

**Shaping the Equiverse: Building Inclusive Urban Spaces for Women in South Asia**  
**March 6, 2024**  
**Event Recap**

The roundtable, **'Shaping the Equiverse: Building Inclusive Urban Spaces for Women in South Asia'**, took place on 6 March 2024 at the India International Centre in New Delhi. It was co-organised by TalentNomics India and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung's (KAS) Regional Economic Programme Asia (SOPAS). The primary objective of this roundtable is to identify actionable issues hindering women's equal access to education, work, and well-being in urban spaces.

**Ms Ipsita Kathuria**, the Founder and CEO of TalentNomics India, gave a welcome speech. She welcomed both speakers and participants, and called for actions that bring about necessary changes for building inclusive urban spaces for women. It was followed by another welcome speech by **Mr Christian Echle**, KAS' Head of the Department Asia and Pacific. He emphasised the importance of women and marginalised groups' roles in shaping inclusive urban surroundings and thanked TalentNomics for their cooperation with KAS.

**Mr Suparno Banerjee**, the Expert in Digital Infrastructure and Smart Cities, Board Member, TalentNomics gave a keynote speech. Below are the points he made during his speech:

- *Context:* More than 57% of the global population are living in cities today, and the share is growing. It is because cities offer people more job opportunities and better services. On the other hand, urbanisation have negative effects on people's livelihood as well. Therefore, it is necessary to work on urban space transformation.
- *Framework for planning urban space transformation:* A framework of SMART is useful in developing a plan for urban space transformation. SMART stands for Specific (setting clear goals), Measurable, Attainable, Relevant (focused on the issues, opportunities of the citizens or the target group), and Time bound (execution within a specific timeline). Effective prioritisation of transformation projects can be done by setting goals of urban space transformation win connection to public values (such as inclusivity and sustainability) and citizens' needs (such as safety and quality of live).
- As transformation is a collective project, all stakeholders should be encouraged to think of what they can do, where they position themselves, and how they can collaborate better with others to bring about the changes they wish to make.

In the Reality and Reflections session, **Dr Meeran Chadha Borwankar**, the former Director General of Police, and **Ms Gita Mittal**, a retired judge, Former Chief Justice, J&K HC were invited to share current situations in India in terms of gender-based challenges and discriminations from the perspectives of the police and court respectively. Below are the major points shared by the two speakers during the session:

- Harassment, stoking, violence against women are still common problems and preventing women from moving freely. Toilet facilities for women on streets, especially, women farmers, and girls in school are not sufficient. Jail facilities are not reflecting basic needs for women prisoners. Failures in meeting women's needs in public spaces limit not only their mobility but also their freedom of choice.
- Speaking of justice is not very realistic as the first step. If girls want to claim their right to decide for themselves, they need to speak up to their own parents. The first step is to recognise the existing discrimination. The second step is to think how to fight against it on different levels, such as family, community, state, and country.
- Two barriers in accessing justice for women: Language difference (for example for Tamil speaking population) and the attitude of the people working in the justice system. Those who work for the system are so reluctant to work with cases related to sexual harassment.
- Policewomen currently consists 12% of the entire police officers in India, which is an improvement in comparison with almost no policewomen in 1981. A slow change is taking place in a sense that it has become more natural that women police officers get promoted to leadership positions.
- However, there are cases where gender discrimination on the field level prevents girls and women from prosecuting attackers. The change must reach the field level.
- To bring about the necessary change, women must be involved in the planning of urban spaces. It is problematic that it has been men-driven.

The **Session 1 on Gender Inclusive Mobility** was opened by the moderator of the session, **Mr Laghu Parashar**, Transport Specialist at the World Bank. The discussion was enriched by two discussants: **Ms Mitali Nikore**, the Founder of Nikore Associates and a Consultant at the World Bank India, and; **Mr Ashish Gajurel**, a Transportation Expert from Nepal. The bullet points below summarise the discussion during the session:

- A gender perspective has been missing in urban planning, which implies that 50% of the population's perspective is missing. Public transportations built without the gender perspective are insufficient to serve the wider population. As availability of functioning public transportations mean more than just mobility for women, it is important to have a realistic imagination and input from women in the planning stage.
- In the planning of public transportations, we need to shift from building them for simple numbers to planning for different groups with different needs. This called for gender disaggregated data collection and analysis. Successful provision of transit system for women would bring them better education and job opportunities as well as better emotional wellbeing.
- Where does India stand in the transformation process? It was a big step forward that the gender mainstreaming is widely accepted now in the general population and among the ministries. To scale up the transformation, more gender budgeting and collaboration across sectors must be done. A more gender-inclusive

- community structure must be invented as well. The transformation has been started in the national level and it needs to reach the community level as well.
- When designing gender-inclusive public transportations, providing just a few seats in a bus, for example, does not solve the actual issue. A wholistic approach should be taken to tackle the core problems that women face in public transportations. For example, making public transportation free for women is not sufficient, as it must be safe for women as well.
  - To promote changes for more inclusive spaces, it is advisable to prepare good arguments to convince pragmatists. We should always ask: Are the investments adequate for what we want to achieve? Data collection and analysis is necessary for building such arguments.
  - Much budget has been spent to install CCTVs and other facilities. To make use of the limited resources, a better use of the existing facilities should be imagined. In combination with data collection and analysis, this also contributes to sustainability of the transformation.

In Session 2 on Gender Inclusive Public Infrastructure, **Ms Sarika Chakravarty**, the Team Lead, UrbanShift Country Project of NIUA moderated the discussion which was joined by **Ms Kalpana Biswanath**, the Founder, Safetipin, and **Ms Farah Kabir**, the Country Director of ActionAid Bangladesh. Below are the takeaways from the discussion:

- The main question should be: How do we bring the gender lens to all aspects of urban planning? Every policy formulation must be nuanced by the gender perspective.
- Current challenges such as inadequate infrastructure arise from and exacerbated by the large population size. Rapid and unplanned growth of cities leads to informal urbanisation (slums). This reduces resilience of the cities in times of climate change and disasters.
- Studies have shown that sexual harassment is a significant problem for women. The next step is to lobby for the official recognition of the problem backed up by the data so that necessary fundings become available for transformation. In addition to tackling violence and harassment, the care economy needs restructuring. Currently, the burden of care falls mainly on women and is preventing women from doing other activities. Finally, women need to sit at the table where the planning of urban spaces take place. Effective changes are made on the municipal level.

The final part of the conference was devoted for a brainstorming session on policy recommendations. The participants were divided into two groups. Intensive discussions took place among the participants in respective groups. A speaker from each groups presented what had been discussed in their group. The ideas exchanged in the session will be consolidated into a few focused policy recommendations later.