

Gendered Public Life in Pettah: Colonial Spatial Legacies and Contemporary Participation in Colombo

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Abstract

Pettah, one of Colombo's oldest commercial neighbourhoods, developed under Portuguese, Dutch, and British colonial rule. Its street layout, building typologies, and spatial organisation historically prioritised male-dominated trade and administrative functions, embedding gendered hierarchies into the urban form. While previous research has examined colonial urbanism and gender in Colombo, few studies have connected these spatial structures with the lived experiences of contemporary users. This study investigates how Pettah's colonial commercial morphology shapes current perceptions, mobility, and participation in public space. Using archival research, on-site measurements, photographic surveys, systematic street observations, semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and oral histories, the study examines both physical and social parameters. Physical aspects include street layout, circulation patterns, shop houses, courtyard houses, upper floors, courtyards, mashrabiya, visual permeability, and privacy thresholds. Social aspects include perceived safety, accessibility, mobility, visibility, and participation in commercial and social life. Findings indicate that Pettah's colonial-era urban form—wide streets, narrow alleys, and segregated upper floors—historically enforced male dominance in commerce. Today, women continue to participate in the area but face safety and accessibility challenges, while the built environment still subtly shapes social interactions. The study highlights the persistence of gendered spatial patterns and recommends gender-sensitive design interventions, adaptive reuse of courtyards and upper floors, and participatory urban planning. Future research should explore other South Asian colonial districts and track shifts in gendered urban participation over time.

Keywords: Pettah, Colombo, Colonial Urbanism, Gendered Space, Public Participation, Urban Morphology, Spatial Experience

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Introduction

Contextual Background and Problematic Framework

Pettah is one of Colombo's oldest commercial districts and its present form carries traces of Portuguese, Dutch and British planning. These layers established a spatial structure that prioritised trade efficiency, administrative surveillance and a largely male commercial presence, as documented in historical studies of Colombo such as Brohier 1984, Duncan 2007 and Roberts 2013. While these colonial elements remain visible in the street network and built fabric, Colombo has undergone more than seventy five years of rapid transformation since independence. These changes include shifts in governance, increased female participation in the labour force, expanded transport networks and a wider diversification of social groups using public space.

The challenge lies in understanding how an inherited colonial spatial structure interacts with contemporary patterns of use. Feminist urban scholarship, including Spain 1992, Phadke 2013 and Perera 2002, argues that the built environment can continue to influence mobility, safety and visibility in ways that persist long after political contexts change. Recent Sri Lankan studies, including De Silva et al 2019 and Jayasuria and Wickramasinghe 2021, show that women still encounter discomfort, crowd pressure and uneven access within busy commercial areas of Colombo. This suggests that current perceptions are shaped not only by social attitudes but also by the physical environment that channels movement and visibility.

The problematic condition addressed in this study is therefore the interaction between Pettah's colonial morphology and the lived experiences of today's users. The district remains commercially vital yet socially uneven, and understanding this tension requires linking the historical production of space with contemporary gendered perceptions rather than treating them as separate subjects.

Research Gap

Existing literature on Colombo's history provides detailed accounts of colonial planning and post-independence development, and studies on gendered urban experience describe current inequalities in mobility and access. What is missing is an integrated analysis that examines how a historic urban form shapes present day perceptions. No study offers empirical evidence that connects Pettah's inherited morphology with the way women and men experience safety, accessibility and participation within its crowded streets. This absence of spatially based perception studies within a historic commercial district defines the research gap.

Aim

The aim of this study is to investigate how Pettah's colonial urban morphology influences contemporary gendered perceptions and patterns of participation in public space.

Objectives

- To analyse the spatial structure of Pettah including street layout, building types and the organisation of public and semipublic areas,

- To examine present day user perceptions of safety, comfort, visibility and accessibility with attention to gendered variations,
- To identify relationships between inherited spatial forms and current patterns of movement and participation,
- To outline planning insights that support more inclusive and gender sensitive use of historic commercial areas.

