[**Right to the city**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1736838/right-to-the-city)

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EVERY day in Pakistan brings stories of violence against women. But some are particularly harrowing in their symbolism. The rape of a woman in Islamabad’s F-9 park has been the most recent incident to have sent shivers down the spine of every woman who lives in the city. Not only is it a brutal reminder of the precariousness of their safety, it also tells them once again that the city they inhabit is not theirs.

The F-9 park, which until some years ago was called the Capital Park and more recently Fatima Jinnah Park, is Islamabad’s most recognisable public space, central to social and cultural life. An expanse of green space in the middle of an ever-growing metropolis, it is where the city’s residents connect with nature, stretch on the grass, spread picnic blankets under trees and sun themselves on winter afternoons.

In a deeply classist and unequal city, the park is also a rare democratising space. Islamabad has only a handful of venues for cultural and literary activities, access to which is governed by class rules. And so, for years, the park has been a venue for study circles, poetry readings, art classes and photo walks. With the city’s prominent feminist groups choosing the park as the venue for last year’s Aurat Azadi Jalsa, the park had also become a space for protest and politics.

A violent sexual assault on the grounds of this park is a chilling reminder to the women of Islamabad that they are not safe in public spaces. The victim-blaming statements in the wake of the incident and calls on social media to ban women from entering parks at night further denies them the right to the city and its public spaces.

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Pakistan’s capital has long treated its women and marginalised citizens with utter callousness. Poor and working class residents were excluded from its very design, and policies introduced in subsequent years only served to strengthen its exclusionary and elitist character. Its wide avenues and lack of affordable and safe public transport are near impossible to navigate without a car. Prohibitive real estate prices have pushed even the middle classes to poorly connected suburbs, forcing the mass of workers to commute for hours on perpetually dug-up roads. Frequent anti-encroachment drives target small-scale vendors operating from carts and stalls and run bulldozers over the homes of the poor.

For its women residents, Islamabad becomes more unsafe and unwelcoming each day.

Students and working women struggle to find safe and affordable accommodation, with the authorities often serving notices to private hostels established in residential areas. The commute from places of work and study is increasingly expensive and difficult. In public spaces, women navigate sexual harassment and fear of violence. Even in the city’s heavily policed red zone, which was recently expanded to include sectors F-6 and F-7, women are routinely stalked, followed, honked at and propositioned.

In 2020, the Aurat Azadi March was violently attacked by extremist religious groups whose fortified multistorey centres, illegally constructed in green areas, are mushrooming across the city. For many women, participating in the march is an important, symbolic claiming of public space, the only time in the year when, drawing strength from numbers, they can walk their city’s streets freely and fearlessly. The attack told Islamabad’s women that they could not be allowed to claim public space even on this one day. The rape in F-9 park drums in this same message.

But hostile public spaces mean women’s exclusion from social, cultural, political and economic life in a city. To deny women safety in green spaces is to deny them nature, air and sunlight, and physical and mental well-being. In response to the assault in F-9 park, city authorities must prioritise women’s safety in public spaces. If safety cannot be ensured, solutions such as dedicated green spaces for women should be considered.

While women-only spaces are not ideal and further gender segregation in society, they can offer short-term respite. Instead of banning women from its grounds, this park named after the mother of the nation should be returned to its daughters, so they too can stretch their bodies on the grass and sit under the shadow of trees, without the fear of prying eyes and violence.

Just as they had done in the wake of the attack in 2020, in protesting the rape in F-9 park, Islamabad’s women once again raised the slogan ‘ye shehr humara hai, mardon ki jagir nahi’ (this city is ours, it’s not the fiefdom of men).

Pakistan’s capital belongs to all its residents and must change to become inclusive and safe for women and working-class people, not just rich, powerful, gun-wielding men.

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*Published in Dawn, February 13th, 2023*