

UNPACKING WOMEN'S RECREATIONAL SPACES: FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON RECREATIONAL INEQUALITY IN THE URBAN PERIPHERIES OF KOLKATA - INSIGHTS FROM THE PILOT STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This pilot study explores how the invisibility of the spatial practices of ordinary women from disadvantaged backgrounds, often considered subaltern, in the urban peripheries of Indian cities perpetuates recreational inequality, with Kolkata as a case study. It aims to understand how the recreational practices and everyday spatial landscapes of subaltern women living under precarious conditions in peripheral, quasi-legal settlements have been marginalized in mainstream recreational policies, shaped by upper-middle-class, male-centered approaches in neoliberal Indian cities.

Drawing on Lefebvre's (1976) concept of the production of space and feminist perspectives on context-specific, subjective meaning-making processes related to recreation (Henderson, 1996; Mohanty, 1988, 2003) we investigate what recreation means to subaltern women and their associated everyday spaces, offering preliminary insights into their everyday recreational landscape.

We adopt a participatory ethnographic approach across three contrasting peri-urban neighborhoods in Kolkata to challenge "World-Class City" initiatives that frame recreation as *free-time activity in homogenized formal public spaces* like parks and commercial places. These policies consider surveillance and aesthetic upgrades as a homogenized planning and design need for women-friendly spaces, while failing to acknowledge grassroots-level knowledge and lived realities.

Accessed through municipal connections, we conducted 15 semi-structured interviews through snowball sampling and analyzed them with a grounded theory approach. Findings show a comparative analysis of the three areas, revealing that subaltern women's recreation is shaped by a nuanced interpretation of recreation associated with leisure, embedded in fragmented, everyday activities within informal, self-made spaces across five settings: residences, informal workplaces, neighborhood spaces, religious spaces, and child-centered spaces. Furthermore, these practices are influenced by socio-cognitive needs shaped by social roles, identity, norms, and agency specific to different groups and locations.

The study concludes that subaltern women's recreation is a contested space, where the physical characteristics of spaces require an in-depth understanding of context-specificity, local knowledge, and women-centered lived experiences.

Keywords

Subaltern Women, Recreational Space, Feminist Perspective, Urban Peripheries, Indian Cities

1 INTRODUCTION

Global Frameworks, such as Article 24 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 15th and 16th Conferences of the World Leisure Congress and UN Women Report of 2022 on Gender Equality and Sustainability, referred to the importance of the built environment in women's leisure equity to achieve social and communal wellbeing. However, in countries like India, the built environment associated with leisure practices for different groups of women is underrepresented (McDonald, 2020; Sharma-Brymer, 2021; Yadav, 2020). Since the end of the 20th century, women's leisure equity has emerged as a significant focus of global feminist discourse across the global south in the context of rapid urbanization and global restructuring (Coalter, 2000; Henderson, 2012; Shaw, 2001; Watson, 2018). In the Indian context, the concept of *leisure* is rarely addressed as a standalone policy concern. Instead, terms such as *recreation*, *public use*, *free-time activities*, or *non-work engagement* are more commonly used in both scholarly and planning discourse to refer to leisure-related experiences and the built environments that support them. Among these, *recreation* is the closest in meaning to leisure and is often the default term in Indian urban and policy contexts. Therefore, this study adopts *recreation* as an entry point to explore the broader nuances of women's leisure practices.

In India, women's recreational practices gained momentum as a bodily right to public spaces following the 2012 Delhi gang rape case and the publication of Phadke, Ranade and Khan's (2011) seminal piece *Why Loiter? Women and Risk in Mumbai*. Yet, a significant gender gap in access to recreation persists (44% of women compared to 25% men), leading to adverse impacts on social and mental well-being (McDonald, 2020; Sharma-Brymer, 2021; Yadav, 2020). To address this gap in access to recreation, in this paper, we focus on how ordinary women from various marginalized backgrounds living in urban peripheries navigate recreational practices within the everyday built environment.

In India, nearly one-third of the population comprises *subaltern* communities—disadvantaged groups that emerged from structural and metaphorical divisions created by middle-class dominance. These communities experience multiple forms of socio-spatial exclusion based on class, caste, religion, occupation, and geographic segregation (Datta, 2020, 2022; Roy, 2003; Spivak, 1988). Nearly half reside in the liminal landscape of urban peripheries—urban fringes or transitional zones on the outskirts of cities—where the boundaries between urban and rural are increasingly blurred (Datta, 2020; Follmann, 2022; Roy, 2003). Often characterized by precarious living conditions, limited infrastructure, informal land ownership, and inadequate governance systems, these areas disproportionately impact socio-economically disadvantaged populations, particularly women from disadvantaged backgrounds who are frequently pushed into these peripheral zones (Datta, 2020, 2022; Roy, 2003). Limited studies indicate that their recreational practices—complex and often radical—are shaped by social, cultural, political, and locational factors, grounded in everyday experiences across public, private, and in-between spaces (McDonald, 2020; Sharma-Brymer, 2021; Yadav, 2020). Yet, these different, nuanced, and complex perceptions of recreation by these subaltern women, and the associated everyday routinized spaces in pursuit of complex recreational processes, remain underrepresented or homogenized in academic and policy discourse, reflecting what Datta (2020) terms "slow violence"—invisible, unmapped, and continuously affecting their lives.

Placing this understanding within landscape architecture makes visible the planning practices of cultural landscapes of everyday urbanism—mundane, self-made spaces and subtle spatial strategies that are not purely physical but are symbolic, shaped through local meanings and acts of micro-resistance across urban peripheries of Indian Cities (Chase et al., 2008; Cosgrove, 1998; Hou, 2010). These informal and overlooked landscapes are central to how women inhabit, adapt, and re-signify space in ways that defy a monolithic, formalized understanding of recreation embedded in dominant policy frameworks. Recognizing these everyday spatial strategies is thus crucial to reimagining the conventional recreational landscapes adopted in planning and design policy practices as projects of spatial justice, inclusivity, and lived experience (Datta, 2020; Massey, 2005; McDowell, 1996). Yet, despite the richness and complexity of these informal cultural landscapes, current planning and design policies continue to reproduce narrow, Western-origin notions of recreation that overlook such everyday realities.