Limitations

The study is limited by the complexity of conducting fieldwork in a dense commercial environment where observations and surveys depend on voluntary participation and fluctuating crowd conditions. Some archival material related to early colonial planning is incomplete which restricts a fully detailed historical reconstruction. The research focuses specifically on Pettah and does not claim to represent all of Colombo although its findings may resonate with similar historic districts in South Asia.

Literature review

Colonial Urbanism and Commercial-Oriented Planning

Colonial interventions in South Asian cities were driven by commercial expansion, administrative control, and military security. In Sri Lanka, each European power left a distinct spatial imprint on Colombo's morphology, particularly in Pettah, which evolved as the city's primary commercial district (Boxer 1969; Abeyasinghe 1966; Arasaratnam 1988). Portuguese construction of fortified precincts and market zones created a rigid spatial hierarchy that later Dutch planners refined through interconnected warehouses, trade corridors, and a tightly ordered street network (Brohier 1984). British administrators expanded these patterns with gridded streets, arcades, and open sightlines intended to optimise circulation and surveillance (Roberts, Rahim, and Colin-Thome 1989; Perera 1998).

These designs were never socially neutral. Duncan (2007) and Perera (2002) demonstrate that colonial commercial districts privileged male traders, brokers, and officials by shaping streets, thresholds, and building types around male-dominated activity. Women's mobility was restricted by both physical configurations—narrow access ways, arcades, upper-floor segregation—and by the gendered norms embedded in those designs. Similar dynamics are documented across British, Dutch, and French colonial cities, where trade-oriented street systems and zoning reinforced patriarchal hierarchies (King 1991; Yeoh 1996). Although Colombo has undergone more than seven decades of post-colonial change, its inherited morphology continues to structure movement, visibility, and access in the present (McFarlane and Silver 2017). Pettah's contemporary circulation, retail patterns, and sensory density can still be traced to these colonial priorities.

Gendered Spaces in Cities: Global and Sri Lankan Context

The idea of gendered space, central to feminist geography, explains how urban environments often regulate access and visibility differently for women and men (Blunt and Rose 1994; Spain 1992). These differences arise through the interaction of physical form, social norms, and

everyday practice. Colombo's colonial streets offered women semi-public thresholds—verandas, arcades, upper-floor walkways, screened openings—that allowed limited participation without fully entering male-dominated public space (Perera 2002).

Contemporary research in Sri Lanka shows that women's movement continues to be shaped by safety concerns, social expectations, and the sensory pressures of commercial districts (De Silva et al. 2019). Feminist urban studies highlight that these patterns are not simply cultural but materially tied to inherited street profiles, visibility lines, and circulation pressures (McFarlane and Silver 2017). In South Asian cities, Rangarajan (2015) argues that colonial planning legacies still influence whether women can comfortably access markets, workplaces, and transportation routes.

Intersectionality offers further nuance by showing how gender intersects with class, age, occupation, and ethnicity to shape spatial behaviour (Crenshaw 1989; Tissier-Desbordes and Visconti 2019). In Pettah, women from lower-income backgrounds may be more exposed to risk and visibility pressure, while middle-class women often restrict their routes or rely on accompaniment. These layered constraints emphasise how colonial morphology interacts with contemporary social inequality.

Comparative studies in Singapore (Yeoh 1996) and Indian colonial cities (King 1991) show parallel gendered hierarchies rooted in colonial design logics. These similarities strengthen the argument that Pettah's present-day gendered experiences cannot be understood without analysing its historically structured commercial form.

Feminist Urban Theory and Spatial Perception

Feminist urban theory frames urban space as an active agent that shapes behaviour, perception, and participation (Blunt and Rose 1994). Perera (2002) describes colonial Colombo as a landscape where women were present yet partially obscured, moving through verandas, balconies, and upper floors designed to retain privacy and modesty. These architectural and cultural mechanisms form part of the city's "spatial memory," influencing how people perceive safety, exposure, and anonymity today.

