

## ABSTRACT

Water, Power, and Gender:  
Interrogating Development in the Slums of Dhaka, Bangladesh

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Urban migratory trends represent one of the most significant challenges for modern international development. For, in the context of weak state capacity, urban migrants often funnel directly into slums—densely populated urban settlements whose complex internal dynamics render them inscrutable to government bodies and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). I argue that effective development requires that project designers understand the nuanced complexity of the power networks organizing slum-dwellers' lives. In order to demonstrate this, I focus on processes of water acquisition in the slums of Dhaka, Bangladesh. After first exploring the gendered, social nature of water-related deprivations, I identify and analyze the primary strategic approaches to development employed by NGOs and the government of Bangladesh. This acts as the foundation for my analysis of power dispersion in Dhaka's slums, where processes of water acquisition force slum dwellers to navigate complex axes of identity-creation. I focus specifically on gender as a means of better understanding the simultaneously individualized and culturally situated process of power navigation in the slum context. I conclude with broader recommendations for NGOs seeking to undertake development in urban settings.

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WATER, POWER, AND GENDER:  
INTERROGATING DEVELOPMENT IN THE SLUMS OF DHAKA, BANGLADESH

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

A child drinks a cup of water.

It is a simple act, small hands wrapped around a fragile vessel. The child drinks without thinking of the effort expended to ensure that his thirst was sated, that the water he drank was available when he needed it, that he would not be sickened from the drinking. Most citizens of the developed world, whether old or young, approach the act of satiating their water-related needs with the same degree of simplicity. In the context of less developed countries, however, the child's access to water represents a feat wrought through the concerted efforts of the women in his life. Indeed, the fact that the developing world is filled with children able to drink and use water without fear of disease or scarcity is a testament to the tenacity of those women responsible for providing natural resources for their families.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and government bodies are slowly coming to acknowledge the role that women play in the resource acquisition process. From one perspective, the resultant targeting of women in natural resource development project designs represents a boon for women in the developing world, many of whom have lived their entire lives in a state of societal marginalization. However, contemporary development designs reflect mounting international, neoliberal pressure to harness women's potential as engines of economic growth, more than they reflect the lived realities of women in developing contexts. Quotas and other methodologies that seek to

include women exclusively for the sake of including women are doomed to fail without a full understanding of the power networks that constrain and define gender in the developing world.

Some development workers argue that the act of including women in development (with or without a discussion of gender) is, by default, an act of empowerment. They argue that demanding that NGOs and governments integrate gender into their strategic approaches is preposterous and ill-suited to the exigencies of on-the-ground development work, particularly when these entities are endeavoring to bring even the most basic rights to women. Many of these organizations perceive the ability able to devote one's time and resources to understanding gender's multivariate facets as fantastical luxury, best left to Western academic feminists in their ivory towers. In the world of development workers, the struggle still very much revolves around women's most basic needs, from protection from violence to the right to vote. While the relevance of gender presents challenges in this context, I argue that integrating discussions of gender into development processes is not only good for women, it is a means of securing the ultimate success and sustainability of the project itself.

It is necessary to specify how, precisely, “gender” will be defined in this research. For, a growing trend among NGOs and government bodies is to use “gender” prolifically throughout their planning and post-project documentation as a substitute word for “women.” For the purposes of this research, I will use “gender” to signify a more inclusive understanding of the power dynamics defining the relationships between individuals. To this end, I turn to Bina Agarwal’s 1994 definition:



Gender is the relations of power between women and men which are revealed in a wide range of practices, ideas and representations, including the division of labour, roles and resources between women and men and the ascribing to them of different abilities, attitudes, desires, personality traits, behavioural patterns, and so on. Gender relations are both constituted by and help constitute with practices and ideologies in interaction with other structures of social hierarchy such as class, caste and race. (Agarwal 1994)

Agarwal's definition appropriately captures the degree of complexity characterizing determinations of gender, as well as the fact that using gender to refer to a male / female binary obfuscates the fluidity of gendered identity determinations and the crucial role that power plays in these negotiations. I intend to demonstrate that the act of successfully designing effective and sustainable development strategies is contingent upon first understanding the nature of this complexity.

