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Coping Gender Inequality through Home Based Work: A Study of Adaptive Micro Scale Work Environments in Korail Slum, Dhaka

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COPING GENDER INEQUALITY THROUGH HOME BASED WORK: A STUDY OF ADAPTIVE MICRO SCALE WORK ENVIRONMENTS IN KORAIL SLUM, DHAKA

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Abstract

In Dhaka, capital of Bangladesh, slums are the natural consequence of rapid unplanned urbanization and poor economic growth. Women living in slums face acute gender inequality due to higher level of poverty and lower level of education. Using Korail slum as a case study area, the study investigates how women facing gender inequality use home based work in adapted micro-scale work environments' as coping mechanism. Using observation, interview and focus group discussion as research tools, the study attempts to identify these apparently mundane spaces and their role in everyday life of the women living in slums. Findings show, the female workers have a spontaneous ability for cultural adaptations and creating home based work environments for survival. The study will possibly contribute in identifying the spontaneous space typologies that help female slum dwellers earn their livelihood and in coping with gender inequality which can guide possible future intervention and/or external support.

Keywords: Home Based Work, Slum, Gender Inequality, Adaptive Micro Scale Work Environments, Female Workers

1. Introduction

According to UN-Habitat estimates, nearly 863 million people live in slum conditions [1]. It is expected that if the situation remains same, the number will probably double by 2030. Categorical terms like *slum*, can disguise significant cultural and economic distinctions among low-income settlements. Various known as *informal* or *non-formal cities*, *squatter settlements*, or *shantytowns*, these communities differ dramatically in size, character, age, and level of political and social organization [2]. However, few characteristics remain common: separation from urban infrastructures such as roads, sewers, transportation, water and electricity supply, storm-water management; having severe health, environmental, security problems and lack of public facilities such as cultural, economic or recreational activities.

In Bangladesh about 30% of the population live in urban areas (Table 1). Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, is a mega city of 15.4 million people [3] with the greater urban

area encompassing approximately 1,530 square km [4]. The city is now experiencing a rapid population growth much higher than the rest of the country (Table 1). Especially over the past four decades, Dhaka's population grew exponentially. This can be attributed to gradual changes in demographic, economic and social fabric. A more specific source is migrants from over populated rural areas; often victims of natural calamities, landlessness and poverty. Annually, the city draws an estimated 300,000 to 400,000 mostly poor migrants who provide critical employment for the city's industries and services. Roy and Sarker [5] observes: "Although urbanization is often associated with increasing national production and high per capita GDP, poverty remains a persistent feature of the urban life, both in terms of income and living conditions". The economic growth has failed to keep up the same pace mainly due to poor political decisions. According to Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), the yearly per capita income of Bangladesh is \$1,314 as in 2015

[6]. In 2014, of the 15.4 million people of Dhaka city [7], up to 6.9% was living in slums [8].

Table 1: Growth of national and urban population (million) in Bangladesh, 2000-2015, Source: [9]

Year	Total National Population (Million)	Annual growth rate of national Population (%)	Total urban Population (Million)	Urban Population as % of total Population (level of urbanization)	Density (P/Sq km)	Migrants (net)
2000	132.38	2.01	31.23	24	1,114	-151,224
2005	143.14	1.57	36.69	26	1,101	-400,001
2010	151.13	1.09	42.15	28	1,049	-714,191
2014	158.51	1.22	47.33	30	994	-456,443
2015	160.41	1.20	48.72	30	919	-408,112

Slums are the natural consequence of rapid unplanned urbanization and poor economic growth. Housing is widely regarded as an essential human need and right, as reflected in its incorporation into the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). MDG 7, Target D states, "Achieve, by 2020, a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers" [10]. As most slums are developed illegally, the government, NGOs and donors generally do not provide basic services such as water, sanitation, electricity, health and education in these areas. Also, close to 80 percent of slums are located on privately owned land creating considerable institutional challenges in terms of basic service provision [11]. There are between 16 to 40 different bodies involved in one way or another in urban matters in Dhaka with little coordination and planning [11]. As a result, there are major gaps in provision of services and infrastructure.

The poor are more vulnerable as they do not have the resources to meet basic needs. Even though slums provide very basic access to shelter for women, gender equality and female empowerment still remains elusive. Despite the expanding economic, social and political opportunities for women that come with rapid urbanization, gender inequality for women living in slums remains a persistent problem in Dhaka. A possible coping mechanism for

women is home based work. This paper studies the adaptive micro scale work environments in slums of Dhaka and how they help in coping gender inequality through home based work.