Current scholarship stresses that spatial design and perception are inseparable. Tissier-Desbordes and Visconti (2019) show that infrastructural qualities such as enclosure, visibility, and crowd density shape how different groups experience urban space. McFarlane and Silver (2017) argue that perceptions of accessibility often predict actual participation more accurately than physical measurements alone. In Colombo, women routinely avoid certain streets in Pettah or time their visits carefully, reflecting the combined influence of the inherited morphology and social expectations (De Silva et al. 2019).

Feminist scholarship also underscores that historical narratives frame how contemporary users interpret and inhabit space. Practices rooted in colonial-era norms continue to affect perceptions of where women "belong," making it essential to analyse both the built fabric and the cultural inheritance attached to it.

Public Participation and Inclusivity in Urban Spaces

Public participation in cities depends on who feels entitled, welcome, and safe in shared spaces. Colonial planning in Colombo prioritised male traders, religious elites, and administrative actors, restricting the visibility and agency of women in shaping the city (Duncan 2007; Perera 2002). In Pettah, women participated indirectly, often from domestic or semi-private vantage points. These patterns echo across post-colonial South Asian cities where inherited street forms and commercial rhythms continue to regulate participation (King 1991).

Modern efforts toward inclusive design stress the need to address historical inequalities directly. Intersectional and feminist frameworks highlight how physical and cultural barriers work together, requiring planning approaches that integrate diverse perspectives (Crenshaw 1989; Tissier-Desbordes and Visconti 2019). Practical interventions—better lighting, clearer circulation, improved visibility, and reconsidered thresholds—can reduce exclusion in dense commercial districts. Heritage-sensitive design is especially relevant in Pettah, where adapting courtyards, arcades, and upper floors for public use must balance social need with conservation values (Perera 2002; Spain 1992).

Recent urban studies emphasise that understanding everyday practice is critical for designing equitable environments. Combining spatial mapping, on-site observations, oral histories, and user interviews provides insight into how colonial-era decisions still shape gendered navigation and participation in Pettah today (McFarlane and Silver 2017). These findings foreground both the constraints and the adaptive strategies used by women as they engage with this historically layered urban landscape.

Methodology

Case Selection Justification: Pettah, Colombo

Pettah, Colombo's oldest commercial neighbourhood, was selected for this study due to its dense street network, mixed-use colonial-era buildings, and historical significance. Portuguese, Dutch, and British urban interventions shaped its spatial structure, prioritizing male-oriented trade and administrative control. These interventions created distinct public, semi-public, and private zones, influencing both historical and contemporary patterns of accessibility, mobility, visibility, and gendered participation. Pettah thus provides an appropriate context to examine how colonial spatial structures continue to affect public life, particularly women's engagement, in a modern urban setting.

Located in the city center and bounded by Main Street, Sea Street, Olcott Mawatha, Mosque Street, and York Street, Pettah contains a dense grid of streets, arcades, shop houses, and courtyards shaped by successive colonial interventions. A location plan (Figure 1) identifies the main streets systematically observed for this study, which included 1st Cross Street, 2nd Cross Street, and Keyzer Street. Streets were selected based on their historical significance, commercial density, and patterns of public use. Observations focused on pedestrian flows, trading activity, and gendered spatial practices.



Fig. 1: selected streets- Pettah Colombo
Source: author

Sample Designs and Sizes

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of 20 participants, from all three streets stratified by gender, occupation, and visitor or resident status. Twenty additional respondents completed questionnaires assessing perceptions of safety, accessibility, and visibility in streets, arcades, and semi-public areas. Long-term residents, traders, and heritage practitioners were interviewed for oral history narratives. This stratified design ensured representation across gender, age, occupation, and socio-economic background.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection occurred from May to August 2025 to capture variations in daily, weekly, and seasonal activity. A mixed-methods approach integrated qualitative and quantitative data.

