



Made by and for men: Indian cities need women leaders to make it safe and inclusive

Women's leadership in cities is not about gender equality alone. It is a catalytic agenda that can ensure more jobs, higher economic growth, and targeted provision of infrastructure and services based on community needs and a holistic human development agenda

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India's cities face several fundamental challenges. Garbage accumulates on street corners, millions live in slums with limited access to potable water and sanitation, and citizens endure congested roads and polluted air every day. The average urban experience is deteriorating rather than improving, even as we develop fast as a country.

Transforming the quality of life in India's [cities and towns](#) requires concerted efforts to strengthen three specific city-systems. We need better spatial planning and design, empowered urban local governments, and improved human and financial capacities in state and city governments. However, these reforms, while essential, are complex and require sustained effort over time. The infusion of women's leadership in our cities could accelerate such changes.

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With a remarkable 46 per cent representation in Urban Local Governments (ULGs), compared to approximately 15 per cent in parliament and 9 per cent in state assemblies, elected women councillors could be one of our most promising pathways to reimagine cities as more inclusive, responsive, and liveable for all.

Women's leadership: Catalyst for inclusive urban governance

One of the principal causes of urban life challenges in India is the narrow lens through which urban priorities are determined. Decisions are mostly made by male politicians and male bureaucrats, and policies and projects are mostly executed by male planners, engineers, and administrators. This gender imbalance in decision-making results in cities created by and for men.

Women constitute around 50 per cent of our urban population but represent a far greater share of lived realities given their roles in care-giving and other familial and societal responsibilities. Yet, their voices remain underrepresented in substantive decision-making. This disconnect is visible in our gendered prioritisation of urban infrastructure. We do not pay sufficient attention to footpaths and walkability, bus transport, including their timings, routes, and safety and comfort, childcare and eldercare centres, and water and sanitation. Instead, there is disproportionate funding and focus on large infrastructure projects without taking into consideration the first and last-mile connectivity.

India's women councillors, therefore, have a unique opportunity to address this mismatch. Women leaders can re-balance urban priorities: Well-lit and walkable streets where women, children, the elderly, and the differently-abled can move safely; improved public transport and last-mile connectivity that reduce barriers to women's mobility; reliable water supply to reduce the burden of water collection on women; and quality childcare and eldercare facilities that empower working women by providing reliable support systems.

We must ensure that our 40,000-odd women councillors are able to realise and exercise their leadership to the fullest extent, without being coaxed by their councillor-*patis*. From speaking more actively in councils for a larger share of budgets for their wards, to greater representation in mayoral and standing committee positions; from speaking up for women's priorities to lending a voice to women's self-help groups and urban poor women, there is much they can accomplish. A leadership development programme for women councillors could significantly enhance their capacity to translate formal authority into such meaningful influence and action. Such programmes would equip women councillors with the required information and peer networks needed to effectively advocate for gender-responsive policies.

Women's absence in administration

Even as we celebrate the 46 per cent representation of women in ULGs, a stark gender gap remains in the administrative machinery in governments at the state and local levels. Walk into a typical government meeting in any Indian government office, you can generally count the number of women on one hand. Very often, these women officials seem not to have much say in decision-making. Notably, a large proportion of women are engaged as *safai karamcharis* or as part of women's self-help groups.

The absence of readily available, gender disaggregated data on municipal staffing is itself symptomatic of this gender imbalance. We need a greater number of women urban planners, women urban designers, women engineers, women public health professionals, women police officers, and women finance managers running our cities. Whether there is a need for affirmative action in some form here is worth a debate.

Women holding public office can catalyse transformative change and make our public places far safer, more inclusive, and economically vibrant. Women-friendly streets and public spaces provide an enabling environment for greater female labour force participation. A 2018 World Bank report suggests India could boost its growth by 1.5 percentage points to 9 per cent per year if around 50 per cent of women join the workforce. India's female labour force participation in cities stands at just 23.8 per cent, significantly lower than rural areas (36.6 per cent) and much lower than the global average of 47 per cent. Studies show that a lack of transport and safety work as impediments to women's employment.

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