Historically, recreational practices originated in Western countries, where recreation was viewed as a part of men's development, narrowly perceived as "fun activities" during "free time" after work (Hurd & Anderson, 2010; McLean & Hurd, 2011; Theobald, 1984). In *The Park and Recreation Professional's*

Handbook, Hurd and Anderson (2010) defined recreation as "an activity of free time that people enjoy and that people recognize as having socially redeeming value" (10), focusing primarily on socio-public activities such as sports, music, dance, games, travel, arts, and crafts conducted in public spaces. This notion shaped homogeneous public spaces such as the agora, stadium, theater, forum, and town square marketplaces that primarily served the upper-middle class, offering greater public accessibility based on economic class (Hurd & Anderson, 2010). India's strategic planning system is rooted in this Western, narrow, male-centered view of recreation, emphasizing free-time public activities and producing a homogeneous environment of park systems, plazas, squares, and commercial spaces, primarily designed based on population density or as city-level attraction spots (URDPFI, 2015). While creating recreational spaces, this approach overlooks demographic-specific recreational needs, context-specific struggles, and the importance of local, informal, everyday spaces vital to marginalized women. More importantly, it neglects leisure as a socio-psychological process of adaptation, resistance, and experience—one that is deeply embedded in grassroots-level acts, informal activities, and the everyday agencies of marginalized groups (Basu, 2017; Henderson, 2012; Shaw, 2001; Yadav, 2020, 2023).

A significant body of literature addresses women-environment relationships in the context of physical spatial practices. However, these studies are primarily limited to middle-class normative experiences, often focusing on the differences between men and women regarding bodily risks, fears related to safety, and culturally appropriate behaviors such as respectability, legitimacy, and purpose, primarily in conventionally designated public spaces (Desai, 2022; Kern, 2020; Perez, 2019; Phadke et al., 2011; Ranade, 2007; Sewell, 2011). Public spaces are typically defined as "all places publicly owned or of public use, accessible and enjoyable by all for free and without a profit motive" (UN-Habitat, 2020, p. 8). In India, especially under World-Class City initiatives, such spaces are deliberately planned with fixed boundaries—streets, parks, plazas, and civic nodes—to promote civility, publicness, and democratic participation (Fraser, 1990). This narrow, formalized characterization of public spaces reinforces a limited perspective, one most visible in contemporary gender-mainstreaming practices, particularly in national-level World-Class City initiatives—Smart City Mission (2015, promoting sustainability through women's safety measures like installing streetlights and CCTV surveillance); Beautification Policy (2011, improving urban aesthetics through landscaping, street art, and infrastructure upgrades); Zero Tolerance Policy (2014, addressing sexual violence in public spaces); and Pink Policy (2019, offering GPS-enabled rickshaws and free passes for women). In these initiatives, safety and aesthetic upgrades have become ubiquitous strategies to improve public spaces for women's participation, with an overarching focus on city-level enhancements (Datta, 2020; Roy, 2020). This monolithic assumption of recreation as a component of free time, alongside the overarching focus on formal public spaces based on middle-class experiences, is repeatedly adopted in the policies aimed at creating an equitable environment. However, this approach erases subaltern women's understandings of recreation and the associated spaces within the socio-spatial segregation of the liminal peripheral landscape.

Emphasizing the importance of a feminist framework within feminist leisure studies and transnational thought, this study critiques the one-size-fits-all concept of recreation (Henderson, 1996) and highlights the micropolitics of context-specific social, cultural, and political conditions, as well as local demographic intersections (age, class, caste, religion, occupation), that shape women's everyday lives (Mohanty, 1988, 2003). According to feminist leisure studies, women's recreation is driven by a nuanced and complex meaning-making process that distinguishes between the concepts of recreation and leisure. Recreation is often more tangible and refers to specific activities or functional outcomes (e.g., socialization, fitness). It tends to be organized, physically demanding, and confined to scheduled time slots. However, for women, the experience of leisure is deeply embedded in unstructured, voluntary, and intrinsically motivated leisure practices shaped by socio-psychological behaviors and everyday routines. This meaning-making process is neither universal nor homogeneous; rather, a system of symbols that people use to communicate, often reflected through psychological and behavioral practices of doing various unstructured activities and acts. While recreational activities refer to what individuals do or which events they participate in, acts denote how and why they engage in these activities—individually or collectively—as part of a patterned behavioral process (Coalter, 2000; Henderson, 1996, 2012). Such diversity in recreation practices underscores the highly context-specific and situated nature of recreation, influenced by the micropolitics of individual social, cultural, and political conditions. These dynamics challenge and resist the one-size-fits-all recreation model by centering women's local knowledge and lived experiences (Haraway, 1988;

McDowell, 1996; Mohanty, 1988, 2003). These localized practices and forms of knowledge directly impact women's everyday choices regarding socio-physical settings. These choices, in turn, are shaped by socio-cognitive needs, often manifesting in engagement with ordinary, routinized spaces and activities (Low, 2014, 2016). Socio-cognitive needs encompass social interactions and emotional processes driven by spontaneity, adaptability, cultural norms, social expectations, and bodily demands (Low, 2016). These needs are reflected in self-made, everyday spaces (Chase et al., 2008; Hernández-García, 2013; Hou, 2010), often mundane and considered insignificant in mainstream policy that blur the boundaries between public and private realms and are actively negotiated through subaltern women's bodily agency (Datta, 2016; Fenster, 2005).