Physical data collection included archival research, on-site measurements, and photographic surveys. Archival research examined historical maps, plans, and photographs to trace Pettah's street networks, building typologies, and public-private gradations. On-site measurements assessed three street widths, building footprints, arcades, courtyards, upper floors, and thresholds of semi-public spaces. Photographic surveys documented streetscapes, facades, and architectural features to evaluate visual permeability, privacy, and gendered accessibility.

Social data collection included semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and oral histories. Interviews explored perceptions of safety, mobility, privacy, and participation, while questionnaires used Likert scales and open-ended questions to quantify accessibility and social experience. Oral histories captured intergenerational narratives linking historical planning intentions to contemporary usage.

Systematic observation of streets and public spaces recorded pedestrian flows, usage patterns, and social interactions, highlighting differences in gendered mobility and engagement.

Analytical Framework

Step 1: Analyzing Architectural Characteristics

Physical data were mapped and analysed to investigate street layouts, building typologies, circulation patterns, and public-private distinctions. GIS analysis quantified accessibility, connectivity, and visual permeability in areas predominantly used by men versus women. Historical and contemporary spatial data were compared to assess the impact of Portuguese, Dutch, and British planning interventions.

Step 2: User Analysis

Social data from interviews, questionnaires, and oral histories were thematically coded to identify recurring patterns in mobility, safety, privacy, and public engagement. Responses were analysed by gender, age, and occupation to examine differences in access and experience. Observational data supported these findings by documenting behavioural patterns and spatial practices in real-time.

Step 3: Cross-Analysis

Spatial and social datasets were combined to explore correlations between built form and lived experience. Restricted access points, visibility thresholds, and gendered movements were mapped against participant perceptions, revealing how colonial spatial interventions continue to shape public engagement.

The cross-analysis generated insights into the interaction between architecture and perception, showing how streets, arcades, courtyards, upper floors, and privacy thresholds influence gendered participation.

Ethical Considerations

Participants were informed about the study's objectives and methods, written consent was obtained, and anonymity was ensured. Sensitive topics, including harassment and safety, were approached with care. Physical data collection was conducted with minimal disruption to pedestrian or commercial activity, and ethical approval was granted by the University of Colombo Institutional Review Board.

Research findings

Below table 1 and 2 present the findings from a spatial, social, and historical analysis of Pettah, Colombo's oldest and most enduring commercial district. It uses spatial observation, archival research, questionnaire data, and semi-structured interviews to demonstrate how Pettah's colonial-era planning still influences gendered access, visibility, and participation in public life. The findings are divided into four interconnected sections: (1) a spatial analysis of Pettah, (2) gendered patterns of access, visibility, and movement, (3) user perception analysis, and (4) a comparison of historical and contemporary participation.

Step 1: Analyzing Architectural Characteristics

Table 5: analysing Architectural characteristics of three streets
Source- Author

Parameter	Image	Sub-Elements	Observed Pattern	Colonial Legacy
Street Layout & Circulation		Main streets, secondary lanes, alleyways	Wide main streets accommodate high trade activity; narrow alleys restrict movement	Portuguese/Dutch emphasis on trade access; British grid extensions
Building Typologies		Courtyard houses, shop-houses	Mixed-use shop-houses dominate; courtyards semi-private	Dutch and British commercial typologies adapted for trade

Vertical Features		Upper floors, mezzanines	Used for storage, male-dominated commerce; limited visibility from street	Colonial adaptations for commercial hierarchy
Spatial Characteristics		Visual permeability, privacy thresholds	High permeability in bazaars; low privacy in alleys	Market design privileging visibility for commerce
Spatial Hierarchy		Public, semi-public, private zones	Streets = public; arcades/courtyards = semi-public; upper floors = private	Layered access reinforcing social hierarchies
Architectural elements		Mashrabiya, arcades, verandahs	Arcades offer shaded trade zones; mashrabiya-type screens rare but present in adaptations	Middle Eastern/Portuguese influence filtered via trade networks

