

# WOMEN'S EMOTIONAL SAFETY IN URBAN PUBLIC SPACES IN PETTAH, SRI LANKA: *A Study of Spatial Perceptions*

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**Abstract:** This study explores women's emotional safety in Pettah, Colombo, focusing on how spatial perceptions influence everyday experiences in urban public spaces. A qualitative-dominant mixed methods approach was employed, combining survey questionnaires (n = 50) with participatory exploratory walks (n = 15). Findings reveal that limited visibility, obstructed sightlines, pedestrian congestion, and male-dominated environments consistently undermine women's confidence and comfort, leading to widespread coping and avoidance behaviours. Conversely, areas with clear visibility, smoother pedestrian flows, and balanced openness were associated with greater emotional reassurance. The convergence between survey and walk data highlights that emotional discomfort in Pettah is not incidental but structural, underscoring the need for gender-sensitive planning approaches that integrate emotional safety as a core element of inclusive urban design.

**Keywords:** *Women, Emotional safety, Urban public space, Spatial perception, Pettah*

## 1. Introduction

Urban public spaces play a critical role in shaping the everyday experiences and well-being of city dwellers. For women, these experiences are profoundly influenced by the emotional safety afforded by the spatial qualities of public environments. Emotional safety, distinct from physical safety, encompasses the subjective feelings of psychological comfort, dignity, and freedom from anxiety or fear while navigating public spaces (Benny et al., 2024; Zysk, 2024). This form of safety is significantly mediated by environmental features such as visibility, openness, walkability, spatial density (Pedestrian traffic), and social pressure - parameters that influence women's abilities to perceive, orient, and move freely with confidence in urban spaces.

Despite growing global recognition of emotional safety as a vital component of inclusive urban design (Cities Alive, 2022; UN-Habitat, 2012), many urban planning frameworks remain predominantly shaped by masculine perspectives that prioritize efficiency and surveillance over psychological and emotional needs (Fenster, 2005; Leslie Kern, 2020). This oversight often results in spatial configurations that generate feelings of disorientation, vulnerability, and exclusion among women through limited visibility, poorly defined boundaries, and challenging pedestrian conditions (Benny et al., 2024).

Visibility, which includes clear sightlines and natural surveillance ('eyes on the street'), is essential in fostering feelings of safety as it enables women to anticipate and navigate spatial risks (Jacobs, 1992; Gehl, 2010). Likewise, openness offers a balance between exposure and enclosure, where overly enclosed spaces can evoke anxiety due to limited escape options, while overexposed areas may lack refuge, intensifying feelings of vulnerability (Gehl, 2010). Walkability, involving the quality and continuity of pedestrian pathways, facilitates ease of movement, spatial legibility, and accessibility, which collectively contribute to emotional reassurance and spatial autonomy (Jin et al., 2023). High spatial density, experienced as pedestrian congestion, can intensify stress and limit movement. Moreover, social pressure, particularly male dominance in public spaces, further compounds women's emotional discomfort and restricts their freedom (Parvez Butt & Sekaram, 2019; Şenol, 2022).

In the context of Pettah, Colombo an intensely spatial and sensory complex urban area marked by narrow streets, high pedestrian density, and socio-cultural diversity-women frequently report emotional discomfort rooted in poor visibility, inadequate openness, and challenging walkability (Kaushalya Herath, 2018; Kawshalya et al., 2022). These spatial challenges, compounded by male-dominated public realms and restricted access, limit women's freedom of movement and active participation in urban life. While physical safety has been partly addressed in policy-driven interventions, emotional safety through spatial qualities remains an underexplored dimension in local urban research and planning (Burtscher & Britton, 2022; Parvez Butt & Sekaram, 2019).

To address this research gap, the present study examines women's emotional safety by analysing how spatial perceptions shape their lived experiences in Pettah. By centring exclusively on the female perspective, the study foregrounds the specific

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emotional and spatial challenges women negotiate in public space, recognising that the insights generated represent one side of the broader gendered experience. This focused approach contributes to gender-inclusive urban design by highlighting how visibility, walkability, spatial density, and social pressure uniquely affect women's sense of safety and belonging.

## 2. Literature Review

Urban public spaces (UPS) are central arenas of social interaction, mobility, and cultural expression, expected to be accessible and inclusive for all users through barrier-free design and adaptation to diverse needs (Zysk, 2024). When effectively planned and managed, they foster participation, belonging, and community well-being. However, these spaces are not experienced equally: women in particular often face challenges that undermine their sense of safety and comfort, shaped not only by the threat of physical harm but also by subtle psychological dynamics embedded in the urban environment.

Emotional safety has emerged as a critical dimension of inclusive urban design. It refers to an individual's subjective experience of psychological comfort, dignity, and freedom from fear or anxiety while navigating public space (Benny et al., 2024). Unlike physical safety, which relates to tangible risks such as crime or violence, emotional safety captures perception-based aspects of feeling secure, including whether one feels welcome, acknowledged, and in control of their surroundings (Zysk, 2024). Global frameworks increasingly recognize emotional well-being as a component of gender-sensitive urban design (UN-Habitat, 2012; Cities Alive, 2022; KDI World Bank Group, 2020), yet many planning traditions continue to prioritize efficiency, infrastructure, and surveillance over psychological comfort (Fenster, 2005; Leslie Kern, 2020). This often results in intimidating or alienating spatial conditions, such as obstructed sightlines, unpredictable pedestrian flows, and socially unbalanced environments, where women must remain hyper-vigilant or modify their behaviour to feel safe.