This pilot study highlights the importance of understanding diverse meanings and socio-physical settings shaped by women's situated knowledge and localized practices, beyond mainstream institutional frameworks. Focusing on *subaltern*, working-class Bengali-Muslim and Bengali-Hindu women of Bangladeshi origin living in Kolkata's urban peripheries—engaged in informal work such as household help, government's contractual jobs like doing dengue surveys or engaged in different vocational activities like embroidery, pickle making, tailoring, etc.—it examines how socio-cultural intersections, and demographic positions influence their everyday experiences of recreation. Representing nearly 33% of the local population, these women—young, elderly, and housewives from households classified by the West Bengal Housing Board as Economically Weaker Sections (monthly income up to ₹10,000 ≈ \$125) or Lower Income Groups (₹10,001–₹15,000 ≈ \$125–\$187.5)—are often marginalized by local middle-class ideologies that consider them low caste due to their occupations and religions (Kundu, 2016; Roy, 2003). They live in government leasehold areas or segregated Bengali-Muslim neighborhoods across the peripheral margins (Kundu, 2016; Roy, 2003). Despite their significant presence, these women's spatial realities and daily recreational practices remain largely invisible in both literature and policy, overshadowed by Kolkata's dominant *Babu (gentleman) Culture*—a traditional Hindu, upper-middle-class, educated Bengali ethos rooted in class, caste, religious, occupational, and habitual locational ideologies. Existing literature on Bengali leisure practices highlights the *adda culture*—a male-dominated urban phenomenon that reinforces patriarchal norms, often excluding women from public discourse in informal social spaces (Chakrabarty, 1999; Chakravarti, 2017). However, the limited scholarship available on subaltern women's leisure reveals how their recreational practices intertwine with daily routines of family care, community rituals, commuting, and economic pursuits, unfolding within fluid public-private informal spaces that remain overlooked in policy frameworks (Banerjee, 1989a, 1989b; Chattopadhyay, 2005; Mitra, 2020; Roy, 2003).

Colonially mediated modernity and nationalist discourse further essentialized women's roles, positioning them within a moral framework of *grihalaxmi (goddess of the hearth)*—educated, disciplined, and responsible for the household, known as *bhadra mahila* (respectable women) (Banerjee, 1989a; Roy, 2003). The *bhadra mahila* identity was constructed as the national ideal, excluding those who did not conform to these socio-demographic norms, particularly women working outside the home. Women from non-native geographic origins of Bengal or different religious backgrounds (especially Muslims, who have historically faced anti-Muslim sentiments), who occupied public spaces for work and survival, were othered as *bad women* and subjected to social, cultural, political, and spatial marginalization (Banerjee, 1989b; Roy, 2003; Sattar, 2018). Such ideologies have been reflected in policy practices since the 19th century. Chattopadhyay (2005) demonstrates that, over time, male-dominated middle-class sentiments have shaped Kolkata's policymaking, prioritizing sanitation and the removal of public spaces deemed unhygienic or low-status, often targeting areas vital to subaltern women. Recent initiatives like Beautification Projects and the Green City Clean Mission, alongside World Bank guidelines (2020), focus on safety through lighting, CCTV surveillance, and aesthetic upgrades in city-level public spaces. While intended to enhance women's enjoyment, these approaches homogenize women's needs, overlooking population-specific contexts and the need for localized settings.

Addressing this gap, in this paper, we show the recreational practices of these subaltern women living in the socio-spatially segregated environment of Kolkata's peripheries by exploring their situated meanings of recreation in terms of understanding nuances in the meaning of recreation associated with leisure, types of acts and activities, different socio-physical settings, types of spaces, and a brief understanding of spatial qualities, focusing on three contrasting case study areas. These cases help identify diverse

recreational needs and experiences among groups of women with similar socio-economic and educational disadvantages but differing in occupation, religion, and socio-cultural contexts. This analysis builds on a feminist framework of leisure studies that explores the complexities and nuances of recreational construction alongside transnational feminist thought, emphasizing context-specificities and local mechanisms of difference to understand the diverse spaces and spatial practices of recreation beyond formal public-private boundaries. It draws on everyday socio-cognitive processes within informal spaces, crafted through the adaptation and negotiation strategies of subaltern women, without homogenizing recreation as a monolithic concept or the recreational landscape as a uniform cultural construct. In doing so, this study challenges existing concepts of recreation and the notion of monolithic bodily needs of women in urban spaces, as reflected in current policy practices.

1.1 Research Objectives

This pilot study addresses the gap in our understanding of how different social, cultural, and context-specific locational mechanisms impact perceptions of women's recreation and their choices of places for recreation within their everyday lives (Henderson, 1996; Henderson & Gibson, 2013; Shaw, 2001). Since grassroots-level practices of adaptation, negotiation, and resistance—which influence women's socio-cognitive needs and place-making practices of recreation—often remain invisible in dominant narratives of policy practices and scholarly works (Collins, 2000; Haraway, 1988; Low, 2016), we use a framework of feminist leisure studies and transnational thought to examine the following research questions:

- 1) What does recreation signify for subaltern women in their everyday lives?
- 2) What socio-physical settings are associated with recreation, and what are their socio-spatial qualities?

The primary objectives of the pilot study are twofold: 1) to gain preliminary insights into the daily recreational activities of subaltern women; and 2) to identify socio-spatial settings (along with their features) associated with these activities.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For the theoretical framework (Figure 1), we draw on Lefebvre's (Lefebvre, 1968, 1992) concept of the production of space, which emphasizes the socially constructed nature of space. We connect this notion of production of space with feminist leisure thoughts that emphasize understanding diverse meaning-making processes (Coalter, 2000; Henderson, 1996), along with the transnational thought of recognizing the impact of context-specific factors driven by individual social, cultural, and political conditions (Mohanty, 1988, 2003). This approach helps us in understanding how women's unique grassroots knowledge (Haraway, 1988) and lived experiences (McDowell, 1996) shape recreational practices.

