

## Chapter 41

### The Socio-Economic Impact of Open Spaces on Women in a Spontaneous Settlement

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The impact of pockets of open spaces, resulting from organic growth in an economically weak, low-income group (LIG) settlement, on the female inhabitants was studied. On the one hand, the open spaces provided a venue for women to carry out small businesses, a forum for their participation in social exchanges, and a miniature playground for their small children. On the other hand, increased usage of open spaces led to their physical degradation, resulting in unhygienic surroundings. The role of open spaces in the everyday life of women in degraded settlements is thus complex.

The data reported here are from one of the five degraded settlements surveyed in Bangalore, an Indian city which has the highest growth rate in Asia. The settlement consisted of 272 families spread over 3.35 acres and was uniquely divided into two distinct cultural groups. A typical dwelling consisted of a multifunctional space separated from the wet core areas (kitchen and bath) in front by a short wall. A prominent feature was a veranda which formed the link between the interior and the exterior. This provided the platform for the socio-economic activities. The veranda was the women's locus for gossip, light-hearted banter, and some arguments. It provided passive recreation for the women while they kept a watchful eye on their young children who played in the open spaces. Side by side, many women, aged between 10 and 45, worked on the veranda doing unskilled jobs for the small-scale industries that employed them. The women "earned" a better status for themselves in the male-dominated home. In an LIG settlement, household income supersedes all other factors for survival. Open spaces are thus useful and should be an integral part of the socio-economic and physical set-up. Housing authorities and cooperative societies should incorporate at least a mandatory 51% open area in their rehabilitation schemes. Small-scale industries can make use of the vast amount of unskilled labor for mutual benefit.

The global phenomenon of accelerated urbanization has been increasingly evident during the past fifty years. The most striking characteristic of this phenomenon is the upsurge of urban growth in the developing world. In just four decades, the urban population in developing countries registered a five-fold increase; the population figure of large metropolises recorded an eight-fold increase. Urbanologists note that the rapid population growth of developing world cities has no parallel economic growth and does not accurately indicate industrial development or social progress. Further, very sizable proportions of population of the major cities in

the developing world consist of low-income group (LIG) settlements. Bangalore, a city in south India, which has registered the fastest growth rate among Asian metropolises, exemplifies this trend. Case studies in cities like Bangalore explain a common scenario in a majority of Third World metropolises. Because of their financial dependence on men, women in LIG settlements are susceptible to extra hardships in life. To alleviate additional hardships, these women have to find ways to help themselves. Any available option they find, although very limited in scope, is thus of interest.

### Formation of a Bangalore Slum

While a final definition of the term "slum" needs extensive study, based on a general survey of five low-income-group settlements, an interim definition for a typical Bangalore slum is as follows: A slum is an LIG urban settlement in unsanitary condition, generally overcrowded, characterized by make-shift dwellings or those in a state of deterioration, either totally unserved or with facilities far below the minimal acceptable standards of the city, tending to make the area hazardous to the physical and social well-being of its inhabitants. A common characteristic of a Bangalore slum is its proximity to industries and/or the mass transportation network. It is often found in open areas with a nearby water body.

### The People

The settlement in the slum studied started in 1944 when families from the neighboring state of Tamilnadu settled in the then outskirts of Bangalore. After India gained her independence in 1947, many industries were started in this area, and that was a major contribution to this particular slum's growth. In 1983, about 120 families from Gulbarga, a district in the northern part of Karnataka state, joined the slum for economic reasons. When this study was conducted in the summer of 1989, the population of the slum had reached a total of 1,496 in an area of 3.35 acres.

### Ethnic Composition

From an ethnic point of view, the slum can be divided into two categories: people who originated from Tamilnadu, 150 miles southeast of Bangalore, and those from Gulbarga, 500 miles north. These two groups of people speak different languages, and also differ in their cultural and social behavior. They do not mix with each other on any account.

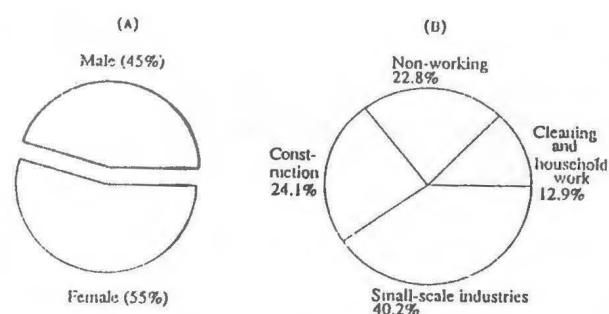


Fig. 1: Gender Distribution and Women's Work in Settlement.

### Religion

Differing religious preferences of the two groups from Tamilnadu and Gulbarga led to the designation of several makeshift structures as shrines, where they conduct regular cultural events to worship their favorite deities. The Moslems have a mosque within two miles and the Christians worship in the local church about a half mile from their settlement.