Research across South Asian cities shows that women frequently adopt coping strategies to navigate these conditions, including altering clothing, avoiding certain streets or times of day, and selecting familiar routes to enhance perceived safety (Jabeen, 2020; Parvez Butt & Sekaram, 2019; Sadeghi et al., 2023). These adaptations extend to behaviour and psychological strategies such as avoiding eye contact, walking quickly, or using phones as symbolic protective tools (Şenol, 2022). Such practices highlight the gendered emotional burden women carry in public spaces, where mobility often reflects defensive adaptation rather than genuine freedom. Despite increased global attention, urban planning still tends to overlook these emotional dimensions. Initiatives such as the Her City Toolkit (UN-Habitat, 2021) stress that psychological comfort, emotional autonomy, and sensory ease remain insufficiently addressed, a gap that persists in Sri Lanka where concerns like crowding, enclosure, and male dominance continue to restrict women's participation in urban life (Burtscher & Britton, 2022).

A key factor shaping women's emotional safety is spatial perception, which refers to how people interpret physical characteristics such as visibility, enclosure, orientation, and pedestrian flow (Zheng et al., 2022). Visibility and openness are particularly significant: clear sightlines and unobstructed views foster natural surveillance and reassurance (Jacobs, 1992; Benny et al., 2024), while excessive enclosure or overexposure can generate anxiety (Gehl, 2010). Walkability also plays a critical role, with well-connected pathways, landmarks, and supportive amenities enhancing both mobility and comfort (Benny et al., 2024). Conversely, high pedestrian density, especially in narrow and congested streets, often heightens stress and vulnerability (Jin et al., 2023). Social dynamics further intensify these challenges, as male-dominated spaces not only reduce women's sense of belonging but also create anticipatory anxiety and avoidance behaviours (Parvez Butt & Sekaram, 2019; Şenol, 2022).

## 3. Research Methodology

The study employs a qualitative-dominant mixed methods research approach, combining participatory and survey-based techniques. This approach makes it possible to capture both the lived, moment-to-moment experiences of women and the broader patterns of perception and behavior across different user groups. While the qualitative dimension emphasizes depth through direct engagement and observation, the quantitative dimension provides supportive evidence on recurring trends. Together, these methods ensure a more holistic understanding of how spatial conditions influence women's emotional safety in Pettah.

### 3.1. DATA COLLECTION METHODS AND TOOLS

To examine women's emotional safety in Pettah, the study employed two complementary methods: a structured survey and a participatory exploratory walk. The survey captured broader patterns of perception and behaviour across 50 women, including commuters, employees, and university students, and was structured around three thematic areas: emotional safety and discomfort, coping strategies and avoidance behaviours, and spatial perceptions. It combined closed-ended questions for measurable comparison with open-ended items that elicited personal narratives. Distributed digitally through Google Forms over a ten-day period, the survey ensured broad accessibility and anonymity. To complement these insights with situated experiences, a participatory exploratory walk was conducted with 15 female university students representing

diverse social backgrounds. The 2.85 km route extended from Pettah Railway Station to W. E. Bastion Mawatha, covering key public spaces such as the Floating Market, Colombo Central Bus Stand, vendor streets, and the Private Bus Stand. Participants documented their experiences through notes, photographs, and reflections, focusing on parameters of visibility and openness, walkability, spatial density, and social pressure. This combination of methods enabled the study to capture both collective trends and in-depth, real-time experiences of emotional safety in Pettah’s urban landscape. Figure 1 illustrates the selected walk route.

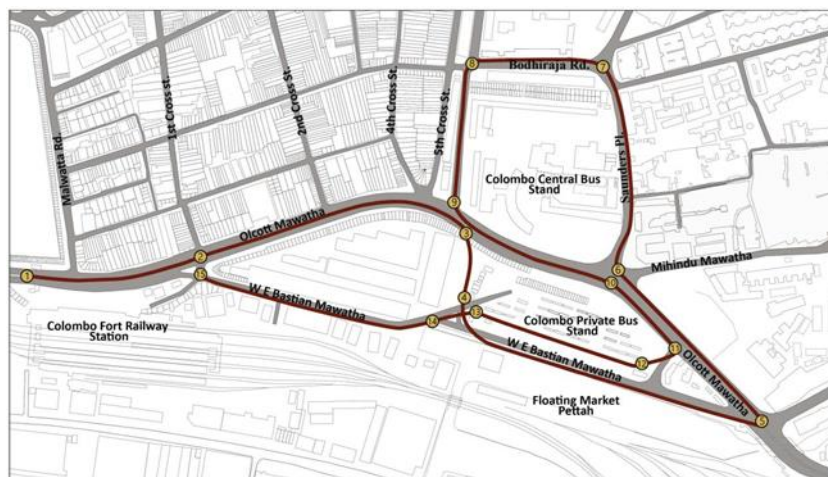


Figure 1: Walk Route map (Source: Compiled by Author)

### 3.2. FIELD STUDY PROCEDURE

Table 3.1 outlines the procedure, including the number of days, participant profiles, tools, representation techniques, interpretation focus, and methods of analysis applied for each method. This procedure allowed data to be gathered at both the collective level (through surveys, identifying broad trends among a larger sample of women) and the experiential level (through exploratory walks, capturing emotional responses to spatial conditions).

