ABSTRACT

This research is an outcome of an early interest in exploring and understanding people’s engagement with the natural environment, the responses and behavior of users in the outdoor public leisure spaces, their interests, preferences, experiences and how useful it is for every individual to visit and experience these landscapes. Women are the less privileged and disadvantaged group with respect to leisure and access/ use of outdoor leisure spaces that is supported in various research. To understand the gender appropriation of public spaces, I argue that outdoor public leisure spaces are not designed considering different gender preferences, perceptions, needs and requirements and usage patterns. It is an inquiry to understand the inter-relation of gender and public leisure spaces from architectural planning perspective.

In an attempt to explore the need and benefits of visiting outdoor leisure spaces, and how such spaces are perceived and frequented by men and women, an expedition started towards exploring the literature in various allied disciplines. From primary literature review, it has been established that urban life has lots of stresses and men and women have different responses to stresses; whereby women are found more vulnerable to depressions and health problems. Green spaces or outdoor leisure spaces are lungs of the city that provide relief to chronic stresses, depression as well as mental and physical health problems. It is also found that women like to spend more time in public spaces and in contact with nature. With this milieu, it becomes a matter of concern that women experience more constraints while accessing public outdoor leisure spaces. It sets a stage for the inquiry into understanding the spatial perceptions, constraints, usage patterns and landscape preferences of men and women in urban public leisure spaces.

In view of above findings from literature review, this study aims to make a scientific inquiry into how the responses, behavior, experiences and preferences vary for both the genders with respect to outdoor public leisure
spaces and to provide future directions to render public leisure spaces gender appropriate.

With the objectives of understanding role of leisure in urban life, examining the inter-relationship of social construction of gender and leisure, as well as the inter-relationship of spatial design and human behavior, usage patterns, perceptions and constraints by both the genders in urban outdoor leisure spaces and differential spatial needs/preferences, this study seeks to make empirical inquiries into a specific context of urban area in Mumbai Metropolitan Region.

The scientific inquiry into above points of concerns is made through different research methods for which constructivist grounded theory approach is adopted. To understand the research gap, literature survey is done in varied related topics to understand relevant theories that confirm the need for research in this field. From such inquiries, three themes emerged for further empirical investigations. The first theme focuses on activity participation and includes research regarding the ‘Extent to which leisure activities are gender stereotyped as well as gender differences in leisure opportunities, experiences and availability of time for leisure’. The second theme revolves around the ‘Issue of gendered nature of leisure constraints especially dealing with social approach and gender roles’. The third theme explores the ‘gendered outcome of leisure’. The emphasis is placed on how leisure opportunities and leisure participation may be enhanced through appropriate design of physical environment thereby improving the quality of life for both men and women.

This research includes various methods informed from feminist research, landscape, architecture and planning social science paradigms. Photo sorting survey was used to identify preferences in landscapes and underlying factors. Feminist, in-depth semi-structured interviews of women were conducted to understand leisure constraints and gender roles. Semi-structured naturalistic observation with videographic survey followed by frame by frame
microanalysis of leisure spaces was employed to understand the usage patterns as a part of grounded theory. Hypotheses emerged through grounded theory methodology were further explored with questionnaire survey for the larger sample of 566 residents in Mumbai Metropolitan Region. The stratified sample selection through various geographical zones in Mumbai Metropolitan Region (urban) was done so as to incorporate people with various demographic factors such as gender, income, education and age.

The findings reveal that though women find outdoor recreation important for their own satisfaction, yet their access to the outdoor leisure spaces is constrained by various factors as compared to men. Perceived lack of safety and security play a major role amongst many leisure constraints for women. Familiarity of place and people, distance to travel and scale of a leisure space define the preferred typologies of spaces for women. Women prefer to be in groups, involved mostly in passive recreation, engage in group activities such as laughter club, yoga when they are in outdoor leisure spaces. Age groups also play important role in women’s constraints and perceptions towards leisure. Amongst typologies of leisure spaces, women prefer small neighborhood parks and seating along roads or temples where as men prefer gardens, jogging tracks, beaches, waterfronts and playgrounds more. Accompanying children to such spaces as a duty and unavailability of time due to family responsibilities found to be confirming with the concept of ethic of care controlling their leisure behavior and decisions.

I argue that gender does affect not only availability of opportunities for leisure but also the ways in which these are perceived and experienced in a particular setting which in turn is defined by architectural and planning aspects of the same. The analysis in this research foregrounds the key issue of constraints that emanate from leisure constraint theory that reduce leisure opportunities, control leisure participation or adversely affect the quality of enjoyment of the leisure activity. Leisure constraint theory identifies three types leisure constraints out of which interpersonal and personal constraints
are addressed in feminist scholarship and social sciences. Whereas structural constraints that have bearing on architectural and planning discipline not been considered by architects and planners adequately. Analysis in this research contributes to bridge this gap with reference to the absence of gender responsiveness in the provision of outdoor leisure spaces from architectural and planning perspectives. It is emphasized that neither gender nor leisure can be understood in isolation from other social aspects and that both need to be considered within particular cultural contexts while planning and designing outdoor leisure spaces.

It suggests that the relationship between gender and leisure is both complex and dynamic. It is not necessarily unidirectional and use of leisure spaces clearly varies with gender. Leisure opportunities and experiences are predominantly different for men and women which are largely influenced by architectural and planning aspects of leisure spaces. This research identifies the architectural planning features which influence leisure pursuit by and large. This research has emphasized that gender appropriate architectural and planning characteristics of leisure spaces may act to promote leisure participation particularly by women through easing and controlling dominant structural constraints. It is an initiative to change leisure practice of working towards gender equity in leisure and a way that compliments and enhance existing initiatives.

Such inquiries can be extended further in other cities with different socio-cultural backgrounds and compared with these findings to evolve a model pattern that will make gender appropriate leisure spaces accessible to all. It is an initiative to inculcate gender sensitivity amongst architects landscape and urban designers as well as policy makers as the footstep towards gender inclusive urban India.