2. Gender inequality in slums

UN Millennium project (2002 to 2006) states in Target 4 under Goal 3 (Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women): "Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015" [12]. Lack of education, gender inequality and lack of women's basic rights has its root in lack of knowledge, ambiguous legal systems and their lack of application, socio-cultural emphasis on the prerogatives of males and their blood relations, etc. In many cases, it appears to be *equality in rights* in principle, but this is not the case in reality. These inequalities are more acute in slums due to higher level of poverty and lower level of education, especially among the women. In general, the greater society has male bias in terms of inheritance and owning property.

Gender equality in rights to land and housing has been established in a number of international treaties and conventions, including Article 16 of CEDAW (Convention of the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women) [13]. As there is no land ownership in slums, the

security of owning property is non-existent among men, let alone women. The most common gender disparities in slums happen due to women's limited access to stable employment and earnings, finance and credit. The limited ownership of movable properties effectively equates with male control over women and there is widespread discrimination against women in nearly all aspects. Even within the context of living illegally in slums, women have to face eviction and/or homelessness in the event of divorce or desertion. A highly vulnerable group facing gender inequality are the widows whose spouses die of natural causes or accidents leaving no one to look after them. In dire circumstances, they have to adapt various demeaning and immoral strategies such as prostitution for survival. On very rare occasions where government or NGOs take limited rehabilitation projects for slum dwellers, the units are generally allotted to the head of household i.e. men. Single women without male 'guardians' face a different type of gender discrimination. A single woman is automatically assumed to be of bad character. Due to societal pressure, it is often difficult for single women to find accommodation even in slums. Field study shows that women mostly cope with this inequality and earn their place in society with home based work.

3. Home based work

Urban informal sector constitutes a significant part of economy in large cities. Yasmeen [14] stresses on the importance of urban informal sector in developing countries where population and demand for jobs, goods and services grows too quickly for the formal sector to cope with. It is a survival strategy as well, especially in many countries that has no effective social safety nets such as pension schemes, unemployment insurance, etc. Informal sector businesses can take advantage of

personal and domestic assets, such as living quarters, vehicles, and furniture which helps them survive [15, 16].

Ghafur [17] states, home-based income generation takes place within a given dwelling and its broader physical context. Charmes [18] defines home based (also known as household or unincorporated) enterprises by their legal status and type of accounts that distinguishes them from formal corporations. They are not separate legal entities independent of the household members that own them. Also, they don't have a complete set of accounts which could permit a clear distinction between the production and other activities of their owners. Home based enterprises (HBEs) help especially when formal wages diminish or cease. They start in the only place available - at home; with advantages such as little overhead cost, availability of household resources such as space and utility connections. They provide opportunity to trade off resources between domestic and productive activities, to save time and money as travel to work is not necessary, to make effective use of social and human resources such as relatives/friends in exchange of small sums of money or benefits in kind; and especially to enable women to have productive work even in social conditions where their movement and social intercourse are restricted (See studies by [19-26]).

Home based work promotes self-employment opportunities and helps to establish a close work-home relationship [27]. One great advantage of the home base work enterprises is they facilitate the entrepreneurs, especially women to release their creative energy and earning potential maintaining privacy, which is often more agreeable with the local cultural and religious context.

Table 2: Different types of home based work by gender and space required, source: author.

Type of Home based work	Gender	Approximate space required (square ft/person)
Traditional painting	Male	15
Woodcarving	Male	20
Hand-stitching (Garment)	Female	12
Handloom/weaving	Male	50
Tailoring/sewing (Garment)	Male/ Female	12
Embellishment/ embroidery (Garment)	Female	20
<i>Chumki/Karchupi</i> setting (sequins and jewellery)	Female	15
Cooking	Female	20
Bamboo products	Male/Female	25
Pottery	Male/Female	60
Agarbati-candle making	Male/Female	18
<i>Bidi</i> (local cigarette) rolling	Female	15
Broom making	Male/Female	20

They also help through self-sustaining and self-financing developments. Some of the disadvantages are the risk of crime involved, endangering overstretched municipal services, environmental degradation, fire hazards and increasing noise pollution [28]. Home based workers can be subdivided into two broad categories: self-employed workers and sub-contracted workers. The majority of the two are the *home workers* who are subcontracted to carry out paid work for firms/businesses or their intermediaries, typically on a piece-rate basis. This has important policy implications as there are distinction between self-employed home-based and sub-contracted home workers as they have varying levels of decision-making power.

