

## Focus 53 - The Significance of Gender in Infrastructural Development

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### Abstract

Infrastructure is vital for urbanisation and development. While infrastructural projects have been carried out many levels, seldom does anyone question the politics of gender embedded in the formulation and implementation of projects. Most infrastructural projects only take masculine perspectives under consideration; seldom is there a focus on female aspirations and mobility needs. This paper examines and highlights the importance of gendered analysis in all steps of infrastructural project making. It examines the role of the World Bank in promoting the role of women in infrastructural development and discusses its shortcomings. The paper concludes by providing certain suggestions intended to increase the role of women in the debate surrounding infrastructural development.

### Key Words

Infrastructure, Development, Gender, World Bank, Women

## Introduction

The debate about infrastructural development started after the Second World War and has proceeded through several stages. Many influential theories have come into play, have been profoundly debated and have, over time, been superseded by new ones. The conclusion of each discussion cycle has been the same: first, that infrastructural development is a core parameter for the progress of any nation, society and community; second, that while infrastructural development may be important, its definition and components vary.

The state and its institutions have historically been considered the primary agents of infrastructural development in any country. While there may be several parameters of development, infrastructure always has been of crucial importance. The salience of infrastructure matters, both politically and structurally. Urban spaces are constantly going through a process of infrastructural transformation - not only because of the change in leadership which leads to change in policies, but also because of liberalisation policies which have led to an increase in private investment in the economy. The existence of gendered inequality (even in leadership) has always led to unequal contribution by women in designing infrastructural projects. Hence, these constantly changing power structures prevent the universal adoption of policies for sustainable infrastructural development.

Infrastructure was always central to the international development priorities; its relevance has increased substantially in recent times. Most assume that infrastructural development is not political in nature - and in past few decades, health and education came to the forefront of policies while infrastructure pedalled behind. Yet contrary to this narrative, infrastructural projects have been prominent for decades. We have at times taken the existence of infrastructure for granted as if it has always existed and will always continue to exist. But the politics and economics behind investment in infrastructure have seldom been questioned in popular understandings. Infrastructure has not been a very stable topic of political debates at either national or international levels, even during election times - unless some development projects like dams, border walls, statues among other things have been extensively covered in news because of their aims or related resettlement and rehabilitation processes. In these situations, infrastructure becomes a political tool to win elections. And at the same time, infrastructure has been a prominent tool for state elections or local elections in peri-urban areas. In the recent Delhi election in 2020, the Aam Aadmi Party campaigned on the basis of their work done in the infrastructure sector wherein they built schools, street light installations and provided water and electricity to a maximum number of households at cheap rates (**Khanna, 2019**). But it is given that we use these

physical infrastructures daily for all our needs; they are a form of development which not all have proper access to.

This paper looks at infrastructural development from a gendered perspective and aims to highlight that there seldom has been a gendered analysis to it. Infrastructural development has always been looked at from a masculine perspective and women and people belonging to other gender categories are not taken under consideration. The process of gendered analysis is not only absent in implementing infrastructural development projects but also while designing, formulating and deciding its salience.

### Gendered Analysis of Infrastructure

A popular notion which is widely accepted by scholars like Jeffery Haynes (Professor of Politics, Governance and International Affairs at London Metropolis University) along with developmental institutions like the World Bank is that all infrastructural projects should be of good quality and should be sustainable because they foster equal opportunities, connect remote and left behind regions, ensure easy access to public services for citizens and more generally improve the life of citizens ((OCED), 2019). There is no fixed definition of what a sustainable infrastructural project is like. But one can say that sustainable policies of infrastructure can be subjective - depending on who is designing them and what ideas they subscribe to. But then it is pertinent to ensure that some basic foundations of gender equality are the same regardless of specific policy. For example, in 2018, the Supreme Court in India passed a judgment citing that homosexuality is not a crime, thereby abolishing Section 377 of the constitution. However, the current Indian government has refused to accept the existence of the LGBTQ community and has failed to make the necessary structural and constitutional changes. This was translated into ineffective changes in infrastructural policies such as making public toilets for the third gender. It also goes against the fundamental rights and freedoms of any individual irrespective of their gender and sexuality – which have been enshrined in the Indian Constitution. This has led to several debates regarding how one draws the line between subjective(ness) and objectiveness in policymaking and implementation processes of infrastructure development.

One relevant approach is that by the Women in Development Approach (1970s) which accepts that most women are negatively impacted by developmental projects taken up, as most policies are not only formulated by men but are also implemented for men (Haynes, 2008). Women are rarely the beneficiaries, and this excludes them from having access to

employment opportunities because infrastructure seldom works out in their favour. For instance, women form a significant labour force in the informal sector of economy. Lack of cheap and safe transports excludes them from having an easy access to their job location. This affects their employment opportunities due to lack of safety and long distances between the job location and house as infrastructure seldom works out in their favour. One criticism to this approach was that while it is correct that women should be more active and play a pivotal role in policy making, several processes would act as hurdles. While patriarchy and constant sexism in society would prevent women from raising their voices and be heard, some would not even know that it is their right to have equal access - let alone be able to voice their opinion. Thus, a new approach in 1980s was introduced, in which gender and unequal power relations between men and women became the central focus of gender development analysis. This was known as the *Gender and Development Approach* – and unlike the previous approach, it focused on social realities that would mould societal views of sex and also try and allocate all gender roles, responsibilities and expectations while taking female aspirations under account (**McFarlene & Rutherford, 2008**).