### *Dhaka, Bangladesh*

In order to establish the role that power and (by extension) gender play in the developing world and the importance of including these considerations into water resource development project designs, I focused my research on the slums of Dhaka, Bangladesh. I chose this city and country in particular for a number of reasons, the most significant of which is the fact that Bangladesh has ridden the crest of innovation in development strategies for almost half a century. From the establishment of the Grameen Bank to the invention of microcredit, development practitioners in Bangladesh have creatively and inventively tackled the substantial challenges associated with soaring overpopulation and poverty. While the Bangladeshi state itself is weak and frequently beset by political crises, it welcomed NGOs from around the world to use the country as a sandbox for their most ambitious endeavors. Because of the prevalence of development

work in Bangladesh and the fact that development organizations are free to experiment with a minimum of oversight or regulations, the more successful development innovations introduced in Bangladesh are later replicated throughout the developing world. For this reason, focusing on the efforts currently being taken to address Bangladesh's water-related challenges in urban areas is a means of gaining insight into the most current development strategies being pursued around the world.

Historically, the most powerful NGOs operating in the country, including BRAC and the Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development (BARD), focused their efforts on development in rural areas. Not only did the vast majority of Bangladeshis live in more agrarian settings, in rural environments NGOs could operate with greater freedom from the cluttered government bureaucracy and sporadic oversight associated with more urban settings. NGO successes in Bangladesh's rural areas and villages have been impressive, to the degree that the average Bangladeshi woman is now afforded a more elevated status than would have been imaginable even twenty years ago. On the other hand, the prolonged success of Bangladesh's largest NGOs has resulted in their bureaucratization and institutionalization, and thus the undermining of their capacity to respond elastically to demographic change. As a result, NGOs have been slow to respond to the most significant change taking place in Bangladesh today: urban migration and the resultant ballooning of the country's slum populations.

### *Slums*

Many of the major national and international NGOs operating in Bangladesh intentionally avoid urban involvement, discouraged by fraught local and national politics

and otherwise limited maneuverability. However, while the urban context certainly entails a number of unique challenges, to avoid it altogether is to ignore the fact that the face of poverty in Bangladesh is increasingly urbanized. Of greatest concern in Bangladesh is not the fact of urbanization itself, but rather, the profound incapacity of its cities to deal with their rapidly increasing populations. Any discussion of Bangladesh's cities must focus on Dhaka—the country's capital and megacity—which, with a population of 15.5 million, is projected to become the third most populous city in the world by 2020 (Rashid 2009, 575). Dhaka's rapid population growth, coupled with insufficient housing, weak infrastructure, and a more general failure on the part of the city and central governments to plan for long-term development has resulted in slums' rapid expansion.

The United Nations Human Settlements Program (UN-Habitat) outlines the deprivations that qualify an area as a slum:

1. Lack of access to permanent or durable housing able to guard against environmental disaster or climate conditions;
2. Insufficient space (defined as three or more people per room);
3. Inability to access safe, sufficient, affordable water without difficulty
4. Lack of access to sanitation facilities shared by a reasonable number of people;
5. Insecure land tenure or security against forced evictions (UN-Habitat 2007)

Today, one or more of these deprivations characterize the lives of 60% of Bangladesh's urban population, making its slum population the largest in South Asia (Dhaka Tribune 2014). Consequently, the Dhakkan slum represents the front line of development work and the fight against poverty and deprivation in Bangladesh. Slums vary widely even within the same city in terms of the degrees of deprivation felt by their inhabitants. This heterogeneity poses a substantial challenge to Bangladeshi state and

NGO endeavors to improve standards of living and marks yet another reason why they have been reticent to become actively involved in fighting poverty in the urban context.

I argue that while the variability of the power networks comprising Dhaka's slums renders them inscrutable and intimidating to government bodies and NGOs alike, it is the very reality of this changeability that offers the greatest opportunity for positive development and even empowerment for slum-dwellers. This prospect requires the establishment of new forums for power creation—a process that cannot take place without an understanding of the slum's pre-existing power network. To this end, it is useful to return water acquisition to the discussion. For, the creation of power networks in the slum context does not just occur alongside the process of water resource acquisition: it is woven throughout the process and outcome. The child taking a sip of water in a Dhakkan slum is capable of doing so because the adults in his life successfully navigated the politics of power creation and re-iteration. Calling for an understanding of gender in this environment is therefore not an attempt to get women more involved in development (although that would certainly be a desirable effect). Rather, it is a means of more effectively understanding the role that power negotiation and creation play in the lives of slum-dwellers—an understanding that can be transformed into successful water resource development strategies.