In Dhaka, home-based work cuts across different branches of industry (see Table 2). It is an important category, representing a significant share of urban employment. It accounts for about one fourth of the urban informal employment. Some of these occupations are gender-specific. Industries including cooking, stitching, making bamboo products, pottery, broom making, certain types of stitching are commonly done by women, and traditional painting and woodcarving are commonly done by

men. Some occupations involve both women and men but with each specializing at different stages of production (e.g., weaving by male workers and then embellishment of *Jamdani* sari by female workers).

In Dhaka, the vast majority of home-based workers are women. Women face greater challenges when they want to start home based work. The scope of home based work is greatly limited by overcrowding, lack of space, lack of financial assets, etc. Those who can overcome these obstacles and actually start home based work occupy the bottom links of value chains in most cases. They earn little as they have to pay the overhead costs of production such as space, utilities and equipment. Some of the common problems faced by women are irregular work orders, arbitrary rejection of goods and delayed payments [29]. Home-based female workers have direct contact with the market and buy their own raw material facing competition from larger and more powerful formal businesses. They often do not have access to credit except at exorbitant rates of interests from local community sources. They lack bargaining power and social protection and remain largely invisible and voiceless. However, this scenario can partially improve if the

overhead cost of renting a space can be substituted with a spontaneous micro scale adapted work environment.

4. Research Approach

It has been recognized that space and the built environment are constituted by, as well as constitutive of gender, in feminist analyses of the city, even if the 'private' space of the household has tended to be somewhat neglected in mainstream theory [30-32]. In developing countries, women lag behind socially, economically and politically even though in most cases they are demographically superior in urban areas. The problem is more acute among the slum dwellers where gender-equitable access to 'decent' work and living environments is nearly absent. Gendered spaces play an important role in balancing this, albeit in limited capacity.

While there has been studies about the need of home based work in terms of its capacity for direct livelihood support, there has been very little research and documentation on how home based work empowers women to cope with gender inequality in slums. Also, there has been little research done on adaptive micro scale work environments as forum for the home based work from an architectural perspective. This is particularly critical in slums because of two issues: lack of adequate space and gender discrimination in terms of ownership of household spaces.

In this context, this study examines gender inequality and coping mechanisms (adapted by women) through home based work in the slums of Dhaka city. The study focuses on how micro scale adaptive home based work environments help in coping gender

inequality. After pilot survey of several urban slums, Korail slum of Dhaka was selected as the case study area. The area has been developed and occupied by more than 18,000 poor households with no security of tenure. The area was selected as it has a high concentrations of female home-based workers with a strong social network and all the other critical components of an urban slum in central city. The study uses observation, interview supplemented with focus group discussions with female home-based workers to identify these spaces and their role as coping mechanism in everyday life of the women living in slums. The aim was to include self employed home-based workers as well as sub-contracted home-based workers. The survey was conducted with female home-based workers, followed by focus group discussions involving the survey participants. These were supplemented by additional interviews with city officials, NGO and development workers. In the survey, individual, family- and community-based conditions were considered to illustrate the circumstances and challenges facing female home-based workers.

The findings of this study will possibly contribute to identifying the spontaneous space typologies that help female slum dwellers earn their livelihood and in coping with gender inequality. This in turn can help to guide future urban expansion where these types of spaces can be integrated informally or formally. While the data from observation and interview is primary; this study has the limitation of using secondary data to suggest various demographic and related trends. To gather data in such a large scale to form these trends was beyond the scope of this study.



Fig 1: Aerial view of Korail slum, Dhaka, source: [33] and author.

5. Coping strategies: Micro scale adaptive work environments in Korail

Korail, just like any other typical urban slum, has been growing with no administrative control, providing the dwellers with maximum freedom to build. Unlike other slums that grow on neglected urban lands, the spaces has been grabbed from Gulshan lake, a prime water body at the centre of an upscale residential area. Over the period of about three decades, the slum has gradually transformed into a substantial area blocking an entire part of the lake. In Korail, about 70-80% of the land is taken up for housing with maximum ground-coverage (Figure 1). The density is high, providing some of the cheapest and most affordable minimal shelters.

Korail slum is one of the best examples of “pirate urbanism”[2] appearing near an important city center (Gulshan) enabled by local political support, bribes, etc. Initially, there was no infrastructure in Korail during the 1980s. Municipal services were gradually added during the next two decades as slum-dwellers constituted a sizable urban population. Korail has a vibrant community with a wide range of social and communal spaces and facilities. This ranges from parochial spaces at the door step providing minimal space for social interaction to larger community gathering spaces for social activities.