Infrastructure became important after the end of World War when the two superpowers started contesting for global power. Infrastructure development in terms of space, industries, roads, ships and planes became a huge symbol of power and dominance. Nuclear power in terms of nuclear labs and testing centres which made and tested bombs, missiles, rockets among other things too became a part of the infrastructural power race. One of the major institutions which came up after the end of the Second World War was the World Bank and central to its goal was infrastructural development. There have been several approaches towards women's role in development studies. The attempts made by the World Bank were studied by Ferguson and Harman in 2015, who found some loopholes in its gendered analysis process. Infrastructure includes four main sectors – *energy, transport, water* and *information communication technology*, and while all the sectors have been studied from the lens of gender analysis, all these fields have never been studied together - which has led to the creation of big loopholes in the policymaking and implementation process (**Ferguson & Harman, 2015**).

While the World Bank has made gender analysis of infrastructure a core parameter and wills to incorporate a feminist perspective, there seem to be some flaws. It has still not surpassed the binary definition of gender. Moreover, while discussing gender perspectives, they fail to define and differentiate between the various types of gender perspective they are striving for. The World Bank still takes only two genders under consideration – female

and male and all its policies are directed towards uplifting people falling under this bracket. While it still discusses third gender categories, it has yet to take any significant policies measures for bridging the gap between the binary gender and third gender category groups. The work of the bank is limited to the attainment of financial disenfranchisement for women and is based on the argument that financial independence via the usage of these infrastructures will give women better chances of earning a decent livelihood. Yet at the same time the bank overlooks how the infrastructural project can help them attain political, social and legal rights and freedoms. And even when dealing with the four sectors mentioned above, the World Bank has been quite problematic in its policy making. This is majorly attributed to the fact that all the four sectors of infrastructure are always tied together but have been studied independently. For example, the lack of linking between the transport and energy sectors has led to unproportionate access in terms of gender. It has had various implications on the water sector if observed from the lens of female safety. There exists sexism in access to resources as well. Generally, men are seen as the breadwinners of the house and most have access to transports like two wheelers and bikes, which means that not they can travel faster from one location to another, making them comparatively safer than women as their work gets done quickly. Men can use their vehicles to fetch groceries and water - yet the household work always comes under the ambit of women. This includes fetching water and firewood. Men also have easy access to water because they have access to better technology, for instance access to irrigation sources for farming. Women on the other hand must travel on foot for more than 5 to 6 kilometres not only to gather wood for fire but also to access clean drinking water. The lack of linking the sectors properly and lack of gender sensitivity has created gaps in the policy making and implementation processes. To elaborate, it is common to find women on the roadside selling, cooking, cleaning the streets and working on road construction. The absence of public lighting, poor infrastructure such as the lack of toilets or bus stops for transport facilities increases the feeling of insecurity among women in the informal working environment (**Thynell, 2016**).

The lack of sensitivity towards all genders, especially women, is not something new. Women have always been subjugated by dominant masculine views and power relations. Their roles have been limited to the households, except in cases where women have had to go work to earn an income for the family In the past few decades, the rural to urban movement by women has increased by 3.2 per cent. The majority of women move to urban areas in search of employment opportunities in the informal sector ((**UNDESA**), **2014**). The demand for transport has also increased - and is assumed to increase two-fold given

the rise in population and the huge rural to urban migration. Yet as of now, most women do not have access to proper transport (**Bergson, 2001**). They not only have to work longer hours than men but are also paid less. The housework which they do before leaving for their job is left unnoticed and unpaid. The lack of proper wages and irregular working hours result in having less or zero access to transport facilities. Thynell highlights “the 5 A’s” while designing transport policies keeping women in mind. The five A’s are – Affordability, Availability, Acceptability, Acceptability and Appropriateness. While these parameters have existed, they have not been implemented properly. This can be assumed because women safety has become a more contested issue - there has been a rise in cases of harassment or violence in the public space (**Thynell, 2016**).

In present-day India, most of the population is now concentrated in cosmopolitan cities - and the fact that these cities are growing at a rapid pace means that longer urban distances will have to be covered and more time will be spent on roads. Moreover, new parts of these cities are seldom planned since they are an outgrowth resulting from overcrowding. Access to various destinations in the city is vital for women and this has become an enormous challenge wherein the lack of safety precautions and the expensive travelling costs are not taken into consideration. The lack of equality in the transport sector has been a hotly debated topic even at international forums, and while several initiatives have been launched to enhance women’s influence and involvement, they have largely failed - masculine norms, ideas and rules have persisted.

### Conclusion

Firstly, the 5 A’s must be kept in mind not only while designing the policy framework for women and their transport needs, but for all infrastructural projects at both national and international levels. In-depth research is needed to explain the relationship between women participation in the development of infrastructure in cities and societies, their mobility patterns and the gender norms that affect their choices. This includes the collection of gendered disaggregated data to facilitate proper planning and designing of projects.

Secondly, more inclusive urban access should be the goal of all policies. The goal is not only to ensure safety for women but also help them in having equal access to their political, social and economic rights, which would result in them making choices according to their needs. This can be done by ensuring that women and people from the third gender are part of decision-making and implementation processes from the start. Infrastructural projects

need to take under consideration gender aspirations along with societal goals regarding environmental protection as well.

Furthermore, a gendered analysis of the usage of and access to different infrastructure sectors needs to be pursued in a collated manner. This will help understanding the linkages between these sectors and will help formulating a gender framework for some adjustments and changes to be made in the various sectors (water, transport, energy and information technology). This could be done with the engagement of both government and private sector to have more women and third gender participation, which would help in better decision-making.

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