Street Typologies

Pettah's street network reflects a multi-layered history of colonial planning, with the Portuguese, Dutch, and British all leaving distinct imprints. The primary arteries, particularly Main Street and Olcott Mawatha, were designed to maximise commercial throughput, visibility, and surveillance. These streets are unusually wide for a South Asian mercantile district, a feature intended to aid cart movement, administrative oversight, and military manoeuvring during colonial rule. Today, these arteries are dominated by wholesale shops, trading houses, and dense pedestrian traffic. Visibility is high, but permeability is limited by shopfronts and thresholds that benefit traders

In contrast, the secondary arcades and side lanes create narrow and congested corridors that connect the main commercial streets. These are frequently semi-covered, lined with stalls or hawkers, and lack clear lines separating public and private domains. Their irregular widths and poor lighting result in layered visibility, but also bottlenecks and blind corners. Historically, these arcades served as connecting points between commercial frontages and residential or religious enclosures. They now represent some of Pettah's most contested and precarious spaces, influencing user mobility, particularly among women.

Courtyards

Inner courtyards were once a feature of Colonial Pettah's shop houses, warehouses, and residential enclaves. Historically, these spaces supported a variety of activities, including product storage, domestic routines, and informal market interactions. Courtyards served as a transitional space where women could indirectly participate in commercial life while remaining at home. However, contemporary Pettah demonstrates fragmentation of this typology. Many courtyards have been converted into commercial warehouses, subdivided for storage, or completely closed off. Accessibility is uneven: some are partially visible from the street, while others are hidden behind locked gates. Their decline represents a loss of semi-public, multifunctional environments that once served as a bridge between the private and public spheres.

Upper Floors

Another distinguishing feature is the upper level of Pettah's shop houses and commercial buildings. During the Dutch and British periods, these served as administrative offices, merchant residences, or storage. The vertical separation of functions represented a broader colonial order, with the ground floor dedicated to commerce and the upper floor reserved for governance or domesticity. Upper floors have long been neglected, converted into warehouses, or abandoned due to poor maintenance. In spatial terms, this neglect reinforces the dominance of ground-level commercial activity, which is still dominated by men. Women's association with upper floors during the colonial period—as places of residence and seclusion—has been metaphorically extended into the present through women's limited presence on Pettah's public-facing commercial ground level.

Architectural elements

Colonial Pettah also has distinct architectural elements that facilitate access and visibility. Thresholds, which are frequently raised or lowered, distinguish between public and semi-public zones while prioritising traders' control over space. Mashrabiya and latticed openings, while less common today, once allowed for surveillance and airflow without compromising privacy, as an architectural response to both climate and gendered seclusion practices. Arcades, with their repetitive colonnades, were designed to allow for safe movement while also providing vantage points for traders and authorities. Collectively, these devices demonstrate how permeability and privacy were designed for efficiency, control, and commerce, rather than inclusivity. Their persistence in altered forms contributes to Pettah's distinct but exclusionary spatial identity.

Gendered Patterns in Access, Visibility, and Movement

Men's Dominance of Primary Streets

According to observation and interview data, men dominate Pettah's main commercial streets. Male traders, workers, and clients occupy prominent and engaged positions, while women appear mostly as transient individuals who pass through as shoppers or visitors rather than active participants. The size and openness of the streets, combined with their emphasis on visibility,

favour forms of participation traditionally associated with men: bargaining, transporting goods, and maintaining shopfronts.

Arcades and Bazaar Lanes

The arcades and bazaar lanes are socially vibrant, but they pose challenges for women. Their limited space, gridlock, and lack of illumination foster an atmosphere of insecurity. Female respondents described these areas as places where harassment, unwanted attention, and jostling are prevalent. Men perceive the same density as "vibrancy" or "energy," whereas women perceive it as unsafe. This gendered divergence demonstrates how spatial characteristics directly influence patterns of inclusion and exclusion.

Courtyards and Restricted Access

The courtyards, which were once multifunctional spaces, are now less accessible, especially for women. Historically, women may have worked here indirectly, preparing food, storing goods, or interacting within the protective enclosure of a courtyard. Nowadays, the majority of courtyards are locked, privatised, or exclusively male-dominated workspaces. As a result, women's potential entry points into Pettah's commercial life have decreased, reinforcing the district's reputation as a male-dominated area.