### *Outline*

In order to achieve an understanding of the nature of power networks in Dhaka's slums, in Chapter Two I utilize water access as a lens of interpreting the adversity inherent in carving out a life for oneself in the Dhakkan slum context. The experiences

of the women who navigate these water-related challenges illustrate the adversity embedded in the process of obtaining water for one's family when one faces historically and culturally impaired access to power networks. I attempt to liberate issues associated with access to sanitation and drinking water from the constraints of binary dualism, by demonstrating the social, relational nature of felt deprivations. Ultimately, this chapter will illustrate how questions of power and identity creation are embedded at every level of the water acquisition process.

In Chapter Three, I identify the principal strategic approaches employed by NGOs and the government of Bangladesh in regards to facilitating water access in the slum context. A brief analysis of these programs and approaches reveals that structural bureaucratic inefficiency, reductive understandings of gender, and ignorance of slum power networks all have potentially disastrous implications for both slum-dwellers and development agency efforts to ameliorate water-related deprivations. The best hope for water resource development in the slum context appears to lie with participatory resource management—a development scheme created in rural contexts whose effectiveness within urban slums will be determined by development practitioners' capacity to successfully situate projects within the slum's power networks.

In Chapter Four, I propose a model for understanding the nature and dispersion of power within the Dhakkan slum context through the lens of the water acquisition process. The complexity of the relations permeating this power network is iterated by both formal and informal power-holders. Slum-dwellers living in this context must perform self-identification both within this macro-level power network and across more individualized but no less complex axes of identity-creation. Strategic development design in this

environment therefore requires an embrace of complexity and an honest assessment of the paradoxes that development can entail.

Finally, in Chapter Five I focus on a single element of the axes of identity creation identified in Chapter Four by investigating the nature and processes of gender construction in the context of the Dhakkan slum. I examine gender within the larger Bangladeshi cultural context and the way in which gender norms associated with rural traditionalism are being translated within the constraints of the slum and its associated power network. Finally, I identify the relationship between gender construction and water resource acquisition and development in Dhaka's slums.

Processes associated with gender construction and water acquisition demonstrate how the specific nature of networked power relations within the context of urban slums profoundly impacts the lives of the slum's inhabitants. For those NGOs or government bodies seeking to address urban poverty or to introduce development projects within the urban context, it is absolutely crucial to first thoroughly grasp the unseen linkages and social currencies underlying the act of negotiating power for oneself and one's household. I tell the story of the slums of Dhaka, Bangladesh, therefore, not just to demonstrate the nuanced navigation of complexity undertaken by its slum-dwellers, but also to offer up the beginnings of a road map for those seeking to achieve development in new urban settings of impoverishment around the world.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Identifying Water-Related Challenges and Deprivations in Dhaka's Slums

Water has held a prominent status in the international development agenda for decades. Since the Stockholm Conference in 1972, the United Nations has repeatedly asserted people's right to clean water, most notably with the 1981-1991 UN Water and Sanitation Decade (Bakker et al. 2007, 1893). The focus then was largely on water's availability as a rural commodity for drinking and for irrigation. However, the idea that water could be a vector for understanding human interaction and social dynamics is relatively new; water has only recently begun appearing in the social sciences. The study of urban water sources and accessibility is relatively new as well, and has occurred largely in conjunction with global migratory demographic shifts towards urban population centers.

As highlighted in Chapter One, Bangladesh's demographic distribution reflects international urban migratory trends. However, in contrast to many locations where this migration has occurred, Bangladesh's urban migrants have largely funneled directly into slums where Bangladesh's government has struggled to provide the infrastructure necessary to meet its citizens most basic-water related needs. Compromised access to water has profound implications for the creation and replication of power networks within the slum context. As a result, understanding the severity and nature of the water-related deprivations faced by Dhakkan slum-dwellers is crucial to ultimately grasping the relationship between said power networks and development initiatives. Therefore, this

chapter will explore the myriad of ways in which water acts as a source of tension and stress in the lives of slum-dwellers, with special attention paid to how access or in-access to water is particularly felt by women in their position of compromised access to power creation and reiteration.