The houses are generally single storied with some having two stories. The dwelling units are some of the smallest shelters possible. The living spaces are not mono-functional,

they serve multiple purpose and often they are not even typical rooms. Family functions, interactions and work overlap to create some of the best examples of optimum utilized living spaces. As the slum dwellers occupy their units, the adjacent spaces, both towards the lake and in between the units are up for micro scale additions. These additions are not done overnight, it's a slow and gradual process. After a certain period of time, the spaces become their 'own'. However, they are smart enough not to invest too much on these spaces; the construction is temporary or semi-permanent in nature, often having only roof and minimum enclosure (Figure 2, 3 and 4).

Most of the female home based workers work in slums. Their dwellings are small and crowded with little infrastructure, water connection, drainage, sanitation, light and ventilation. The lack of or poor quality of these services in turn effects their productivity. Frequent evictions and insecurity of tenure makes them even more vulnerable. Spaces are overcrowded and require constant reorganization for different activities. Amidst these realities, they find an 'escape' in the form of micro scale work places often in the form of an extension and alteration of the main house. In most cases, the micro scale adaptive spaces were not originally part of the household. Serendipitously they become a part of the households and in time becomes inseparable corners of home based work. They are invariably partial, provisional, and often experimental; relying on the idea of replicability: where a neighbour uses

similar solutions and copies to create a space of her own. However, economic conditions greatly influence the decision of materials and types of construction. These spaces display indigenous creativity of

design, spatial and social adaptation. It supports the idea that poverty of resources doesn't have to result in poverty of imagination.



Fig 2: Home based female workers in micro scale adaptive work environments, source: author



Fig 3: A housing cluster at Korail slum, left - before and right - after addition of micro scale work spaces, source: author

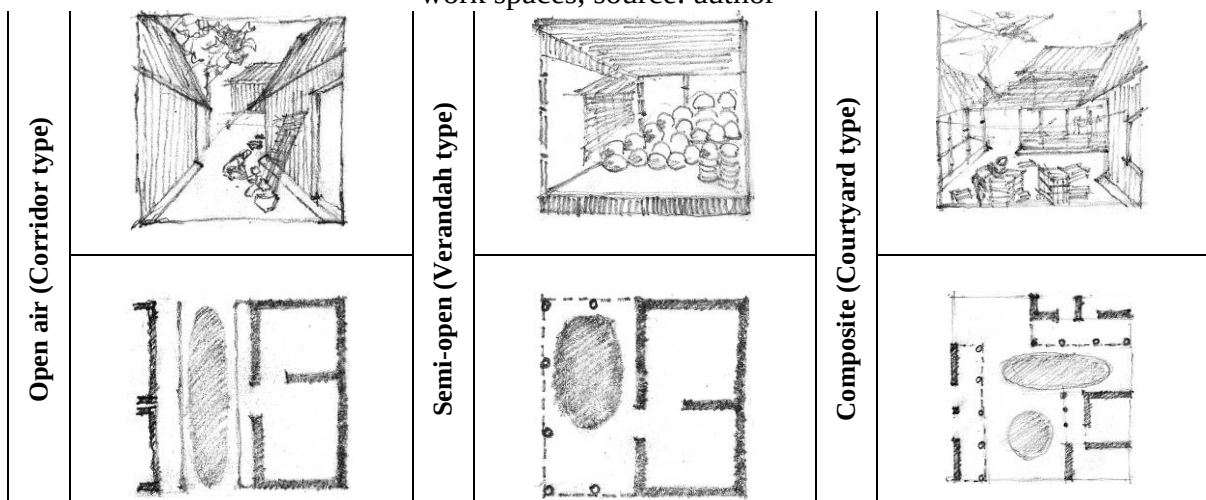


Fig 4: Basic typology of micro scale adaptive work environments at Korail slum, source: author



Fig 5: Different housing cluster types and development stages of micro scale adaptive work environments at Korail slum, source: author

Figure 4 shows three basic types of micro-scale adapted work spaces with activity zones highlighted. Depending on whether they are open air (corridor type), semi-open (verandah type) or composite (courtyard type), home based works vary significantly. For example, activities such as making bamboo, coconut fibre based products is possible in open air, activities such as traditional painting, handloom/weaving, cooking requires semi-open or covered spaces while activities such as pottery requires both covered and open spaces, i.e. composite type.

Figure 5 shows three cluster types and the encroachments that take place in stages. The first stage additions generally extends or connects the most private part of the dwellings where the public access level remains unharmed. This stage generally facilitates establishment of home based businesses. Once businesses start to prosper more space is required, leading to stage 2 of the encroachment. Here more public spaces are grabbed. As cluster type 1 and 2 shows, stage 2 development has significantly narrowed the public access. This is even more dire in cluster type 3 where the public access is entirely blocked (Fig 3 and 5).