The diverse meaning-making process of recreation explored by feminist scholars (Henderson, 2012) leads us to reject the notion of recreation as a "one-size-fits-all" concept. Instead, we focus on the relationship between recreation and leisure, even though there are differences in the literal meanings of recreation and leisure. Recreation is more tangible and usually refers to activities or their functional outcomes, such as socialization, fitness, etc. It is more frequently regulated, organized, and physically demanding, with designated time slots for specific activities. In contrast, leisure is an intrinsically driven, unstructured, optional, voluntary, and experience-specific psychological state. It can be enjoyable and engaging but does not follow any particular rules (Voss, 1967).

Henderson (1996) and Shaw (2001) explored the complexities and multiple facets of this relationship in terms of non-discretionary and residual time, passive and active forms, individual and collective pursuits, and mental satisfaction—often impacted by individual and collective resistance, reproduction, constraints, and empowerment. Resistance involves actions that counteract socio-cultural norms and social expectations while reproduction refers to caregiving and overlapping household responsibilities (Henderson, 2012; Henderson & Gibson, 2013). Constraints relate to bodily barriers regarding access to recreation (Henderson, 2012; Henderson & Gibson, 2013; Shaw, 2001). Empowerment is associated with how women navigate these constraints to reclaim and reshape their leisure experiences (Henderson, 1996).

Finally, this framework emphasizes differences and particularities to examine the micropolitics of everyday life, focusing on the importance of understanding how individual context-specific local intersections—social and cultural—shape women's unique, situated experiences and influence their leisure practices within specific socio-cultural settings (Mohanty, 1988, 2003).

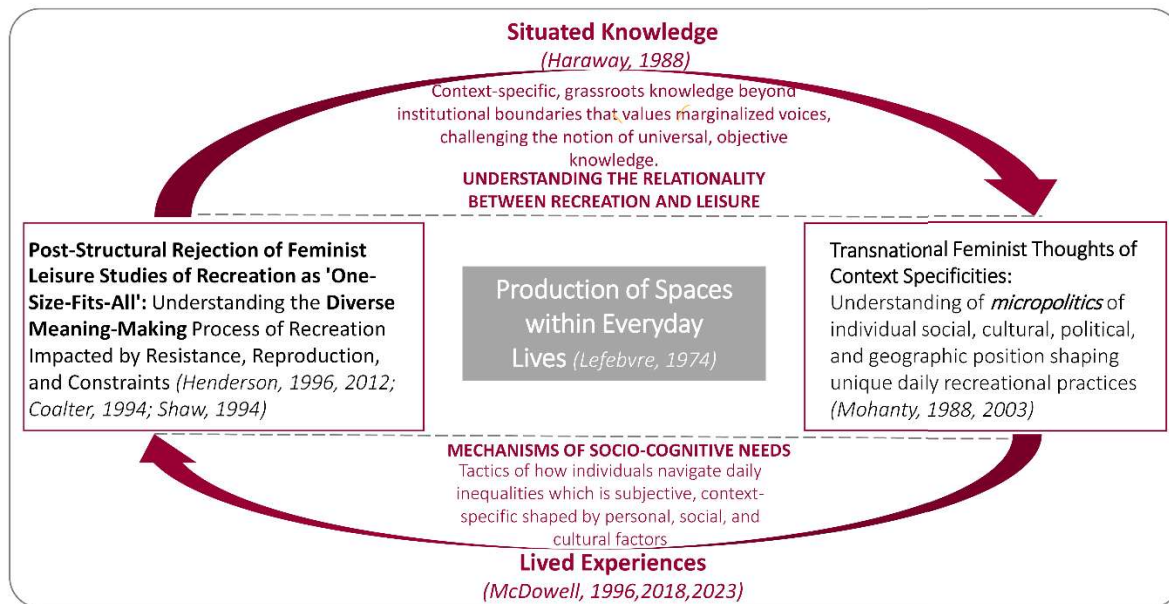


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework. Diagram by the authors.

3 METHODS AND PARTICIPANTS' PROFILE

We use a case study approach (Creswell & Poth, 2016) in three contrasting areas across the urban periphery of Kolkata, to conduct a comparative analysis of the similarities and differences in marginalized women's recreational place-making practices. The three areas are Sonarpur-Rajpur, Patuli, and Mukundapur. The selection of these areas was based on 2011 census data, secondary literature on subaltern women and area development, human geography impacts, and public data on policies transforming public spaces (Roy, 2003; Roy, 2020). Sonarpur-Rajpur is a low-income neighborhood predominantly occupied by the Bengali-Muslim population, currently under the threat of encroachment by gated development. The Patuli area is known for its quasi-legal land ownership status, where everyday life unfolds on government leasehold land. Mukundapur has emerged as a resettlement colony where residents of the Jadavpur Railway slum were relocated under a local political regime without any initial infrastructure, gradually developing through neoliberal real estate practices. However, the land settled by the relocated slum population in the resettlement area still lacks formal ownership status. Both Patuli and Mukundapur are authorized under verbal commitments from local authorities, ensuring that residents do not fear future displacement (Roy, 2003).

We adopted a participatory approach using feminist ethnography. Building on Hesse-Biber's (2007, 2023) feminist ethnographic framework, this research focuses on situated practices and the lived experiences of marginalized voices that are often overlooked in formal institutional practices. We accessed the area through municipal offices and local self-help groups, where we recruited the participants (n = 15) using snowball sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2016) to capture socio-demographic diversity. The sample size and methodology followed were guided by Hesse-Biber's (2007, 2023) feminist qualitative framework, which advocates for a small sample size in pilot projects and emphasizes the use of open-ended interview questions to capture rich, descriptive narratives of lived experiences. The interview questions probed issues of perception of recreation, daily recreational routines, associated spaces, familial and social roles, and perceptions of neighborhoods and communities, followed by identifying the places of recreation on a

printed map. The interviews were recorded and transcribed in the native language, Bengali, and then translated into English. This study adhered to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocols.

