

Addressing Walking Barriers for South Asian Women in Glasgow

Walking is a fundamental part of daily life, with well-documented benefits for physical health, mental well-being, and social connection. However, not all communities experience walking in the same way. For many South Asian women in Scotland, walking is not always a straightforward choice - it is influenced by infrastructure, cultural expectations, and practical barriers that are often overlooked in mainstream urban planning discussions.

This report builds on insights gathered from a *Walking and Belonging* workshop held with South Asian women in Glasgow. The session explored key questions:

- What encourages walking?
- What prevents it?
- How does the built environment support or hinder mobility for minority communities?

The findings provide valuable lessons for organisations working to promote walking, particularly among communities that are statistically underrepresented in walking initiatives.

Beyond documenting experiences, this report aims to provide recommendations for practitioners in urban planning, transport, and the third sector. It highlights the need for practical interventions - such as better access to public toilets, and improved seating and resting spaces. More broadly, it challenges assumptions about why certain groups walk less and emphasises the need for targeted, community-led approaches to improving walking infrastructure. The desire to walk exists. The barriers are not lack of motivation or interest - they are systemic, embedded in everything from public toilet availability to the way parks accommodate cultural preferences.

For organisations committed to making walking accessible for all, the message is clear: policies and interventions must be designed with and for the communities they aim to serve. This report outlines some steps to ensure that walking is a safe, and attractive option for South Asian women and other underrepresented groups across Scotland.

Workshop Summary:

This report draws on qualitative findings from a community engagement session conducted at Glendale Women's Café, Glasgow. The session explored key barriers - such as inadequate public infrastructure, cultural considerations, and social perceptions - that impact walking habits among this demographic. The session was attended by South Asian women aged 40 to 70 and involved interactive discussions, mapping



activities, and participatory exercises. Discussions were facilitated in multiple languages, including English, Urdu, and Punjabi.

Key Findings:

Lack of Public Seating and Rest Areas

Many participants reported hesitancy in taking long walks due to the lack of accessible seating in public spaces. One participant described how, without benches, she was forced to rest on a neighbor's fence, risking reprimand. This highlights a critical gap in urban design; walking infrastructure should include resting spots to support elderly and less physically able walkers.

Absence of Public Toilets

Several participants highlighted that they “avoid walking longer distances because of the lack of public toilets”. This means that some women choose to drive instead of walk, even for short journeys. This underscores how poor public infrastructure indirectly discourages walking. Women, particularly those with medical conditions, require access to clean and safe public toilets to feel comfortable engaging in outdoor mobility.

Cultural Perceptions and Workload

A common theme was the internalised perception of laziness. Participants frequently attributed their limited walking habits to a lack of personal motivation. However, deeper discussions revealed that many women carried the primary burden of domestic labour, leaving them with little time or energy to walk recreationally. This reflects broader societal expectations that disproportionately assign unpaid labour to women. Walking initiatives for South Asian women should recognise and address time poverty by, for example, creating programs that accommodate caregiving responsibilities, such as organising walking groups that align with school drop-off times, allowing caregivers to participate without adding extra strain to their schedules.

Encounters with Dogs in Public Spaces

A significant cultural barrier was the presence of unleashed dogs in public parks. Many participants avoided certain walking routes due to concerns about dog behaviour and religious considerations regarding dog saliva. One participant explained,

“If a dog licks me while I’m walking, I have to go home and change my clothes. That’s why I avoid parks with lots of dogs”.

This insight highlights the need for dog-free zones or better leash enforcement in shared public spaces to ensure inclusivity.



Recommendations

A top-down approach to walking interventions often fails to engage minority communities. Instead, solutions must be co-designed with South Asian women. These recommendations are not just about infrastructure — they are about agency, visibility, and dignity. Making walking work for South Asian women means making walking work for everyone.

- **Increase Public Seating:** Introduce more benches in residential areas, shopping streets, and walking routes. The simple act of sitting down should not be a privilege. Introduce more benches and covered resting spaces in key pedestrian areas — near mosques, shopping streets, schools, and medical centres. Prioritise locations that South Asian women use and involve them in identifying where seating is needed most.
- **Expand Public Toilets:** Invest in clean, free public toilets in key pedestrian zones. The absence of public toilets forces women to limit their walking range. Public toilets must be treated as essential infrastructure, not an afterthought. Councils should mandate provision in high-footfall areas and create partnerships with businesses to allow free toilet access.
- **Enhance Signage:** Make public maps and wayfinding systems relevant to the communities using them. Highlight local cultural landmarks and use multiple languages.
- **Be Better Dog Owners:** South Asian women often avoid parks due to negative experiences with dogs. A public awareness campaign targeted at dog owners - educating them about cultural sensitivities and responsible dog-walking practices - can improve shared space dynamics.

Conclusion

This report is a call to action for organisations, policymakers, and urban planners working at the intersection of walking and community engagement. Walking is a powerful tool for improving public health, fostering community connection, and enhancing well-being. However, for South Asian women in Scotland, systemic barriers continue to hinder access to walkable environments. Addressing these barriers requires an inclusive, community-driven approach that integrates lived experiences into policy and planning. By investing in accessible infrastructure and culturally competent outreach, Scotland can create walking-friendly spaces that truly serve all its residents - ensuring that every individual, regardless of background, can walk freely and confidently in their city.