### *Water Deprivations*

Because of Bangladesh's geographic situation within the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna river delta, Dhaka receives ample annual rainfall, particularly during the monsoon season. However, the resultant plentiful surface water becomes polluted in unregulated urban environments and is thus unsuitable for most uses. Most Dhakkans therefore rely on the groundwater found within Bangladesh's sedimentary aquifers to fulfill their daily needs. Widespread use of groundwater, particularly by industrial entities, has led to the drying up of formerly dependable shallow tube wells (Khan et al. 2000, 22). Because these aquifers are unevenly geographically distributed throughout the city, the full effects of these drying water supplies have only begun to be felt by the city's residents. For certain slums within Dhaka, the loss of water access via shallow tube wells represents the loss of one of slum-dwellers' primary means of accessing water outside of municipal water networks (Khan et al. 2000, 22). The haphazard geographic distribution of this creeping deprivation deepens the heterogeneity of water resource acquisition in the slum context.

An average slum-dwellers' perception of his or her water-related deprivation is dependent on the access enjoyed by other members of his or her community. In other words, if the same problems in relation to sanitation or drinking water are shared near-



universally by all of the members of a given slum, individual members are less likely to identify these deprivations as problematic (Ruback et al. 2002, 100). This relativity of felt deprivation reflects the significance of community relations and implications for natural resource acquisition. For, an individual whose access to water is limited but who does not *feel* deprived will be less likely to actively maneuver his or her slum's power network to better situate him- or herself in relation to water access.

This relativity of experience does have a limit, however, with implications for how gender is understood within the slum context. For, whereas men may find themselves satisfied with their location within the power network and their degree of water access relative to their neighbors, women slum-dwellers almost always identify water as a significant source of consternation in their lives. Furthermore, when Ruback et al. investigated physical manifestations of stress amongst slum-dwellers, women and older women in particular identified water as the principal stressor in their lives (2002, 115). Relative deprivation therefore both *reflects* the power networks situating both men and women in their slum community and *is productive* of deeper gender-related power inequities within this context.

### *Sanitation*

Water deprivation need not refer only to drinking water. Indeed, within the Dhakkan slum context, sanitation represents one of the most significant sources of felt deprivation for slum-dwellers. And yet, of all water-related concerns for Bangladeshis, urban sanitation receives the least amount of attention. Compared to drinking water infrastructure, sanitation infrastructure requires greater government investment;

moreover, drinking water has greater appeal for the average NGO's fundraising campaigns. As a result, discussions surrounding sanitation infrastructure or solutions often rank low in terms of development priorities. It is therefore all the more imperative to identify the ways in which water-related sanitation deprivations are manifested in the lives of Dhakkan slum-dwellers. In large part, Dhakkan slum-dwellers experience the absence of access to safe sanitation in two primary forms: compromised health and compromised personal cleanliness.

### *Compromised Health*

Within Dhaka's slums, overpopulation and high population density facilitate the rapid spread of disease. In part as a result of this, slum-dwellers have a lower life expectancy and higher rates of child malnutrition and diarrhea (a gastrointestinal disease transmitted by contact with the feces of an infected individual) than the rest of Bangladesh's population. In their study of diseases within the slum context, Isunju et al. found a strong causal correlation between water deprivation, sanitation, and disease, with "close to 90% of the diarrheal disease burden is caused by unsafe sanitation, water and hygiene" (2011, 370). This is particularly significant in light of the fact that diarrhea is the single most prevalent disease in Bangladesh and is responsible for the vast majority of infant mortality within the country (Chowdhury 2010, 39).