We used open and axial coding (Miles et al., 2018) within a grounded theory framework (Corbin & Strauss, 2015), using NVivo 14 to address two primary research questions: (1) “What is recreation?” and (2) “What are its socio-spatial settings?” For the first research question, open coding captured women’s own words about recreation, categorized into symbolic nuances of recreation, acts, and activities (Coalter, 2000; Henderson, 1996; Henderson & Gibson, 2013). The second research question identified socio-spatial settings-built environments with fixed, semi-fixed, or non-fixed elements that shape cultural landscapes through systems of activity (Moore, 2019). Axial coding (Miles et al., 2018) revealed that subaltern women’s recreation is shaped by social, cultural, and gendered norms through subcodes like reproduction, resistance, constraint, and empowerment. It also highlighted how socio-cognitive needs like legitimacy, control, safety, etc., guide their everyday space usage (Low, 2014; McDowell, 1996).

Participants’ demographics and backgrounds by area are summarized below (Table 1):

Table 1. Participants Profile

Participants Profile	Sonarpur-Rajpur	Patuli	Mukundapur
Number of total participants	5	5	5
Age Range	25-59 Years	38-60 years	26-59 Years
Gender	Female	Female	Female
Education	Ranged from the 10 th standard to postgraduates	Up to the 12 th standard	Below the 12 th standard to attend an undergraduate college
Ethnicity and Religion	Bengali-Muslim	Bangal (<i>ancestral roots in Bangladesh</i>) and Hindu	Bangal (<i>ancestral roots in Bangladesh</i>) and Hindu
Caste	Gazi (<i>A marginalized, lower socio-economic Muslim community in Bengal, part of the Pasmanda group</i>)	Did not clarify	Scheduled Caste (<i>Historically marginalized, constitutionally recognized for affirmative action in education, employment, and politics</i>)
Occupation	Homemakers and Informal sector workers, such as those running beauty parlors and doing embroidery, etc.	Homemakers, Informal sector workers, Municipal Contract Jobs, Domestic Maid	Self-Help Group Activities (<i>Government-led initiatives for savings, micro-lending, and skill building to empower women</i>)
Duration of residency	2 - 33 years	17 - 32 years	1 - 33 years

4 RESULTS

The preliminary findings reveal similarities and differences in the complexities of women's recreational practices across contrasting peri-urban areas. For the first research question, two major themes emerge: (i) recreation as a multi-faceted concept, and (ii) recreation as a set of diverse activities that fulfill a wide range of needs (Table 2), reflecting the varied meanings of recreation beyond a one-size-fits-all approach, as emphasized in feminist leisure theory (Coalter, 2000; Henderson, 1996). Table 2 shows that subaltern women’s understandings of recreation vary across the three neighborhoods, shaped by cultural, religious, economic, and familial roles. In Sonapur-Rajpur, Bengali-Muslim women view recreation as a *culturally or religiously acceptable way to access public life or create publicness in private spaces*. In Patuli, recreation overlaps with *working time and household responsibilities*, reflecting economic survival and the demands of social roles. In contrast, women from Mukundapur, define recreation as *mental empowerment through collective skill-building, emphasizing personal and collective upliftment*. The activities associated with

recreation are likewise diverse yet largely unstructured and multifunctional, reflecting these same socio-cultural conditions. In Sonapur-Rajpur, women seek socially sanctioned socialization through evening chats, group activities like pickle-making or embroidery, and daily chores. Some also mentioned daily prayer routines. In Patuli, women's recreation is intertwined with post-wage work chores, caregiving, economic activities, and brief relaxation during commutes. In contrast, women from Mukundapur engage in skill-building, reflecting a gradual shift toward organized personal and collective empowerment.

Table 2. Women Recreational Practices

Research Question 1: What is Recreation?		
Key Theme: recreation as a multi-faceted concept		
Sonapur-Rajpur	Patuli	Mukundapur
<i>"(...) an excuse to go outside the home"</i> <i>"a sense of publicness within the home domain"</i> <i>"(...) religiously approved happy times."</i>	<i>"working time,"</i> <i>"extra time for household work",</i> <i>"family-rearing time after work,"</i> <i>"a psychological escape from womanhood chores"</i>	a source of "mental empowerment" driven by individual empowerment and fostered through productive engagement, skill-building, and social bonding
Key theme: recreation as a set of diverse activities that fulfill a wide range of needs		
Sonapur-Rajpur	Patuli	Mukundapur
- Sanctioned opportunities for social interaction (75%): Evening chit-chatting, pickle making in family groups, procuring daily resources through multiple trips (5-6 times a day), such as groceries or fetching water, and accompanying children to school, tuition, and extracurricular activities. -Daily prayer routines (55%) -Vocational skill-developments (35%): Beautician courses, embroidery, and other forms of skill development activities	- Post-work (paid) household chores and caregiving responsibilities (50%): Cooking, cleaning, fetching water, childcare, and school drop-offs. - Work & Commute (35%): Job tasks, economic activities such as selling milk or tea, and workplace interactions. -Physical Activities (30%): Walking to markets and commuting on foot to the workplace. - Sedentary Activities (30%): Watching people and unwinding alone. -Socialization (13%): Evening socialization while doing groceries and visiting vegetable markets on the way home, along with workplace interactions. -Me-Time (15%): Self-care, hobbies, and creative pursuits serve as forms of personal relaxation	Productive engagement, skill-sharing, self-help group-based activities, and sharing perspectives in weekly meetings at the local party office (50%).