### Economic Activity

In this settlement many of the men are construction workers in the ever-expanding city of Bangalore. Given the nature of the construction industry they can find only seasonal employment. Another category, albeit a small one, consists of industrial laborers who have regular jobs and are economically secure. Many of the laborers send money back to their villages. A still smaller group of people belongs to the lower middle class (monthly income greater than Rs. 1,250) who continue to live in slums for various reasons. Some own a piece of land or a house; and the cost of living is lower in the slums. This group consists of elementary school teachers, clerks, and petty businessmen. A sprinkling of such people is found in most slums. These people are instrumental in changing certain areas from the slum to the non-slum category.

The survey indicates that women constituted 55% of the slum population. Figure 1 shows the work distribution of these women. The average income of a family per month is about Rs. 1,250. Unemployment is very high.

### Open Spaces in a Slum

A typical housing unit consists of a multifunctional space separated from wet core areas in the front by a

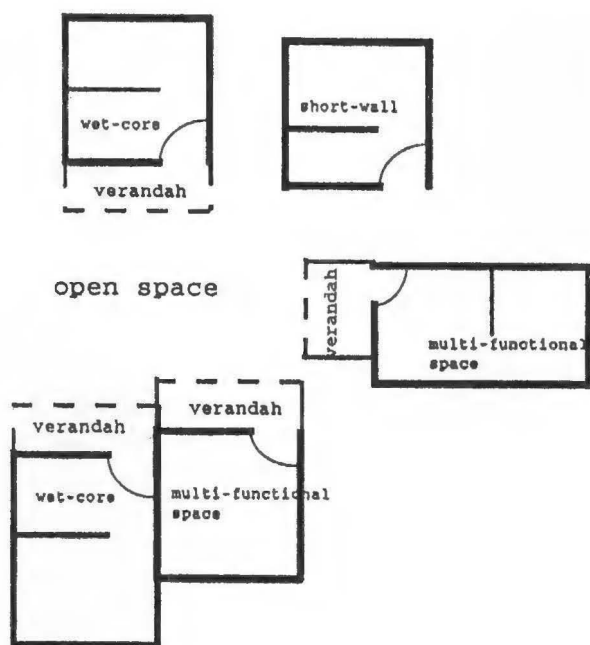


Fig. 2: Typical Cluster of Housing Units and Open Space.

short wall. The walls are made of semi-permanent materials such as unbaked, undried mud, hay, or straw, with a thatch roof on top. These walls do not reach the minimum height according to the acceptable standard for a residential house and do not span large lengths, and hence are built thinner in section than the acceptable standard. These units have very little or no ventilation. The wet core areas are grouped in front because they do not have a drain system and the refuse has to be put out to the front. The housing units have grown organically within the settlement with no organized orientation or pattern, and open spaces have been created spontaneously. The dwelling units look inward at the pockets of open spaces thus created. The outermost part of the dwelling unit, the veranda (analogous to a porch), is the first physical and spatial link to the outside. The veranda may or may not have a shelter on top, but is mostly open on the sides, the front, and the back, forming the first wall of the house (Fig. 2).

Most open spaces have at least three units surrounding them, but some may have up to five units. There is hardly any ground cover in these open spaces in the form of plants, but one can occasionally find small plants, of Tulasi, a sacred plant for Hindus. The ground immediately in front of the housing unit is coated with cow dung paste. The open spaces are well ventilated compared to the interior of the dwellings, with plenty of

light and sunshine. The air is tunneled through the gaps in between the houses. If the orientation is against the local wind direction, the air inside the open spaces is stale, but the ventilation is still better than inside the housing unit where the smoke from the mud-baked ovens is suffocating. The open spaces form a physical means to drain the refuse from the kitchen and bath areas toward any kind of natural slope in the land formation. Indeed the open spaces are a visual delight in a way after one reaches the expanse of spaces traveling through a narrow corridor. The surrounding walls have brightly painted colors with vernacular patterns which can instill a festive mood in anybody responsive to subtleties in artistic expression.

Open spaces as defined above are more common and abundant within the earlier group of huts where the settlement grew gradually. Open spaces are nonexistent within the group dwellings of people from Gulbarga where settlements took place very quickly. The socio-economic impact of open spaces in the former case can therefore be sharply contrasted with the later.

#### Socio-economic and Physical Aspects of Open Spaces

In the absence of electricity, the waking hours of a household were mostly limited from dawn to dusk, i.e., from about 6 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. The settlers believed in rising and retiring early. Not surprisingly, an average woman spends two to three hours outside on the veranda. Considering the amount of activity that had to be fitted in her limited time schedule, this was of particular significance. When two or more women gathered outside their houses on their respective veranda the scene was set for gossip, light banter, and sometimes volatile arguments. This interaction provided passive recreation, an essential ingredient in their strife-torn world. Young children enjoyed playing with marbles and wooden toys outside their homes. Young children found diversion from closed space and their mothers kept a watchful eye on them in the open spaces.

An important aspect of the study concentrated on the economic activity of the "outdoor" women. Even though passive recreation was an integral part of their lives, many women were busy with the jobs they got from the local light industries which employed the women as unskilled labor—an ideal condition wherein jobs came to women's doorsteps, literally! Such jobs included basket weaving, agarbathi (incense sticks) making, and casting construction elements in molds. All these activities took place in the proximity of open spaces in the veranda.