Upper Floors as Vertical Segregation

The upper floors represent the vertical dimension of segregation. During colonial times, women were more acceptable in the elevated, private domestic sphere than on the public, commercial ground level. The current abandonment of upper floors has eliminated even these protected zones, leaving women with fewer footholds in Pettah's spatial hierarchy. The persistence of this metaphorical vertical segregation exemplifies how planning legacies translate into long-standing patterns of exclusion.

Step 2- User Perception Analysis

Social data from interviews, questionnaires, and oral histories were thematically coded to identify recurring patterns in mobility, safety, privacy, and public engagement. Responses were analysed by gender, age, and occupation to examine differences in access and experience. Observational data supported these findings by documenting behavioural patterns and spatial practices in real-time.

Security

Safety emerged as the most important concern among female respondents. More than half of those who visited Pettah's arcades reported feeling uncomfortable due to crowding, harassment, and inadequate surveillance. In contrast, men rarely expressed such concerns. Instead, they saw congestion as a sign of thriving business. This divergence reflects how spatial density has opposing effects depending on gender.

Respect for privacy

Women also highlighted the lack of neutral or buffered spaces. Pettah's thresholds are primarily transactional—one is either inside a store or on the street. There are few semi-public spaces where women can pause, observe, or socialise without feeling pressured to consume. As a

result, Pettah is perceived as overly exposed. For male traders, exposure is an asset: visibility equals commerce. For women, it creates vulnerability.

Ability to access

In terms of accessibility, male traders preferred open thresholds and direct street access. Women and visitors, on the other hand, preferred semi-public transitions such as arcades, benches, and shaded areas that allowed for a gradual entry into the commercial environment. This contrast demonstrates how designing for trade efficiency can undermine inclusivity.

Mobility

Gender-specific mobility patterns were also observed. Male traders moved freely between shops, lanes, and arcades, frequently taking shortcuts and informal passages. Women's movement was more strategic: they avoided crowded alleys, used specific entry points, and spent less time in congested areas. This selective navigation demonstrates a constant negotiation between safety and visibility.

Step 2: User Analysis.

Social data from interviews, questionnaires, and oral histories were thematically coded to identify patterns in safety perception, mobility, privacy, and involvement. Responses were analysed by gender, age, and occupational group to identify differences in public-space experiences and usage. Observations supported these findings by capturing behavioural patterns and spatial practices.

Table 2: User Analysis.

Source- author

Respondent	Gender	Role	Perception of Safety	Accessibility	Mobility & Visibility	Participation (Commercial /Social)
R1	Female	Trader	Moderate	Limited in alleys	Visible in stall	Active in small-scale trade
R2	Male	Trader	High	Full access	High mobility	Dominant in trade
R3	Female	Visitor	Low	Restricted in arcades	Low visibility	Limited participation

R4	Male	Visitor	High	Unrestricted	High visibility	Full participation
R5	Female	Resident	Moderate	Limited after dark	Constrained mobility	Social participation in festivals
R6	Male	Resident	High	Full	High	Commercial + social
R7	Female	Trader	Low	Restricted in alleys	Limited	Small-scale
R8	Male	Trader	High	Full	High	Dominant
R9	Female	Visitor	Moderate	Limited	Moderate	Observational
R10	Male	Resident	High	Full	High	Commercial
R11	Female	Resident	Low	Limited	Low	Domestic + social
R12	Male	Trader	High	Full	High	Commercial
R13	Female	Visitor	Moderate	Limited	Low	Religious/cultural
R14	Male	Resident	High	Full	High	Both
R15	Female	Trader	Low	Restricted	Moderate	Peripheral
R16	Male	Visitor	High	Full	High	Dominant
R17	Female	Resident	Moderate	Limited	Low	Family/community
R18	Male	Trader	High	Full	High	Commercial
R19	Female	Visitor	Low	Restricted	Low	Minimal
R20	Male	Resident	High	Full	High	Both

Step 3: Cross-analysis

Spatial and social datasets were combined to investigate the correlation between physical form and lived experience. Locations of restricted access, visibility thresholds, and gendered movements were mapped against participant perceptions, revealing how colonial strategies continue to influence public engagement and participation today.