Analysis of the second research question identifies five major categories of socio-physical settings associated with women's recreation, which include home environment, neighborhood meeting points, settings related to kids' activities, informal work settings, and religious settings. These settings occupy a range of **ordinary, informal, and self-made places**, spanning **public, private, and fluid in-between settings** that blur public-private boundaries (Chase et al., 2008; Fenster, 2005; Hou, 2010) (Tables 3 and Figure 2). The results show that residential spaces include semi-private, fluid domestic edges such as front yards, courtyards, verandahs, rooftops, and outdoor stoops, which are heavily used by women in Sonapur-Rajpur. In Patuli, similar use of front yards and balconies is common, though limited access to rooftops often causes stress. In Mukundapur, women engage with the outside world through stoops, verandahs, and kitchen windows despite similar rooftop constraints. Neighborhood resource spots—grocery shops, markets, and milk booths—double as informal social hubs in Patuli and Sonapur-Rajpur, while women in Mukundapur use walking routes that combine errands, enjoying the surrounding outdoor environment, and vocational visits to a local party office. Across all areas, mothers transform waiting zones outside schools or tuition centers into spaces for social interaction, even occupying male-dominated club grounds when in groups. Informal workspaces are created by temporarily converting semi-outdoor

areas like verandahs, alleys, and rooftops, blurring the boundaries between private and public life. Religious spaces, such as small temples and tree-shaded shrines, serve as important social landmarks in Patuli and Mukundapur. However, they are less emphasized in the Muslim-majority areas of Sonarpur-Rajpur.

Table 3. Socio-Physical Settings Associated with Women's Recreation

<i>Research Question 2: What are the associated socio-physical settings and daily places for recreation</i>		
Sonarpur-Rajpur	Patuli	Mukundapur
Category: Residential Spaces		
Front yards, courtyards, verandahs, rooftops, and outdoor sitting stoops.	Similar multifunctional use of front yards and balconies. Lack of rooftop access causes mental stress for some.	Use of outdoor stoops, verandahs, and kitchens with windows as points of interaction. Mental stress due to a lack of rooftop access.
Category: Neighborhood Spaces		
Each alley serves as a distinct neighborhood unit, with various informal spaces fostering social interaction, like alley corners, shaded tree spots, water tap platforms, steps leading to local ponds, and low-maintenance orchards or gardens.	Grocery stores, milk booths, vegetable vendors, and snack corners serve as recurring social nodes during daily errands.	Regular walking routes, local party office serve as informal meeting points.
Category: Settings related to kids' activities		
Small waiting areas, tree-shaded spots outside schools or tuition centers, playground edges, and covered areas outside local mazars (shrines) used for socializing while waiting for children.	Undesignated open spaces near neighborhood club grounds—often male-dominated spaces—are used by mothers while waiting for children attending vocational activities.	Similar repurposing of waiting areas outside schools, tuition centers, or near clubs that offer children's programs.
Category: Informal Workspaces		
In all three areas, women convert flexible residential spaces—such as verandahs, front yards, adjacent alleys, rooftops, or parts of ground-floor rooms—into semi-outdoor work areas for self-help groups and vocational training. These are colloquially known as bairer ghor (outdoor rooms) or bairer jaiga (outdoor spaces), blending private and communal functions.		
Category: Religious Spaces		
Not mentioned.	Patuli and Mukundapur women emphasized the importance of small street-node temples or tree-shaded shrines, which serve local beliefs and function as key neighborhood landmarks.	



Figure 2. Different Socio-Physical Settings of Women's Recreation. Photos by the authors.

5 DISCUSSION

In the discussion section, we address the relationship between recreation and leisure and the role of socio-cognitive need in the choice of recreational settings:

5.1 Understanding the Relationships between Recreation and Leisure

The findings suggest that the conventional, policy-based idea of recreation as “free time” is irrelevant for subaltern women (Henderson, 1996, p. 145). For women in peripheral areas, recreation is not separate from daily life but deeply embedded in it, emerging through unstructured, context-specific practices shaped by psychological and behavioral processes. These practices reflect acts of resistance, reproduction, constraint, and empowerment. This rethinking of recreation as embedded leisure is shown

through everyday actions, routines, cultural beliefs, and bodily tactics, shaped by how individuals navigate religion, gender roles, class, and family structures in diverse social contexts (Coalter, 2000; Henderson, 1996; Henderson & Gibson, 2013; Henderson, 2012; Shaw, 1994; McDowell, 1996; Mohanty, 1988, 2003).

For women in Sonarpur-Rajpur, recreation serves as a culturally sanctioned form of leisure acts that subtly resist patriarchal, religious, and gendered restrictions confining them to the *andarmahal* (inner quarters) of domestic life. Often described as “an excuse to go outside the home” or “a sense of publicness within the home domain,” recreation allows women to reappropriate these spaces as sites of leisure and social interaction. Within the *mohilamahar* (women’s space), agency is fostered through evening conversations, pickle-making, and embroidery with female relatives and neighbors. Reproductive tasks like grocery shopping or escorting children are similarly framed as legitimate and religiously accepted avenues for mobility and interaction. In this context, leisure emerges as both a form of social reproduction and a subtle act of resistance, negotiated within the bounds of respectability, familial authority, and religious norms. For instance, a 35-year-old Muslim married housewife said,

“Every male in the Gazi family was short-tempered (...) We were strictly disciplined and even faced domestic physical domestic violence, which was common in the past. Things have improved a lot now. But still, we weren’t allowed to go out much for fear of something bad happening (...) we are a joint family, all living together in the same lane, so from the beginning, our social interactions mostly took place within the mohilamahar (women’s space) at home, where even the men of the house would sometimes join in. Now, we only step out for small errands like visiting the grocery stores, fetching water, or washing clothes. Even when we take the kids to tuition in the evening, we meet some familiar faces. But, beyond that, we don’t feel the need to go out much (...)”