Table 1: Field Study Procedure (Source: Compiled by Author)

Data Collection Methods	Number of Days	Number of Participants	Tool	Representation	Interpretation	Analysis
Survey Questionnaire	10 days	50 (commuters, employees, students)	Google Form (structured questionnaire)	Charts, tables, graphs (bar charts, pie charts, frequency tables)	Patterns of emotional safety, coping strategies, and spatial perceptions	Frequency analysis for closed-ended questions; Content analysis for open-ended responses
Participatory Exploratory Walk	2 days	15 (female university students)	Photographs, field notes, participant comments, route map	Annotated maps with walk routes, colour-coded emotional responses, icons for spatial triggers	Emotional responses at specific locations, links between spatial features and feelings of safety	Sensitive mapping (colour coding, icons) + Content analysis of participant reflections

### 3.3. DATA ANALYSIS METHODS

There after the study focuses to an analytical study in the case of Pettah. Closed-ended responses from the survey questionnaires were examined through frequency analysis, with results presented in bar charts, pie charts, and frequency tables to reveal patterns in emotional safety, coping behaviours, and perceptions of spatial conditions. Open-ended responses were subjected to content analysis, where recurring words were coded to capture personal feelings and experiences.

Data from the participatory exploratory walk were processed through sensitive mapping, in which participants’ photographs, notes, and comments were translated into annotated maps. Emotional responses were color-coded by comfort levels, and icons were applied to represent triggers such as isolation, poor visibility, congestion, noise, and odors. These

visual mappings were then interpreted through thematic analysis, enabling recognition of how spatial factors shaped women’s feelings of safety or unease across the route.

### 3.4. MAPPING METHODOLOGY

The analysis of the exploratory walk was conducted through sensitive mapping, in which each participant’s spatial and emotional responses were visualised using a consistent system of color codes and symbols. This method allowed for the integration of multiple dimensions of experience-emotional, and spatial - within a single visual framework. Emotional responses were graded across five levels, ranging from very good to very poor, and represented through a yellow-to-brown gradient. This enabled clear differentiation between locations where participants felt positive, moderate, or negative emotions.

Spatial parameters such as visibility and openness, walkability, and spatial density (pedestrian traffic) were represented using graded color scales that reflected conditions from good/low to poor/high. In addition, social pressures, particularly those associated with male-dominated areas were also color-coded to capture their influence on emotional safety. To complement the color-coded parameters, a symbolic legend was applied to identify specific spatial features observed along the route. Symbols were used to mark elements such as clear or obstructed sightlines, natural or absent surveillance, physical barriers, and isolated or narrow areas. Figure 2 illustrates the system of color coding and symbols used in the study. By combining emotional gradients, spatial parameter coding, and symbolic markers, each of the 15 maps provided a detailed representation of individual participants’ experiences. Collectively, these maps reveal patterns of emotional safety and discomfort across Pettah’s streets, highlighting how physical characteristics intersect to shape women’s movement and perception in public spaces. In addition to these individual maps, an overall summary map was created by synthesising responses from all 15 participants. This cumulative map highlights pause locations and presents the group’s collective emotional responses in relation to the spatial parameters, offering a broader overview of emotional safety patterns across Pettah.

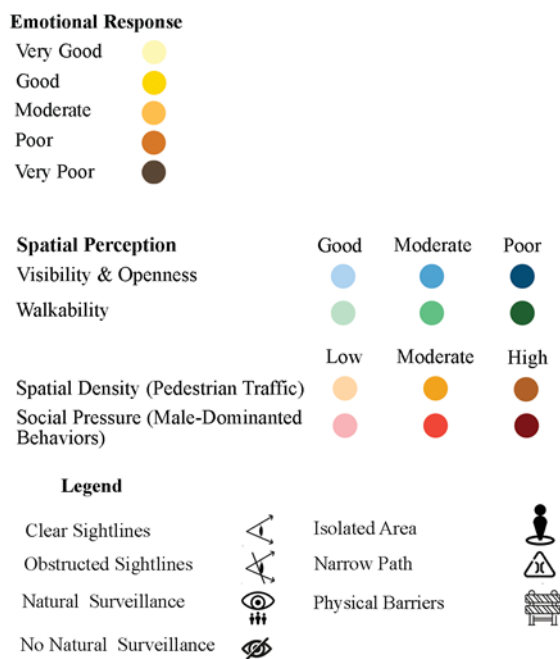


Figure 2: Colour codes and Symbols (Source: Compiled by Author)

## 4. Results and discussions

This section presents the findings of the study by integrating both survey responses and insights from the participatory exploratory walk. The survey results are discussed first, highlighting broad patterns in women’s perceptions of emotional safety, coping strategies, and spatial challenges in Pettah. This is followed by analysis of the exploratory walk, which provides in-depth, place-specific accounts of how spatial conditions shape women’s lived experiences in real time. A comparative discussion then synthesises these two strands of evidence, examining points of convergence and divergence to offer a holistic understanding of how spatial perception influences women’s emotional safety in urban public spaces.