Income is the most important factor for survival in a society. The contribution of women almost doubled the monthly income of their families. The consequences of income generation by women resulted in the following:

1. In a male-dominated society, an earned income provided these women a say in family matters.
2. Women were now financially independent and bought new clothes for themselves during a festival.
3. If their husbands deserted them, which was not uncommon, these women had their earnings to fall back on.
4. Instances of child labor were low in families with working women. More children were sent to nearby schools for education.

Overall, since the work was not physically intensive, and did not involve traveling to distant places but staying in their verandas, there was a congenial relationship between these women's working and family lives. Most of the women interviewed (85%) felt that the quality of their lives improved since they started earning money. A small percentage (11%) of working women thought that their lives had gotten worse due to increased health problems and their husbands' unchanged attitudes. It is interesting to note that women from the early settlement group were more approachable during data collection and seemed to be more active in work than the women from Gulbarga.

The advantages of these spontaneously created open spaces were many. However, there were a few disadvantages too. Misuse of the space occurred in a number of ways. Since there was no site planning of any type, a low point in an open space could act as a tiny water spot to collect refuse from the wet core areas from surrounding dwellings, thereby becoming a breeding ground for mosquito larvae and bacteria. When the water shortage was acute, the contaminated water was being reused by the people, increasing the risks of health hazard. Children between the ages of 2 and 4 used the space to defecate and increased the levels of pollution. All these factors leading to degradation of open spaces did not foster any beneficial activity. Therefore, slum dwellers needed to exercise some level of health consciousness.

### **Municipal Service and Public Utilities**

In 1984, the local slum development board intervened to provide some basic amenities with the financial backing from the Housing and Urban Development Corporation (HUDCO). As a result, five borewells were dug at different locations within the settlements, roads were designated and a public toilet was built. Availability of

drinking water improved the condition of women to some extent since they could concentrate on their family and work. However, one of the borewells dried out by 1989 and another had stopped working due to a mechanical failure. Only three borewells were in operation at the time of the study reported here. Long lines were noted in the morning between 8 a.m. and 10 a.m. and evenings between 4 p.m. and 6 p.m. Summer months brought in more demand for water but less availability.

The roads were demarcated with no design logic. The main road was 30 feet wide while all the other roads were 20 feet wide. In a settlement where most of the people walk and a few own bicycles, the money spent on those roads could have been invested for some other improvement. There was no management of public toilets either. The group psychology perhaps had a big role in this. People used the toilets irresponsibly. As a result, open spaces served as spots for defecation.

### **Conclusion**

Urbanologists now use the approach of slum rehabilitation and slum resettlements instead of slum clearance. Most of the rehabilitation schemes in the Third World end up as monotonous rows of (semi-permanent building materials used for construction with poor technology) houses with no interesting street scapes. But this survey indicates that a site-specific response is necessary to cater to the activities of women and their level of sensitivity to change. Clusters of dwelling units around open spaces are conducive to women's psychological, economic, and physical well-being. This was found to be true in all five slums that were surveyed in general and in the specific slum that was studied in detail. This is an emphatic recommendation for open spaces to be a part of resettlement schemes and to be a part of the layout of every single unit. Most rehabilitation schemes executed in the past fifteen years have less than 5% of the area devoted to open spaces. It is argued that providing such a facility reduces the number of dwelling units provided. A possible solution is to vertically stack units within the range of local building laws. This can provide the advantage of open spaces without sacrificing the number of dwelling units. A low-cost paving and planting system would go a long way toward improving the aesthetics of the environment by reducing the impulse to spoil the surroundings.

Roads within the settlements were used for the transportation of pedestrians and two-wheelers. A maximum of 25 feet and a minimum of 15 feet for the main and the arterial roads within the settlements can meet any such



transportation needs. In this study, the wider roads seemed unnecessary, an investment which could have been channeled to other basic facilities for women and children.

### Economic Rehabilitation

This case indicated that, given proper conditions, a women's potential to provide unskilled labor in an economically weak LIG settlement is tremendous. A slum rehabilitation scheme can be located near heavy or light industries which need vast amounts of unskilled labor. Incentives can be given to women to make use of this economic opportunity. Essentially this means that the industries have to take the initiatives and approach the women in settlements like these for their mutual benefit.

### Education and Health

Cleanliness is not unfamiliar to women in an economically weak LIG settlement. For all the filth outside their home, the interior of their homes is surprisingly clean. This means that they just lack the belief that the quality of space just outside their dwellings is their concern. They are unaware of the health risks of not maintaining a clean surrounding. Children become the main target of disease. As a result, infant mortality is high due to illnesses such as diarrhea, malaria, cholera, and tuberculosis. Most children can be seen plagued with chronic cold symptoms. Since the main reason for pollution of the open spaces is dumping refuse from their wet core areas or defecating, a special place can be designated and designed to wash vessels and wash clothes. The women are eager to maintain their public facilities like water sources and public toilets. This would ensure a better quality of open space linked to their dwellings so that they can reap the benefits of what the space has to offer. A small initiative on the part of administration to educate the women about basic hygiene and to teach them organizational skills could go a long way to help the women use the open spaces where they live for much greater benefits.

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