For women in Patuli, recreation merges leisure as a psychological state with empowerment, as they navigate economic survival alongside the mental relief found in post-wage-work roles like motherhood and household management, tasks viewed as passive forms of relaxation. Marriage marks a shift from *meye* (daughter) to *barir bou* (housewife), repositioning them as working mothers with financial and decision-making roles. This transformation shapes their understanding of *happy times*, where daily tasks, commuting, workplace interactions, and economic independence foster empowerment, while caregiving and household labor offer a sense of mental fulfillment. For example, one 58-year-old single mother (widow) said,

“I need to do work, no matter what... When I got married, I saw a life of struggles. But how can a woman feel at peace without doing household work? So, after finishing my job, cooking, tidying up the house, and picking up my grandchild from school, it brings me a sense of peace. This itself is my happiness (...)”

In Mukundapur, women engage in self-help groups, political meetings, and skill-building workshops—often facilitated by local leaders—that blend structured and unstructured activities, fostering collective empowerment. These spaces offer economic opportunities, self-expression, and temporary relief from domestic violence, reinforcing women’s identities as independent individuals. Here, recreation intersects with leisure by enabling empowerment and community-building through acts of self-assertion. Similar to Patuli, leisure in Mukundapur serves as passive relaxation tied to mental empowerment, social connection, and agency. For example, a 45-year-old married woman said,

“Every day at the party office, we learn skills like sewing and handicrafts, thanks to Didi’s (local councilor) support. This has made us self-reliant. I’ve even set up a space at home to teach others. More than money, the freedom to express our opinions—both outside and at home—is invaluable. Domestic violence was more common before, but now we find a sense of happiness”.

In all three sites, women’s recreation is embedded in the leisure state of daily life as a multifunctional activity tied to caregiving, labor, and socialization, beyond mere relaxation (Henderson, 1996; Shaw, 1994). It fosters resistance and agency, allowing women to create autonomous leisure spaces within restrictive norms shaped by individual context-specific lived experiences (McDowell, 1996; Mohanty, 1988, 2003). In Sonarpur-Rajpur, Bengali-Muslim women’s leisure is shaped by religious norms; in Patuli, it overlaps with economic survival and family duties; in Mukundapur, it’s an escape from domestic

violence. This calls for redefining recreation by attending to local contexts, grassroots expressions, and psychological dimensions, challenging one-size-fits-all approaches to recreational landscape planning (Henderson, 1996).

5.2 Understanding Socio-Cognitive Needs in Choices of Places

The results highlight that subaltern women's spatial choices are primarily driven by their socio-cognitive need for spatial embodiment—a cognitive-emotional process rooted in the human necessity to occupy physical space, shaped by social expectations, cultural norms and bodily needs (Low, 2014, 2016). These needs vary across individual contexts and socio-demographic conditions (Mohanty, 1988, 2003).

Social Legitimacy: For Bengali-Muslim women, domestic spaces gain legitimacy through familial and religious approval, leading them to use private domestic spaces like *dawa* (porches), front yards, rooftops, and stoops for household, creative, and food-related tasks. These multifunctional spaces enable outside interaction while remaining within family boundaries, functioning as semi-public zones. As one woman described, they are “our public spaces within the domestic domain.” Similarly, in Mukundapur, women transform outward-facing ground-floor rooms into vocational workspaces, also with familial consent.

Territorial Control: Similarly, in Sonarpur-Rajpur, the lane adjoining the house becomes a space of self-defined authority, with all members of a particular group residing along it. Outsiders, except those from this group, are generally uncomfortable and tend to avoid entering, thereby reinforcing the territorial boundary. For example:

“Our father-in-law has eight brothers, and they all live in this lane. We get along by chatting with everyone—it has become like a neighborhood itself. Each lane here feels like a small community of its own.” — A 33-year-old married woman in Sonarpur-Rajpur

Purpose for Stepping Out: Availing daily resources, such as grocery shopping or school runs, gives women a purpose to go out while maintaining a legitimate public presence. For example,

“We meet and chat with everyone at the vegetable market. There's fun at the grocery store while getting milk, and it also gives us a chance to walk a little—that's our version of exercise. And at the well and pondside, there's daily enjoyment while fetching water.” — A 48-year-old married housewife in Sonarpur-Rajpur

Time-saving Strategies: The choice of spaces largely depends on daily routines, particularly the routes women take from home to work, as well as their starting and destination points in both Patuli and Mukundapur. Since these women are responsible for balancing daily informal paid work with household duties, everyday resource points such as vegetable markets, grocery stores, meat shops, bus stops, and auto stands become key spaces for socialization. These locations align with their time-saving strategies, proximity, and affordability in relation to commuting routes. For example:

“On the way home from work, buying roti (bread), vegetables, and then meat from Buddho's shop (a local butcher shop named after its owner's nickname) is a common practice—that's the fun... meeting so many people along the way.” — A 52-year-old working woman in Patuli

Similarly, for the women of Mukundapur, their everyday shared route is a source of happiness:

“This is the fun of coming here (to the local councilor's office) every day, meeting everyone at different points—that's what makes it fun (...) Everyone comes here together (...) Then on the way home, we all might have a little snack together (...) At that time, I buy flowers or vegetables from the vendor (...) It's convenient for everyone to negotiate the price (...) Then I go home (...) Before leaving the next day, I send her a WhatsApp message (...) Everyone knows who will stop where so that we can go together (...)” — A 38-year-old married woman in Mukundapur

Presence of Other Women as a Sense of Safety: Women also utilize male-dominated spaces, such as tea stalls or neighborhood club grounds, when these spaces are integrated with need-based infrastructure, where the presence of other women creates a sense of safety.

“I take my daughter to that club on Sunday evenings for her drawing class. There's a tea shop in front of it, so all of us mothers wait there, sitting and chatting. Everyone is around, so it doesn't feel

uncomfortable (...) And during that time, the boys don't come to the shop in a hurry (...) Even when they do, we all stay."