### 4.1. SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRES: RESPONSES AND ANALYSIS

The questionnaire survey was conducted to capture women’s perceptions of emotional safety in Pettah’s urban public spaces, focusing on commuters, employees, and university students within the age category of 20 to 50 years. Responses from 50 participants provided insights into how spatial and sensory conditions influence everyday experiences. The analysis

highlights patterns across four thematic areas: emotional safety and discomfort, coping strategies and avoidance behaviours, spatial perceptions, and sensory perceptions, allowing both collective trends and individual perspectives to emerge.

4.1.1 Emotional Safety and Discomfort

Perceptions of safety are mixed but skew toward uncertainty and discomfort. Only 7% of respondents feel safe, while nearly half, about 47% are neutral about their safety. At the same time, roughly 47% feel unsafe, with 16% feeling very unsafe. in Pettah. The range of emotions most commonly experienced irritation, alertness, fear and anxiety, is shown in Figure 3 and underscores an affective state of vigilance when moving through the area. Respondents identified dark/isolated paths, congested and narrow streets, and male-dominated zones as primary locations that generate emotional discomfort (Figure 4). These results highlight how both the physical environment and social conditions shape women’s emotional safety and influence their everyday movement within Pettah. Time-of-day patterns further emphasise vulnerability: 88% of respondents report feeling unsafe at night, and 70% report feeling unsafe in the evening . These results indicate that emotional safety is both place- and time-sensitive in Pettah.

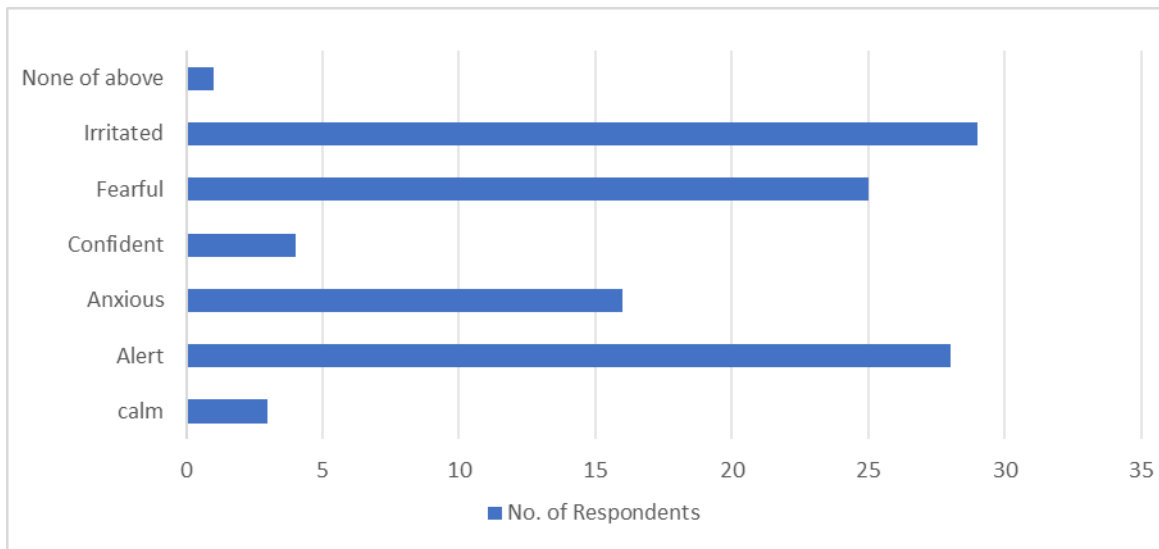


Figure 3: Commonly Felt Emotions When Moving Through Pettah (Source: Compiled by Author)

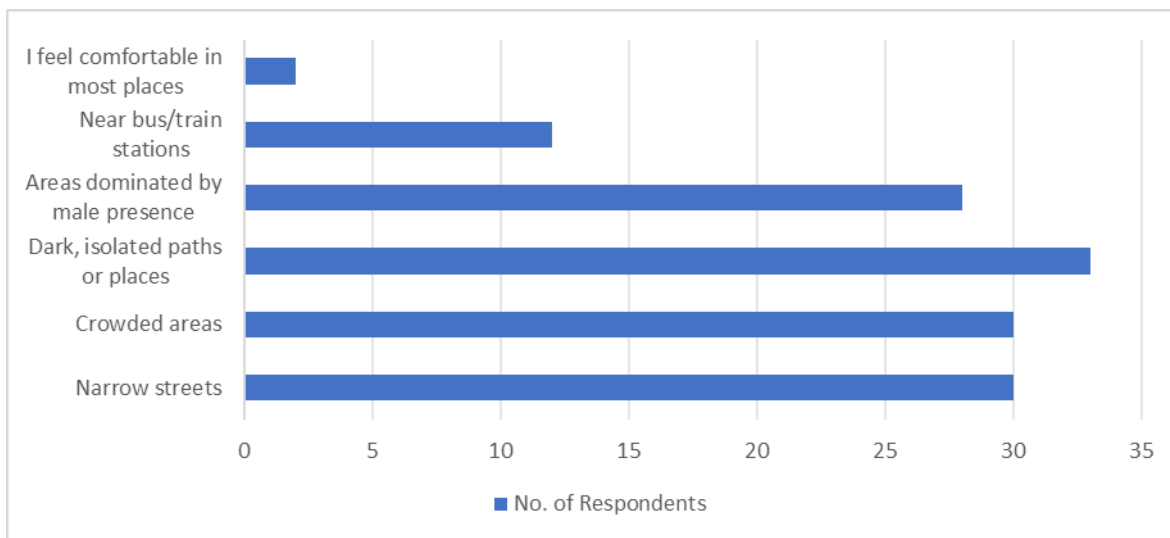


Figure 4: Commonly Felt Emotions When Moving Through Pettah (Source: Compiled by Author)