Rashid's 2006 survey of Dhakkan slums found that 70% of all slums lack safe sanitary facilities, and in 50% of the cases observed six or more families shared a single latrine (2009, 579). In the absence of safe sanitation, slum-dwellers have no choice but to pursue alternative defecation strategies, including pits, drains, and bags—all of which are

considered unsafe sanitation methods liable to contribute to diarrheal outbreaks (Isunju et al. 2011, 369). While it is considered culturally acceptable (albeit undesirable) for men to defecate in public, Bangladeshi women must go to greater lengths to screen their bodies. In light of Dhakkan slums' limited sanitation options, this could mean dramatic inconvenience of time or distance (Joshi et al. 2012, 185). However, should a woman refuse to pursue these more strenuous options, she would incur shame, the full gendered implications of which will be further explored in Chapter Five.

Slum-dwellers' compromised access to safe sanitation ultimately deepens the inequalities between Dhaka's informal and formal residents. The contrasts in access to even the most basic sanitary facilities between Dhaka's informal and formal residents are striking. For example, Halder and Kabir found that 89% of the women in Dhaka's wealthiest income bracket owned latrines, whereas only 29% of the women in Dhaka's poorest income bracket owned a latrine (2008, 69). These inequalities are reinforced and deepened by the health implications of poor sanitation in the slums, where Rana's 2009 study found that slum-dwellers lost an average of 10.2 working days in a three-month period due to water-related diseases (2009, 327). Slums' close proximity to wealthier neighborhoods further engenders experienced deprivation. For, whereas in traditional, rural settings one is able to accurately determine one's relative deprivation by observing the water access enjoyed by one's neighbors, geographical approximation to such stark inequity distorts felt deprivations.

### *Compromised Personal Cleanliness*

Religion, culture, class and gender intersect to define standards of personal sanitation and cleanliness. The trials and water-related challenges associated with living in the slum context do not in any way lessen the significant role that cultural standards of sanitation and cleanliness play in the life of the average slum-dwelling Bangladeshi. The fact that remains, however, that the act of achieving cultural standards of sanitation increases in difficulty considerably in the slum context. Questions of personal cleanliness therefore can deepen slum-dwellers' perceived levels of deprivation in relation to the other members of the slum community.

At a larger cultural level, Bangladeshis are expected to live according to *sunat*, or the correct way of living. *Sunat* is comprised of cultural traditions that dictate one's proper activity as per one's identification as a Bangladeshi Muslim. *Sunat*'s many norms include the concepts of *pak* and *wazu* (also written as *ozu*). *Pak* refers to the degree of cleanliness required for worship, and the associated concept of *wazu* denotes the practice of cleansing oneself in order to achieve the requisite *pak* for prayer (Joshi et al. 2012, 189). *Wazu* requires that one use clean water to wash the hands, the forearms, the face, and the legs to the knees three times (Hoque 2003, 81). "Clean" water in this context refers not to any objective medical standard but to the determination of the community—a judgement made in relation to community members' relative water-related deprivation. Also significant to discussions of sanitation is *poy poriskar*, an individualized form of cleanliness set apart from purely religious requirements. Because *poy poriskar* is seen as going above and beyond *pak*, close observance indicates higher class status and social prestige (Joshi et al. 2012, 189). Within the slum context, therefore, an individual's

manner of *poy poriskar* observance symbolizes his relative positioning in the power network.

Because a slum-dwelling men's relative positioning within the power network holds greater significance to the overall wellbeing of the household than the relative positioning of slum-dwelling women, families prioritize men's observance of *poy poriskar* before women's. Thus, it is far more culturally acceptable (and common) for a man from a poor family to pay to use a latrine or cleaning facilities' soap than for a woman to do the same (Joshi et al. 2012, 189). Soap, notably, has recently become an interesting cultural factor in calculations of cleanliness. Because the use of soap is not one of *pak*'s required components, those who are able to cleanse themselves with soap immediately achieve *poy poriskar* (and all of the augmented social standing this level of cleanliness entails). This reveals how water and its associated uses play a vital role in the creation of a community's power network and therefore for the identities of the people within it. For, just as one's ability to achieve a higher degree of cleanliness can serve as a movement towards greater personal standing, one's inability to do so can generate a profound sense of deprivation, with corresponding lowered positioning in the community's power network.

