

Co-Founder of Safetipin, Board member at SLOCAT and member of the Advisory Group on Gender Issues at UN Habitat, Dr. Kalpana Viswanath is Chairperson of Jagori and Board member of the International Centre for the Prevention of Crime.

Thirty years of working to make the experiences of women and girls in the city a joyful one, Dr. Kalpana Viswanath has a hard time pinpointing one transformative moment that has shaped her work. As feminist role models, her parents enabled her to become who she is simply by allowing her to be herself, exposing her to feminist literature and thinking, and being active members of the community. But it was around 2004 when Kalpana experienced a shift in perspective. Until then, much of her work was focused on addressing violence against women. In starting to work on how to realize safe cities and safe public spaces in India, she realized that it was important to shift the responsibility from women themselves to all urban stakeholders to create safety.

“This is not the solution. The solution is to change the entire environment for gender equity.”

From this point on, the restrictions on the mobility and access to opportunities for women and girls has defined Kalpana’s work. Not just to address gender-based violence, but also how transport systems limit access. Access to education for girls, opportunities for (better) employment for women, but also access to leisure.

“Access to opportunities for leisure is a very important part of cities and urban well-being. We need to not just address the need for better transport to go to school and work, but also ask, ‘What about the right to enjoy the city?’”

Walking in the city Kalpana sees men freely enjoying public spaces, but for women that is never as comfortable and easy. Her work in her career and with the creation of Safetipin is to ask: “How do we make sure that fear is not the dominant factor that determines women’s experience of the city and opportunities?”

This is where a feminist transport system comes in to play, which Kalpana believes must be based around the economics and ethics of care. Because the care economy has been invisibilized for decades, so too has the provision for it. To move forward, we need to make the care economy visible again, and begin to have transport systems that recognize every human being is and should be a caregiver.

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In her career, Kalpana has realized the importance of mainstreaming these ideas into all organizations. Whether transport, climate, housing, etc., a gender perspective is necessary to highlight the needs of women and girls. This can lead to uncomfortable conversations, but will eventually lead to learning or all.

Dr. Kalpana Viswanath

CO-FOUNDER OF SAFETIPIN

INDIA



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“Being able to talk to people for whom gender is not always their first go-to is a learning process for them and also for me to learn how to explain things in clear, simple terms. So that everyone understands why they need to do this.”

This has meant taking inspiration from the feminists that have come before her. Feminism and feminist work is not something you can ever retire from. She’s inspired by women like Kamla Bhasin, a founder of Jagori, and amazing communicator, who can take complex ideas on feminism and package them for a general audience in a compelling and powerful way. She is also encouraged by young women who are fearlessly embracing the term ‘feminist’ again. Kalpana believes it is this community of feminist activists that keeps her motivated and can help others as well.

“I know that if I am tired and slow down, someone will pick up the baton and continue. I am not that important, and the world will not end if I take time to rest. We are all part of something larger, and there are enough other men and women in the feminist community who will keep the fight going.”

Reflecting on her own journey, Kalpana notes that if she were to speak to her younger self, she would tell her to be kind to herself and patient with others. Young people expect things to move fast, but social change is hard, and will not happen overnight.

“It is not changing technologies or a policy. It is changing the way we behave. A little patience and kindness can make the process a lot easier for everyone.”

For Kalpana, the future of feminist transport depends not just on women continuing the fight, but to have men as allies, where they recognize that the work of care is not just women’s work. This is the feminist struggle.

“If you put the care economy center stage, you also allow men to be better caregivers. It is an amazing experience to give care, and the benefit to gender equity and empowerment is for everyone. I think when we visibilise that, more people will become part of this struggle.”

Women are doing the work because it affects them with an immediacy that is not experienced in the same way by men. Going beyond the gender binary and mainstreaming gender-responsive policies will be key to realizing a more equitable, feminist future.