4.1.2 Coping Strategies and Avoidance Behaviors

The data show that avoidance is a pervasive strategy among women navigating Pettah, 92% of respondents reported actively avoiding particular places: 16% *always*, 40% *often*, and 36% *sometimes*. Only a very small proportion indicated that they never avoid spaces. This demonstrates that spatial exclusion, rather than being occasional or incidental, is a normalized part of women’s everyday navigation. The types of places avoided (Figure 5) further highlight critical spatial and social triggers. Dark or poorly lit areas were avoided by 74% of respondents , followed closely by isolated alleys and narrow paths at 70%. Male-dominated areas were cited by 58%, and crowded streets or junctions by 54%. These results illustrate that both physical (poor lighting, enclosure) and social (male dominance, crowding) factors strongly influence women’s mobility

choices. Notably, while congestion is often assumed to increase safety by providing “eyes on the street”, is instead perceived as threatening, reinforcing feelings of intimidation and lack of personal control.

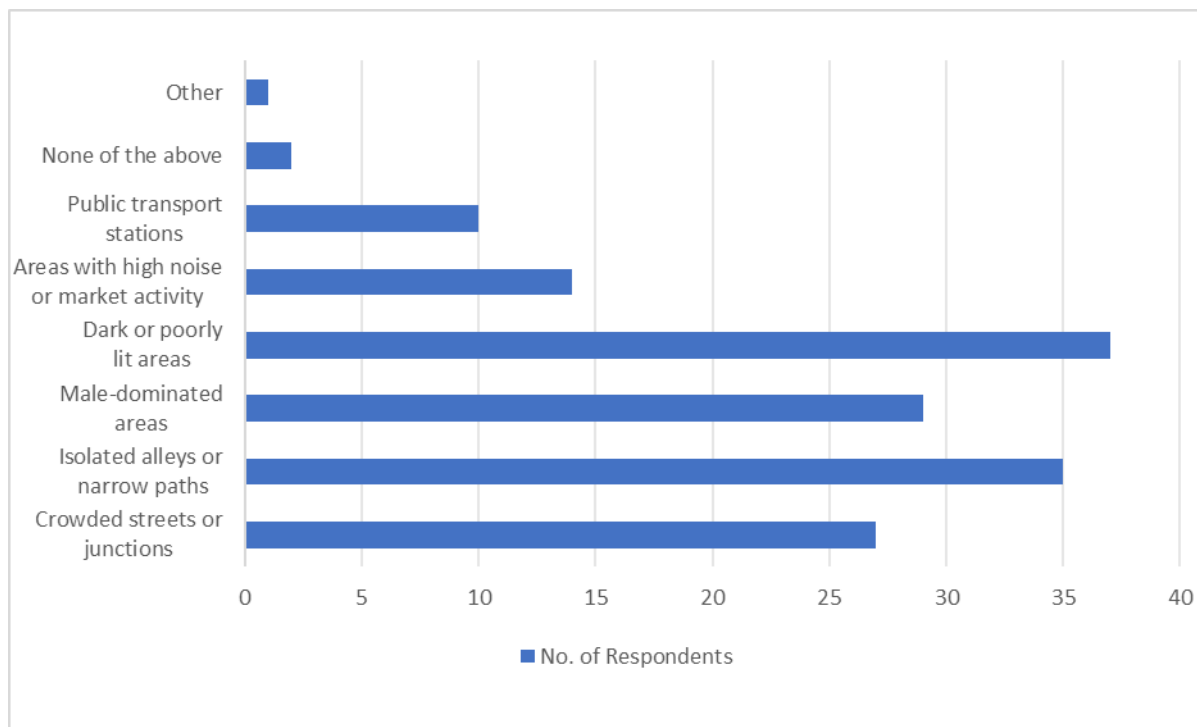


Figure 5: Places in Pettah Commonly Avoided (Source: Compiled by Author)

Coping strategies reveal women’s active adaptations to manage emotional discomfort. The most common strategy was walking fast or purposefully, reported by 84% of respondents. This reflects the need to project confidence and reduce exposure to unwanted attention. Walking with others was chosen by 70%, underscoring the protective value of companionship and peer networks. Adjusting the time of visits (50%) and dressing conservatively (48%) highlight behavioural regulation to avoid risky conditions, while avoiding eye contact (58%) shows subtle strategies of self-protection in male-dominated contexts. These findings show that avoidance and coping strategies are key behaviors women rely on to navigate Pettah’s public spaces safely. Responses to emotional discomfort clearly show protective behaviors. Nearly 66% of respondents leave the space immediately when they feel uneasy, while about 33% avoid returning to that area in the future. Around 20% choose to share their experience with others, and approximately 20% tolerate the discomfort silently. A very small number, less than 2%, reported other reactions.

