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entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and
peace for the twenty-first century"

Statement submitted by Sambhali Trust, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

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Statement

The challenge of women's access to public spaces has been a longstanding issue, and the barriers they encounter can vary from region to region. However, one constant is that women everywhere confront difficulties in moving freely in public areas. This problem of restrained accessibility to public spaces is not just a small problem in the contemporary world but also acknowledged by the UN Women's Global Flagship Initiative known as "Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces for Women and Girls" (Global results report 2017–2020 UN Women – Headquarters). There is a need to examine the current policy, fundamental principles, and prevalent social and gender norms in today's time. This knowledge will aid in establishing a more equal public setting that will empower individuals.

Sambhali Trust aims to highlight the obstacles women encounter when attempting to access public spaces. Simultaneously, the statement will underscore how these challenges contribute to a worsening of deeply ingrained disparities, further impeding the achievement of equality.

Women and Public Space

Women's accessibility to public spaces is a critical dimension of societal equality and empowerment. Historically, women have faced barriers and challenges that limit their freedom of movement and participation in public spaces and decisions. Factors such as inadequate infrastructure, safety concerns, and societal norms have restricted women's ability to engage with public spaces fully (Phadke. S, 2013). This includes improving lighting and security measures, fostering a culture of inclusivity, and challenging stereotypes perpetuating gender-based restrictions. Creating public spaces that are welcoming and safe for women not only promotes their individual well-being but also contributes to a more equitable and vibrant society where all members can freely and confidently contribute to public life.

It is crucial that public transport is made safe because this is instrumental in advocating for women's active participation in both society and the economy. Safe public transportation not only ensures the physical well-being of women but also encourages their increased involvement in various facets of life, making them more empowered (Tara. S, 2011). When women feel secure while using public transport, it positively impacts their ability to contribute to society and the economy. Advocating for women's accessibility to public spaces is an essential step towards building a world where everyone, regardless of gender, can participate fully in the public sphere.

While there is a direct link between unhindered access to public space and women empowerment, sadly it is seen how these crucial spaces have become unsafe for women and there are no changes that are seen to improve the accessibility. Seventy-five per cent of the women who reported harassment said it happened on the streets, and 19 per cent said it happened at bus stops. Twenty-five per cent experience harassment every day or occasionally (Joshi.M & Singh.D, 2021). The forms of harassment included being observed, subjected to obscene remarks, stalked, and even flashed or masturbated to. These numbers are alarming at the same time indicators of how unsafe public spaces are for women.

Overcoming the challenges faced by women is crucial, and solutions derived from research and investigation are essential. In a collaborative research initiative conducted by Safetipin, The Asia Foundation and Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), a comprehensive study was conducted to assess the safety perceptions of women in Bhopal, Gwalior and Jodhpur (Jodhpur Safety Analysis Report 2019). The findings revealed a concerning statistic, indicating that close to 90

per cent of women surveyed expressed a sense of insecurity within these cities. This unease was primarily attributed to the presence of isolated and unsafe areas, suggesting an immediate need for targeted interventions to enhance the safety and well-being of women in public spaces. The study highlights the importance of addressing issues related to women and urban planning to create more secure spaces for women and foster inclusive and protective communities.

The importance of ensuring women's accessibility to public spaces cannot be overstated as it is fundamental to fostering equality, social cohesion, and overall societal progress. When women have restricted access to public spaces, it is reflective of deep-rooted gender norms and stereotypes that have historically confined them to private spheres. Accessible public spaces empower women by providing smooth access to education, employment, social interaction, and civic engagement.

The issue of accessibility to public spaces is crucial because, in certain instances, these areas serve as a refuge for women escaping adversity. Public spaces that are not easily accessible can contribute to a perpetuating cycle of gender inequality, as indicated by research illustrating how it establishes a relentless cycle of ongoing violence. According to a UN report, among the 87,000 documented global cases of female homicides in the past year, 58 per cent or 50,000 were committed by the victims' close family members or intimate partners (Global Study on Homicide 2018 – United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime). Our organization itself has addressed 57 cases of domestic violence in the last year. These statistics show that women are not always the safest in private areas, making public places a more secure choice. These women are being forced back into the hands of their abusers when public locations become inaccessible, forcing them to go back to the places where they are subjected to violence. This problematic chain effect needs to be curbed by creating safe public space which serves as their asylum from the violence at home.

These factors underscore a critical need to recognize that ensuring women's free access to public spaces is more than just a matter of convenience; it's a basic right that contributes to societal equality and empowerment. To humanize this issue, consider the cyclical nature of gender-based violence. Instances where women seek refuge in public spaces highlight the interconnectedness of safety and the development of inclusive public spaces, ultimately fostering the empowerment of women.

Recommendations

With the understanding of this grave social issue, there are various recommendations that need to be considered. Keeping the priority theme in mind for this year, "Accelerating the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls by addressing poverty and strengthening institutions and financing with a gender perspective". The organisation would like to give some recommendations:

• The establishment of a specialized research team is required to conduct surveys and investigations aimed at comprehending the issues faced by women and the obstacles hindering their access to public spaces. Research holds paramount importance in this context, as it is essential to gain a profound understanding of the actual challenges to devise fitting solutions.

• To achieve the first recommendation it is crucial that state finances should be revised and reallocated, as the above suggested pathway requires large monetary investment.

- The development of public infrastructure, such as street lights and security cameras, should align with the insights garnered from the research. This approach ensures the enhancement of inclusivity for women in public spaces.

- Financing specialised institutions that adopt gender mainstreaming and gender impact assessment in all public policy.

- Public transport should be made safer by including well-lit bus stops and train stations, security personnel, and clear information on transportation routes and schedules.

- Engage with the community, including women, in the planning and design of public spaces. Their input can provide valuable insights into specific needs and concerns.