This type of encroachment happens where the dwellers have a greater level of social influence.

The micro-scale work environments are some of the best examples of optimum use of resource, primarily land, often making use of negative spaces to the advantage and consolidating the entire development. A typical unit generally consists of a simple dwelling unit with a multi-functional living space with a kitchen alcove, shared service/wash area. The flexibility to build incrementally within adjacent spaces of the dwellings units is closely related to their semi-permanent nature. They are built with locally available materials such as new and used corrugated iron and tin sheets, timber rafters, country tiles, joists and posts, plastic sheets and other recycled materials. The extended micro-scale work spaces mostly use recycled materials such as used corrugated iron sheets, light bamboo fences, etc.

Even though the space they take is illegally occupied, home based enterprises of Korail helps in survival in struggling economic conditions adding to average household income and the general welfare of the local neighborhoods through positive activities (which otherwise could be used for anti-social activities). Women's participation in labor force is pivotal for survival of most households. Despite scarce resources, women take on productive roles as well as engaging in community with micro-scale work spaces as their stage.

They also contribute to social security of woman through economic freedom as they gain a better status in the household. The study shows that (Figure 2) provides not only means of survival but a much needed hope for women living in slums who otherwise would have been unemployed. It restores the power balance, albeit partially. Even though social security is minimum; finance and institutional support (often from NGOs) gradually becomes available

when the home based businesses have some kind of physical existence in the micro-scale spaces.

Whether for its construction or improvement, investment in a new space or acquiring one is a gender biased practice. This is mostly related to decision-making power, awareness, knowledge and perception of members of the household which is mostly male dominated. As micro-scale work spaces don't require a significant new investment they happen gradually and serendipitously; establishing women's role in the household.

The micro-scale spaces stand in a neutral ground where no extra resource is required by the households and there is no conflict between established norms (gender roles) and emerging needs in the households. This presents a new spatial practice where women find their economic and social space keeping the gender dynamics, which, in turn, influences and alters social processes as well. In the long run this spatial practice and adaptive capacity of individuals within a house or a neighborhood enables women to cope with gender inequality.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Settlements such as Korail have become too large and old. It is impractical to think of eradicating them entirely, especially since sufficient vacant land to relocate them is scarce in Dhaka. Leaving the slums where they are may initially seem cumbersome and arguably more expensive, but relocation has often lead to gentrification. Also, developing infrastructure has the advantage of leaving the local economic and social networks intact, supporting local initiatives.

In Korail, women face difficult and complex socio-economic conditions. The study shows that they have a spontaneous ability for cultural adaptations and creating home-work environments as survival

strategies which can guide future interventions. The challenge remains for city managers to use this urban phenomenon (micro scale work environments) positively, gradually making them a part of the system.

The female workers could do better with external support as they are struggling. NGOs have been working in slums such as Korail; they can support the female workers acting as facilitators to bridge the gaps between the overall slum community and struggling female workers. Support can come in the form of small scale improvements (aided by local initiatives) which may inspire others and more comprehensive upgrades where female workers can join micro scale spaces into larger entities where space and work can consolidate. This has the potential to influence and improve employment infrastructures for female workers in slums significantly. However, any support should consider the real social, economic and financial challenges and it should enable community action.

Female workers are mostly under-skilled and poorly trained. Their empowerment is a vital issue. This can be achieved with motivating change in social and economic capital. The existing resources (skills, space, etc.) may be minimal but these can be strategically used to support female home based enterprises through active participation in decision-making. The micro scale work spaces provide a strong cue to what approach should be taken by the NGOs or government. Then the solution will be place specific and appropriate.

Gender bias is deep rooted in society; the female workers in struggling economic conditions especially suffer from social, cultural, economic, legal and political discrimination. The study shows how provision of physical spaces for work helps them cope. These spaces, 'insignificant' to bare eye, actually create a stage where

future institutional input, infrastructure development and possible stakeholders' (such as NGOs, industry, academic and research institutions, international organizations, etc.) support may become possible. A new insight and vision is required to sustain this existing phenomenon (where women spontaneously finds a way to cope) for a more humane home-work environment for women living in slums. There are no set of best practices. However, considering numerous infrastructural, economic, environmental, and social failures of recent urban policies (where slums are mostly ignored); the possible initiatives from stakeholders can contribute in their small way as a solution to social and spatial inequalities in slums.

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