#### 4.1.3 Spatial Perceptions

Visibility and wayfinding emerge as central spatial determinants of women’s comfort in Pettah. Only 6% of survey respondents reported feeling well visible and safe, indicating that the overwhelming majority perceive shortcomings in sightlines and personal visibility. Issues with navigation are likewise frequent: combining the responses shows that 88% of participants experience difficulty finding their way at least sometimes (58% sometimes + 30% very often) . These figures point to widespread problems of spatial legibility rather than isolated incidents of disorientation.

Figure 6 details the specific spatial attributes that drive discomfort: blocked sightlines, lack of continuous pathways or signage, difficulty locating exits, and enclosed or isolated pockets. Each of these features undermines “possibility to see and orient” - a core element in people-centred spatial design - and helps explain why so many respondents report uncertainty while moving through Pettah. The data therefore indicate both a perceptual problem (users cannot easily read the environment) and a material problem (obstructions, and unclear routes impede movement).

Pedestrian congestion is experienced negatively by a clear majority. A majority of 68% of respondents feel uncomfortable in crowded spaces (40% very uncomfortable, 28% slightly uncomfortable), whereas only 20% report feeling safer when more people are present. This suggests that congestion in Pettah is more often perceived as chaotic or constraining than as the protective “eyes on the street” that can produce comfort; in other words, the quality of crowding (organized flows versus chaotic pinch points) matters for perceived safety.

Social composition of space further compounds spatial discomfort. A combined 76% of respondents indicate that male-dominated areas negatively affect their emotional comfort (42% strongly agree, 34% somewhat agree). This high proportion

shows that spatial constraints intersect with social dynamics - places that are physically narrow or poorly surveilled become socially uncomfortable when dominated by a single gender group.

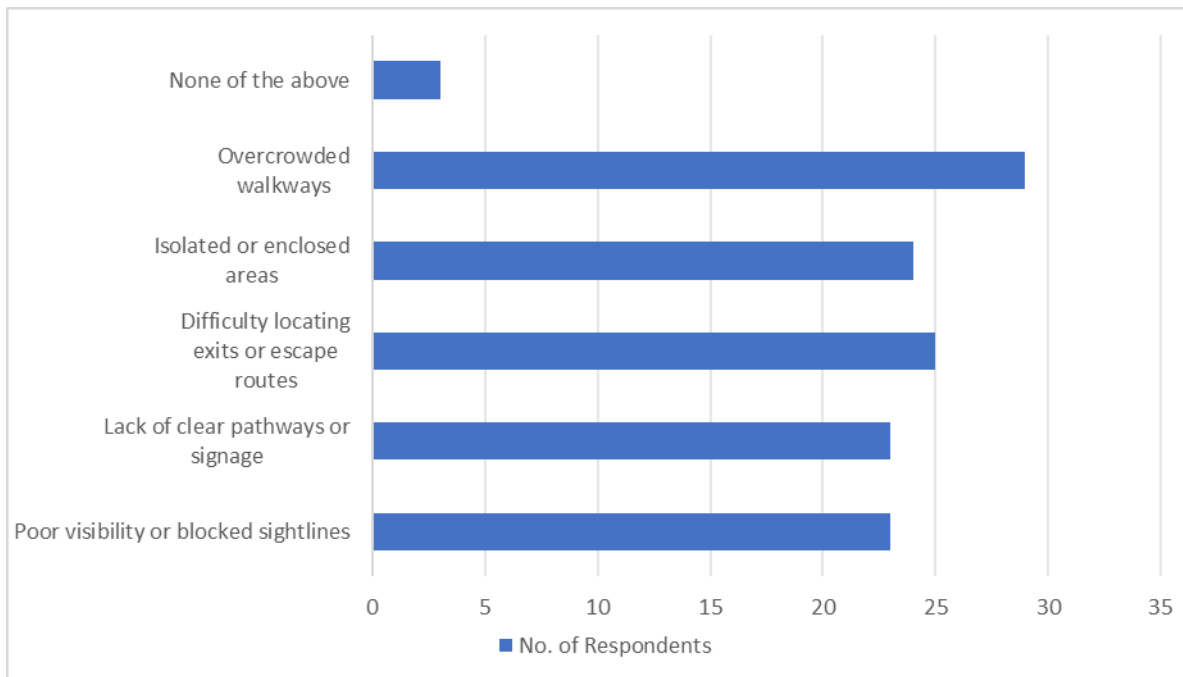


Figure 6: Spatial Features Contributing to Emotional Discomfort in Pettah (Source: Compiled by Author)

#### 4.2. PARTICIPATORY EXPLORATORY WALK: RESPONSES AND ANALYSIS

The exploratory walk provided detailed insights into how spatial characteristics in Pettah shape women’s emotional safety. Figure 7 maps the 25 pause locations along the walk route, indicating visibility, walkability, spatial density, and male dominance, while also visualising participants’ emotional responses through colour-coded symbols. Figure 8 complements this by showing how each participant rated their emotional experience at each location, ranging from very good to very poor. Together, these figures reveal strong correlations between spatial parameters and women’s feelings of comfort or vulnerability.