— A 40-year-old housewife in Patuli

Time-Space-Based Changes: Finally, time-space-based changes—such as shifts in user demographics (e.g., increased male presence during specific times), evolving usage patterns, and changes in the physical environment—play a significant role in shaping how subaltern women access and navigate spaces across all three areas. The presence of certain groups often triggers societal surveillance or male gazing, leading women to self-regulate their movements and modify spatial use.

Subaltern women's spatial choices are shaped by embodied mechanisms of bodily needs, societal sanctions, cultural norms, and time-space dynamics, varying by socio-demographic intersections, socio-cultural roles, and geography (Collins, 2000; Mohanty, 1988, 2003). In Sonarpur-Rajpur, religious norms and rural-urban fluidity confine women to domestic spaces. In Patuli, mobility depends on one's working status, whereas in Mukundapur, women participate in unpaid self-help group activities that provide limited, socially sanctioned mobility and empowerment. Across all areas, marital status imposes spatial restrictions through spousal and familial control. Additionally, the characteristics of these places are highly fluid, blurring public and private boundaries as self-made, informal activities are reappropriated through socio-cultural norms and bodily tactics. Yet, everyday recreational spaces face numerous socio-physical constraints—unpaved verandas, inaccessible rooftops, poor drainage, mosquito-infested lanes, lack of lighting, and male-dominated tea stalls at intersections. Environmental discomforts like heat and slippery surfaces near water sources further restrict access. Such localized, improvised spaces sharply contrast with formal, city-level public spaces prioritized in policy and planning (McDowell, 1996). Ultimately, women's spatial choices reflect a socio-cognitive need for spatial embodiment, shaped by bodily needs, psychological negotiation, and social expectations linked to religion, working status, and gender roles (Low, 2014). However, these lived, context-specific experiences remain largely invisible in mainstream planning and design frameworks for recreational spaces.

6 CONCLUSION

This study highlights how subaltern women in Kolkata's peri-urban areas engage with recreational spaces in nuanced, context-specific ways, challenging conventional definitions and recreation policies. For these women, recreation is not singularly leisure-focused but a multifunctional, adaptive practice embedded in everyday life. In Sonarpur-Rajpur, Bengali-Muslim women weave recreation into caregiving, household chores, and companionship within localized informal spaces. In Patuli, Bengali-Hindu women with Bangladeshi origins combine economic empowerment through informal work with family care and evening socializing. In Mukundapur (Bengali-Hindu women), recreation is seen as collective freedom, fostered through self-help groups and community networks that foster autonomy and participation.

Recreational spaces in these communities are largely informal and self-created, taking shape in shared courtyards, residual spaces, shaded areas, religious sites, and temporary workspaces. These spaces blur public-private boundaries across varied socio-physical settings, residential environments, child-centered amenities, informal work zones, ritual spaces, caregiving environments, and neighborhood resources. Their use is negotiated through socio-demographic intersections, including religion, gender roles, class, and patriarchal norms. Muslim women often face spatial restrictions from religious and male territorial norms, while women in Patuli emphasize respectability and legitimacy, reflecting socio-cultural expectations. Beyond structural constraints, socio-cognitive and emotional factors—bodily emotions, familiarity, and social expectations—shape women's spatial practices, negotiations, and subtle acts of resistance. These experiences reveal the contested, dynamic nature of recreation in segregated settings, where women's agencies are continually redefined. Yet, current policies overlook these informal, multifunctional, and adaptive practices, reinforcing exclusion. Inclusive recreation planning must therefore acknowledge these situated, lived realities and the complex interplay of social, cultural, and spatial forces.

Building on these insights, the study offers key recommendations to address the complex nature of subaltern women's recreation, particularly in planning and designing inclusive recreational landscapes for women. First, there must be a recognition of the complexities, relations, and interdependence between recreation and leisure. Though often used interchangeably, these are distinct yet interconnected concepts:

recreation tends to be more structured, activity-based, and spatially oriented, whereas leisure is a more fluid, socio-psychological state, often embedded in fragmented, multifunctional, and adaptive everyday practices. Understanding how these two realms are interwoven in the lives of subaltern women is crucial to designing inclusive and meaningful interventions. Second, recognizing the diversity and context-specific nature of recreational needs and spatial practices is essential, as these vary greatly depending on individual circumstances and social positions. Third, the fluidity of public-private spaces—ranging from intimate domestic spaces to in-between semi-public community spaces and public neighborhood spaces—should be acknowledged and legitimized as important sites of informal recreation and social engagement. Fourth, an intersectional feminist lens must guide policy, addressing differences shaped by factors such as religion, class, caste, and family roles. Fifth, understanding people-environment relationships through everyday bodily tactics reveals how women's sensory, cognitive, and social experiences shape access and place-making practices. Meaningful interventions must center grassroots knowledge and lived experiences through inclusive community engagement, enabling the co-creation of responsive and contextually rooted recreational spaces.

Moving forward, future studies should explore women's daily routines and the complex socio-physical landscapes of their recreational spaces. Using ethnography through community-engaged research, researchers can examine how bodily experiences and socio-cognitive needs shape spatial layouts, material features, multifunctional uses, activity zones, and temporal changes. Centering women's voices and agency will foster a more inclusive understanding of recreation, challenging dominant policy discourses that neglect the everyday realities of marginalized communities.

Acknowledgement

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to Prof. (Dr.) Suchandra Bardhan of Jadavpur University, Kolkata, and Dr. Melissa W. Wright, Dr. Leann Andrews, and Dr. Kathleen Sexsmith of Penn State for their constant guidance and support. We also thank Saheli Ghosh, Shubhashri Bose, and Syanatan Paul for their support with fieldwork, and the Rajpur-Sonarpur Municipality for facilitating community access. Above all, we are deeply indebted to the participants whose insights into this study made it possible.

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