Walk Like A Woman

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If you’re an able-bodied man, chances are high that when you step out of your house to meet a friend, you take the shortest route possible. Or you choose to stop by the *paan-beedi* (tobacconist) shop for quarter-of-an-hour. Or walk down that scenic lane where all the beautiful raintrees converge. If you are an able-bodied woman reading this, chances are strong that you know that it’s quite different for you most of the time.

That’s because women and men often access public space in very different ways. In our research for ‘Why Loiter’, we mapped women’s journeys in the city and found that women commute in distinct ways. Men usually walk in a straight line, choosing the shorter or more stimulating route. Conversely, women might take a longer roundabout route, even cross a road a few times just to avoid what they perceive to be uncomfortable, and sometimes unsafe, situations.

I particularly use the term ‘uncomfortable’ to imply not actual physical violence but what many women respondents mention, a sense of unease or a perception of threat that marks their everyday negotiations of the street.

These perceptions of threat—staring, stalking, verbal comments, unsolicited cell phone photographs taken of oneself by strangers—make women walk with an altered map of the city in their heads. They strategise—sometimes intentionally and sometimes not—how to get past that beer bar where men hang around (perhaps by crossing the road) or avoid that footpath crushed between parked trucks and a high factory wall (by choosing to walk on the road instead). If a longer way to tuition
class can help them circumvent the boys staring at the street corner, they will.

If the fenced-in pavement makes them unable to find an escape route in case of an assault (and make no mistake, in their heads, women plan every day for assault), they walk in the traffic.

They stomp through underground pedestrian subways that seem busy with shops. If the choice is between a shorter way through a deserted or poorly lit street and a longer way that is more well-lit, even if extra lighting is provided by hordes of street vendors, they will choose the longer road home.

As we followed women's paths, we noticed that they often favoured the messy over the straight, especially if it offered friendly ‘eyes’. At night, when the branches of trees often shade and dim street lights, some women said they preferred walking down treeless avenues. They shun pedestrian skywalks with advertising hoardings running on both sides as that prevented a street view. In their complex negotiation of the public, women attempt to walk in a manner where they can be both, invisible (so as to avoid unwanted attention) as well as hyper-visible to multiple ‘eyes’ (so as to get help if attacked).

Why Loiter’s mapping studies reveal that women seldom stand still on the Indian street. They are mostly in a state of motion. When they wait, it’s at very particular places – markets, outside their children’s schools, bus stops, railway stations. Women mention that they might wait for a friend at a bus stop as it seems like a place of purpose. As our study showed, this need to constantly demonstrate purpose in public space helps reinforce women’s respectable status.

In public, women’s body language – tight and contained – is different from men’s. When sitting on a park bench or the bus, their body compresses up to occupy the least amount of space, almost as if it acknowledges that it is a body out of place. The only
place where it seems at home is in the ladies compartment of the local train. This is particularly visible in Mumbai’s trains in the afternoon, before rush-hour where women sit with legs spread out, body at ease, almost owning that space as their own.

If urban planners could walk the city like a woman, what a different city they would see.