests reflect new ways of engaging with the public, and indirectly with the State, through individual women's aspirations for change and the formation of informal collectives based on shared experiences. Indian feminist movement has long focused on the State as a potential site of violence as well as the provider of gendered safety, security, and equal rights (Roy 2017; Mukhopadhyay 2019). In turn, there has been continued efforts to make legal and structural changes to establish greater gender equality, including changes in legal parameters of VAW. Yet, much of the State's efforts are protectionist rather than efforts that enable women to claim their rights to the city (Kapur 2014). Simultaneously, many legal and State machineries, such as the police often operate as gatekeepers by preventing women, especially from marginalised sections, from accessing the justice system. Within this context, protests that focus on occupying public spaces present 'unique moment[s] of public recognition and consensus around women's rights' (Roy 2015, 99). Such public demands transpose formal legal recognition of equal gender rights onto everyday life and spaces where rights are violated and/or upheld. In turn, collective action plays a crucial role in the construction of individual identities and subjectivities, with women as political subjects aspiring for greater control over how they use and produce the city. Resilience, and speech act presented in the previous sections, reverberate some of the collective voices and concerns of women in relation to their rights to the safe city.

## **Conclusions**

In this paper I presented how young women use speech act and resilience to reclaim their access to public spaces amidst violence and fear in Delhi. Collectively, speech act and resilience allow us to understand how women use different practices relationally to navigate, cope with, and respond to violent and threatening socio-spatial experiences rooted in historical gendered structures and power inequalities. Phadke, Ranade, and Khan (2009, 186) argue that women's desire and 'pleasure-seeking' behaviour in public spaces potentially transform women's relationship with the city and hold the possibility of 're-envisioning citizenship in more inclusive terms'. Extending this argument, I call for understanding young women's speech act and resilience as practices that are potentially political in producing women's sense of belonging, comfort, and ownership in the city.

Many argue that women challenging patriarchies through individual resilient practices are proxies of neoliberal governance and cooption of feminist values (Roy 2011; Chatterjee 2012; Gupta 2016). However, I argue that such a notion is too simplistic and often harmful to the ways in which individual

agency work and are understood and represented. These critiques come from a place wherein individual women's ordinary practices are constructed as defeating the purpose of feminism i.e. to bring equality by overthrowing the unequal power relations *collectively*, which individual practices may not be able to achieve. I recognize that in some situations, individual actions require some form of conformity to established gender norms around violence and fear that conflict with liberal feminist understanding of gendered freedom and agency. From liberal perspectives, speech act, resilience and violence are intimately interconnected. Yet, I am arguing for a more nuanced, careful, and political understanding of speech act and resilience as everyday forms of resistive practices from below that allow young women marginalized through violence and fear to manage their lives in the city. Furthermore, young women's desires to be a part of the city produces significant tensions around their place in the city, both in public spaces and at home. In the context of these women's everyday lives, living in the city is not torn between submission to gendered norms or subversion of these norms. Instead, as I demonstrated, the young women's desire in and for the city and urban lives is much more complex and paradoxical. Young women are aware of their paradoxical position in the city and the complexity of the gender question, and by choosing to express their agency in particular ways as detailed in this paper they destabilize the binary constructs of submission and subversion. Subsequently, there is a need for critical understanding of these everyday context within which speech act and resilient practices are undertaken.

While young women's speech act and resilience are not grand political protests that a city like Delhi witnesses often, these are forms of resistances that are minute, everyday and ephemeral, which make gendered lives liveable, and the city inhabitable. A focus on the everyday located within the historical context demonstrates how marginalized yet resilient actors undertake political action without being overtly Political. This is critical because creating hierarchies of social groups based on their Political awareness and categorizing their practices as Political or apolitical risk reproducing exclusions and structures that exclude the voices of the already marginalized. While my focus in this paper has been on the individual, there are glimpses throughout women's speech act and resilient practices which demonstrate that the individual is deeply embedded within the dynamics of the society, community, family, and the urban environment. This embeddedness not only amplifies discourses around VAW but also affects how women, as an emerging social group, practice resilience and speech act. The slippage between the *I* and the *We*, the reiteration of similar speeches and practices, the dependence on familiar networks and collective resources to be resilient point to the emergence of ways of speaking out and strategizing *together* as young women in the city without closing off the possibilities for collective feminist actions.

In sum, it is not only possible to politicise speech act and resilience of young women but also a necessity for the remaking of the city. As the city's fabric - its (lack of ) infrastructures, social lives, cultural norms, spatial codes, legal systems - get interweaved into women's own understandings, desires, and ambitions in and for the city, these actions provide young women the necessary micro-level support that makes everyday life bearable and even enjoyable by asserting their agency. When viewed through everyday life and the historicity of VAW and fear in Delhi, young women's practices signify struggles of thousand small steps oriented towards the feminist ideal of a gender inclusive city. While the mitigation of VAW is often seen as a State's responsibility, and rightly so, the Indian State and the society at large continue to provide inadequate and often regressive responses to VAW. Within this context, a State-centric response to women's speech act and resilience as apolitical does not quite capture the ways in which young women reflexively define and enact agency from below. Their acts, which occupy the in-between space amid collective and individual, and public and private struggles, potentially rework gender relations at the scale of intimacies - family, community and friendships.

## Note

1. The term Nirbhaya means Fearless. The name 'Nirbhaya' has been used in most media reports, protests movements and subsequent government policies and efforts to improve safety for women. For instance, the Nirbhaya Fund was established by the Government of India for dedicated funding to improve security infrastructure in Delhi.

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