Participants were given details about the study's purpose and methods, and written consent was obtained before participating. Coding ensured anonymity, and sensitive topics like harassment and safety issues were addressed with care. Physical data collection occurred with minimal disruption to commerce and pedestrian traffic. The archival and photographic sources were properly cited, and the University of Colombo institution-wide review board granted ethical approval for the study.

Table 3: cross Analysis.

Source- author

Physical Parameter	Social Experience	Gendered Effect	Key Insight
Wide streets / bazaars	High accessibility, high visibility	Men dominant, women partially included	Public commerce favors men but allows partial female participation
Narrow alleys	Low safety perception, restricted movement	Women excluded; men unrestricted	Physical constraint reinforces gender exclusion
Shop-houses with upper floors	Men use upper floors for storage/trade	Women absent from vertical zones	Architecture reinforces male commercial hierarchy
Arcades and courtyards	Semi-public, mixed participation	Women limited to family or guided use	Transitional spaces partially inclusive
Privacy thresholds	Women feel monitored, unsafe	Men unaffected	Visibility designed for commerce undermines women's comfort
Cultural/religious markers	Festivals enable women's temporary access	Temporarily equalizes participation	Cultural practices mitigate exclusion but don't erase it

Historical vs. Contemporary Participation

Colonial Period

During the Portuguese, Dutch, and British periods, Pettah was primarily designed for commerce, administration, and surveillance. Women were present but peripheral, confined to domestic spaces, religious institutions, or supportive market roles like food preparation and textile production. The physical structure of Pettah reflected this hierarchy, giving women fewer spatial opportunities in public commercial life.

Postcolonial Transition

Even after independence, male traders dominated Pettah. Women primarily participated as consumers in bazaars and shops, rarely as traders or business owners. The postcolonial state's planning interventions, which focused on infrastructure and traffic management, did little to challenge the inherited gender hierarchy.

Contemporary Participation

Women's participation has grown marginally in recent years due to roles in retail, heritage initiatives, and tourism-related activities. However, even these roles are limited when compared to men's dominance in wholesale trade and shop ownership. Female respondents frequently described Pettah as a "passthrough" rather than a place of belonging.

Continuity of Colonial Logic

The persistence of male participation highlights the continuity of colonial planning logics. Wide commercial streets continue to favour male-dominated trade; arcades and lanes remain unsafe for women; and courtyards and upper floors have lost their potential as semi-public or domestic domains. Thus, Pettah's current gendered patterns cannot be understood in isolation; they are deeply embedded in the colonial urban structure.

Discussion

Implications for Urban Design

The findings show that Pettah's spatial structure keeps on emphasise visibility, trade efficiency, and control over inclusivity. The street layouts, particularly along Main Street and Olcott Mawatha, are highly effective for commercial activity, but women face increased visibility without protection. This reflects a larger trend in which urban design frequently prioritises circulation and surveillance over inclusivity (Beebeejaun, 2017).

The narrow arcades and bazaar lanes amplify the exclusion. While traders see them as vibrant, women see them as dangerous due to the crowding, poor lighting, and limited opportunities to pause without exposure. Such concerns are consistent with feminist urban scholarship, which emphasises how women perceive dense, male-dominated environments as threatening rather than lively (Spain, 2008). Simple interventions, such as lighting, seating, and clear sightlines, could transform these arcades into safer and more inclusive spaces.

Courtyards are another underutilised asset. Originally multipurpose and semi-public, they have grown privatised or inaccessible. However, they still have potential as shared cultural and heritage spaces. Reclaiming courtyards as semi-public commons could create neutral spaces where women, traders, and visitors can interact without the pressures of commerce. Similar strategies in other cities show how reclaiming "gendered spaces" can change their function in everyday life (Fortuijn et al., 2004).