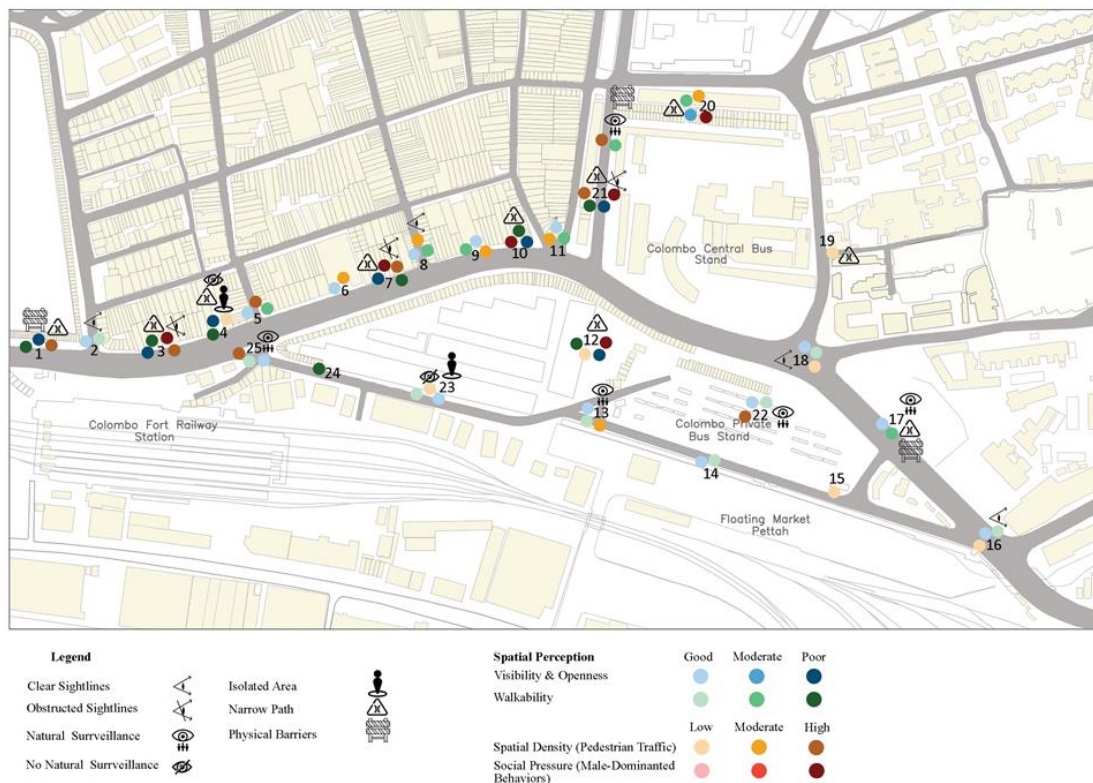


Figure 7: Overall Response Map (Source: Compiled by Author)

Walkability also played a critical role. Sections with smooth pedestrian flow and wider footpaths were evaluated positively, whereas congested vendor streets and intersections with physical barriers were consistently linked to poor responses. High spatial density (pedestrian congestion) was one of the strongest predictors of emotional discomfort. In places such as bus terminals and market entrances, crowding limited mobility and personal space, leading participants to pause, avoid eye contact, or quicken their pace.

Another recurrent theme was social pressure. Locations identified as heavily male-dominated, such as street corners, and vendor clusters were strongly associated with poor or very poor emotional ratings. Even without explicit harassment, the concentration of male presence and behaviours such as staring created anticipatory anxiety, compelling participants to regulate their behaviour and movement.

Overall, the mapping and participant reflections demonstrate that emotional safety was highest in areas with clear sightlines, balanced openness, and moderate pedestrian activity, while the lowest ratings were concentrated in zones of obstructed visibility, high density, and male-dominated presence. These findings confirm that women’s emotional safety is mediated not simply by physical infrastructure but by the interaction of spatial perception and social dynamics.

