

Founder of The Urban Catalysts and Executive Director of C-SEC (Centre for Sustainable and Equitable Cities), Sonal Shah is a multi-sectoral professional with 18 years of experience in catalyzing urban change through action-oriented research, knowledge tools, technical advisory, capacity development, and implementation support. She is passionate about people-oriented cities with a focus on sustainable transport, gender, informality, and universal access.

In your view, what is a feminist transport system?

A feminist transport system is rooted in a feminist development policy which transforms our mobility systems and public spaces so that all womxn and girls can enjoy public spaces. Having a broad group of people – including children, girls, poor womxn, womxn with disabilities, older womxn loitering in public spaces is a marker that our public spaces and transport are safe, accessible, and affordable. A broader perspective would consider gender balance in the public sphere, especially technical, managerial and decision-making positions.

How do you use your role to promote more inclusive transport systems?

At The Urban Catalysts, a large part of our local and global work is focused on gender inclusive mobility and how we can incorporate a gender lens in existing transport projects, combining mixed-methods and action-oriented approaches. On the one hand, we believe that research is required and can be powerful in shaping the narrative around gendered mobility. On the other hand, we work with public transport authorities to incorporate a gender perspective into their infrastructure and services. We try to bridge the gap between the data we have created and action on the ground. This has included supporting multilateral development banks in creating gender equality and social inclusion action plans to incorporate a gender lens in public transport infrastructure, road safety, and institutions. This takes extensive outreach and consultation with

civil society organizations that represent different groups of womxn, girls, gender minorities, and people with disabilities. We use their voices to inform gender priorities in transport investments.

Looking more locally, we have also supported the Delhi government in creating a committee for women’s safety in public transport. Realizing that women are often portrayed as a homogenous group, we wanted to highlight the differential impacts of the pandemic on different groups, with a focus on self-employed, resource poor women workers. We have also conducted technical capacity development workshops on gender inclusive mobility with decision-makers, professionals, and students. Our work is focused and centered on how gender can be used as a lens to inform transport investments.

Have you had a transformative experience that has guided your work?

I was fortunate to be exposed to a feminist way of thinking when I was in architecture school, in a faculty that exposed me to Western feminist authors and to art. This had a profound impact on me at a young age in my life. That transformed me from being an obedient adolescent to a questioning adult. At school, I was not exposed to transport planning but to gender, politics, development, labor, and globalization, which helped me develop a broader perspective on feminism and feminist thought.

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A pivotal moment for me, however, was a very gruesome rape and death of a young woman in India in 2012. Prior to this, transport organizations had not really engaged with or even acknowledged the gendered experience of mobility systems. I then had the opportunity to specifically focus on how transport systems were gendered, which kickstarted my journey. My passion found a purpose. I have followed this path with continuous reflection and a desire to catalyse gender-just cities and organisations.

How do you stay motivated?

I have 'enough is enough' moments all the time, because I work with decision makers, transport and urban development professionals in India where we still don't have an understanding of why we need gender-inclusive mobility. It is often confused and conflated with social safeguards. What keeps me moving and motivated is working with leaders and organizations who are doing important work on the ground.