Finally, the upper floors of Pettah's shop houses represent a missed opportunity. Their neglect reflects the dominance of ground-level commerce, but adaptive reuse has the potential to reposition them as community hubs. Women-led cooperatives, training centres, or cultural workshops on upper floors would balance the exclusive nature of ground-level trade while preserving Pettah's heritage character.

Continuity of Colonial Gendered Spaces into Postcolonial Pettah

The persistence of gendered exclusion in Pettah demonstrates the continuation of colonial logics. Male-dominated commerce, once imposed by colonial planning, is still prevalent in the main streets. These spaces continue to function as stages of visibility, favouring men and marginalising women (McDowell, 1983).

Similarly, Pettah's experience reflects the colonial emphasis on surveillance and policing. Streets designed for visibility now create vulnerability for women, who are treated as outsiders in commercial areas. Hawkers and encroachments complicate navigation, increasing congestion and creating unsafe zones (DeSena, 2008).

Religious and cultural symbols (shrines, flags, mosques) serve as unifying anchors for diverse communities. They create the illusion of inclusivity at the symbolic level but do not change the everyday realities of exclusion in practice. This conflict between symbolic belonging and lived exclusion has been documented in comparative urban gender research (Beebejaun, 2017).

Planning Strategies to Promote Inclusive Participation

Addressing such entrenched patterns demands planning strategies that go beyond heritage conservation and actively promote gender inclusivity. To counter perceptions of insecurity, arcades and lanes should be redesigned with adequate lighting, seating, and "eyes on the street". Small interventions, such as street furniture, surveillance points, and vendor regulation, can improve women's comfort and visibility.

Second, courtyards must be transformed into semi-public cultural spaces. Community-led management could ensure that these spaces serve as inclusive hubs, balancing heritage preservation and participatory use (Spain, 2008).

Third, upper floors should be adaptively reused to support gender-inclusive initiatives. Women's cooperatives, community workshops, or safe workspaces could re-establish these levels as active components of Pettah's urban fabric, broadening participation beyond male-dominated trade.

Fourth, heritage tourism strategies must be gender sensitive. Guided tours, safe navigation pathways, and curated cultural experiences can help create accessible routes through Pettah while emphasising women's contributions to its history.

Finally, planning policy must change its framing. Pettah has long been regarded as a hub of commerce and heritage conservation. A more inclusive paradigm would see Pettah as a living, gendered space in which design interventions can address historical exclusions. Policies must thus incorporate social inclusion alongside conservation to ensure that the preservation of colonial heritage does not perpetuate colonial inequities (Fortuijn et al., 2004).

Conclusion

This study reveals that Pettah's colonial-era planning resulted in male-oriented spatial patterns—wide commercial streets, surveillance-driven layouts, and rigid thresholds—that still marginalise women in modern Colombo. Despite adaptive reuse and shifting economic roles, women still find Pettah less accessible, safe, and welcoming than men. These findings are consistent with larger feminist critiques of urban form, which emphasise the persistence of colonial and patriarchal logics in shaping public space

The study adds to feminist urban theory by demonstrating how colonial planning logics persist in postcolonial contexts, influencing daily participation in heritage districts. It emphasises the distinction between symbolic inclusion, as represented by cultural markers, and lived exclusion, as experienced through limited access and unsafe mobility

This study's recommendations include incorporating gender-sensitive design into heritage conservation, reactivating upper floors and courtyards as inclusive community spaces, and implementing targeted design interventions to improve arcade safety and accessibility. Participatory planning processes that prioritise women's voices are critical for transforming Pettah from a male-dominated commercial zone into a more inclusive urban district

Future research should expand this analysis to other colonial trading districts in South Asia, such as Mumbai, Chennai, and Galle, to assess the transferability of findings. Longitudinal studies could also track how gendered use of Pettah changes in response to design and policy interventions

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