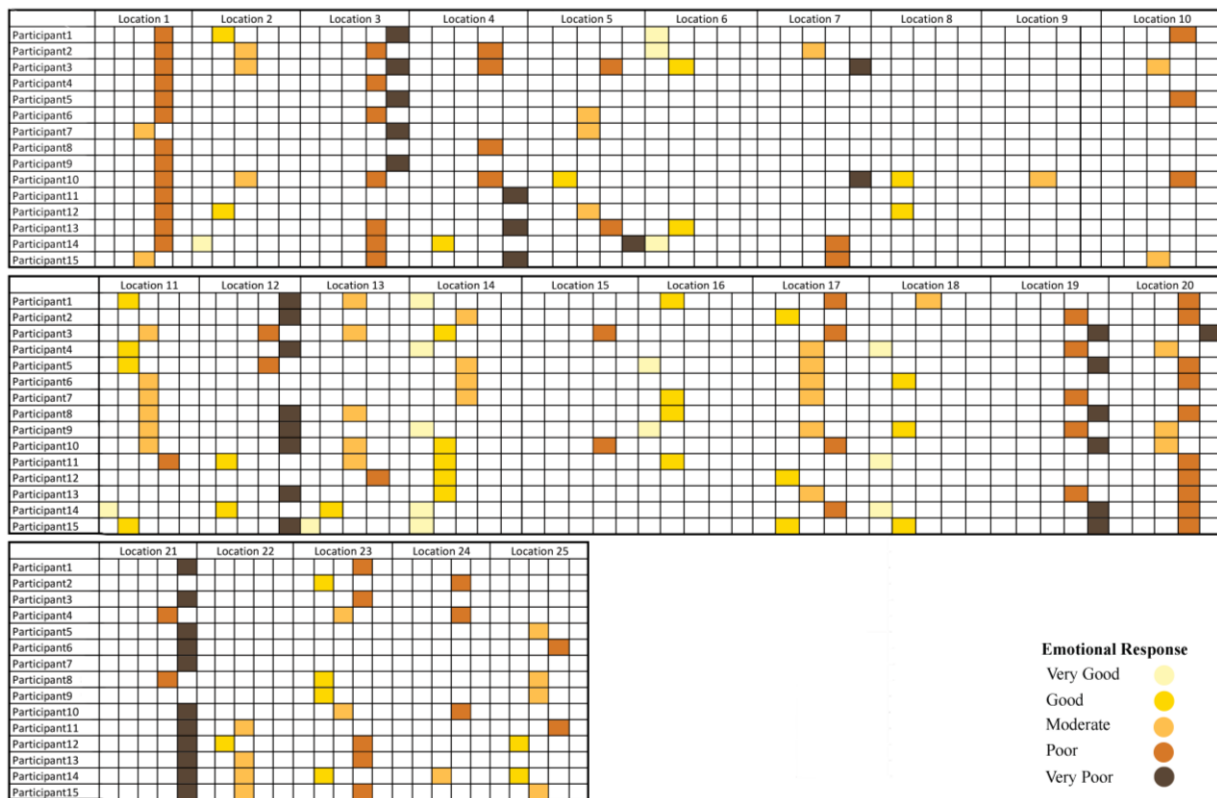


Figure 8: Emotional Responses by Location (Source: Compiled by Author)

### 4.3. DISCUSSION

The two methods together provide a layered understanding of women’s emotional safety in Pettah. The survey reflects women’s broader perceptions of the area, capturing an overall sense of unease and the coping strategies they adopt in daily navigation. Responses revealed that discomfort is a consistent feature of women’s urban experience, with avoidance behaviours, such as steering clear of particular streets, adjusting travel times, or modifying dress, emerging as normalized strategies for negotiating the city.

In contrast, the exploratory walk situates these perceptions in real time and specific locations. Here, participants expressed their emotional responses directly in relation to spatial characteristics encountered along the route. As illustrated in Figures 7 and 8, areas marked by congestion, obstructed visibility, and male dominance consistently triggered discomfort, while more open and legible spaces fostered relatively positive experiences. Unlike the survey’s generalized accounts, the walk reveals how these challenges unfold in the lived moment of occupying space.

Together, the findings converge on the same determinants-visibility, walkability, density, and male dominance-but offer different vantage points. The survey establishes the widespread nature of women’s discomfort in Pettah, while the exploratory walk grounds these perceptions spatially, showing where and how they manifest. This complementarity

underscores that women's mobility is constrained not only by physical risks but also by constant emotional regulation shaped by both environmental and social dynamics.

## 5. Conclusion

This study examined women's emotional safety in Pettah, Colombo, with a focus on how spatial perceptions - visibility and openness, walkability, spatial density, and social pressure- shape everyday experiences in public space. Using a qualitative-dominant mixed methods approach, the research combined survey questionnaires with participatory exploratory walks to capture both broad patterns and situated responses.

The findings reveal that women's sense of safety in Pettah is strongly mediated by spatial characteristics and social dynamics rather than by direct physical threats alone. Limited sightlines, obstructed visibility, congested pedestrian flows, and male-dominated environments consistently undermined women's confidence and comfort. In response, avoidance and coping strategies such as route changes, walking quickly, or travelling with companions were found to be widespread, highlighting how women adapt defensively rather than experiencing true freedom of movement.

Importantly, the convergence between survey results and walk-based observations confirms that emotional discomfort in Pettah is not incidental but structural. Positive experiences were associated with locations offering clear visibility, smoother pedestrian movement, and balanced openness, while negative experiences clustered around enclosed, overcrowded, or socially intimidating areas. These findings underline the need to recognize emotional safety as an integral part of urban design, complementing physical safety measures.

As this research was conducted exclusively from a women-centred perspective, the insights presented represent only the female side of the broader gendered experience in Pettah. This study does not claim that the identified spatial conditions affect women alone; rather, it highlights the specific ways in which women interpret and negotiate spatial and social cues in their everyday movements. Accordingly, the findings should be understood as one-sided, offering a focused interpretation of emotional safety from women's standpoint.

By foregrounding women's lived experiences, the study contributes to gender-sensitive planning discourse in Sri Lanka, where emotional safety remains underexplored. The results suggest that improving visibility, enhancing walkability, reducing uncontrolled congestion, and addressing gender imbalances in public space occupation can play a critical role in creating more inclusive and emotionally supportive urban environments. Addressing these dimensions is essential not only for women's mobility and participation but also for advancing spatial justice in rapidly urbanizing contexts like Pettah.

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