This relationship between personal sanitation and power has gendered implications for development within the slum context. For example, women must go to greater lengths to achieve *pak* than men by performing ritual self-cleansing following childbirth, menstruation, sex, and defecation (Joshi et al. 2012, 191). While ritual cleansing after sex and defecation is required of men as well, it is the duty of the woman to acquire the clean water for both partners to properly cleanse themselves. The process

of obtaining clean water for cleansing purposes is an explicitly gendered task that a man would never perform for a woman (Joshi et al. 2012, 185). This is but one example of the larger cultural expectation that women fulfill all of the sanitation and water-related needs of their households (which further include cleaning, caring for children, cooking, and cleaning household latrines). Women's water-focused role cuts to the negotiated planes of shame and honor that play an outsize role in the creation of Bangladesh's gender relations. As one Dhakkan woman said, "It is inappropriate to get men to wash our clothes. Their dignity and value in the society, and with it our own, will diminish if this happens" (qtd. Joshi et al. 2012, 190).

Gendered expectations in regards to water-related sanitation impact men as well. In Bangladeshi culture, a man's ability to provide sufficient sanitary opportunity (or *tel-shaban*) to his wife reflects his masculinity and status as a provider. Joshi et al. describes the way in which development constraints in urban contexts create gendered conflicts and tensions arising out of expectations that are often impossible to fulfill:

Men no longer provide (in accordance to the saying) their women with the basic sanitation needs--water, privacy, and convenience--and women suffer disproportionately for the lack. Increasing urbanisation [*sic*] and competing priorities for basic survival have made men's traditional tasks of provision (of sanitation) redundant. However, women's cleaning responsibilities continue, driven by the absolute need for these tasks as well as an effective gendered self-discipline. (Joshi et al. 2012, 192)

The significance of sanitary water in the urban slum context further is manifested in the creation of power networks in the form of generational differentiation. Older women tend to place greater value on *wazu* cleanliness, since many older women have more recently come from rural backgrounds and thus feel more closely connected to traditional practices. However, because of their own physical limitations, their own

generally stricter interpretation and observance of *purdah* (See Chapter Five), and their overall diminished societal status, older women encounter more difficulty than any other demographic sector in the slum context in achieving this degree of cleanliness (Joshi et al. 2012, 191). Middle-aged married women, in contrast, have greater mobility. This cohort must, however, place the sanitation needs of their husband and children before their own as individuals in order to fulfill their duties as a household's facilitator of water acquisition. Younger women—especially those of a marriageable age—enjoy greater water and sanitation privileges than older women and, in some cases, older men. For, a young woman who is able to perform *wazu* and preserve an outward appearance of cleanliness enhances her appeal as a marriage prospect (Joshi et al. 2012, 191). This advantage also brings constraints, however, as Bangladeshi society views the period before a young woman marries as the most vulnerable in terms of honor (See Chapter Five). As a result, young women are discouraged from queuing for toilets because to do so exposes them to the public eye. In the burgeoning slums where there are so few public latrines in proportion to the absolute numbers of people requiring their services, accessing toilets without queuing can represent a near-impossible expectation for younger women to fulfill (Joshi et al. 2012, 186). In this way, women across all aging demographics must navigate processes of personal sanitation in order to preserve their personal standing and that of their households in the networked context of their communities.

### *Drinking Water and Questions of Access*

While more often discussed by NGOs and the Bangladeshi government, deprivations related to drinking water are often more poorly understood than sanitary deprivations. For, NGOs and government bodies tend to perceive drinking water issues on a binary of safe or unsafe, accessible or inaccessible. In reality, the safety and accessibility of drinking water fall on a continuum. As such, the reports of stunning progress by the Bangladeshi government in providing safe drinking water to its citizens should be treated with skepticism. Bangladesh's government recently reported improving water access for its citizens from 74% in 2003 to 81% in 2013 (*The Financial Express* 2013). This report, like so many assessment reports and project impact surveys littering the developing context, falls prey to the simplifying assumption that one is either able to access water or not, with no room for alternative scenarios. In this act of reductive simplification, the true nature of water access is lost.

In fact, access to water in the slum context is best understood as a spectrum, interpreted and determined by the individual based on distance, travelling time, and—perhaps most significantly—the number of people whose needs a given water access point is intended to satisfy. Even water sources deemed accessible and clean by international rights-based definitions can represent a source of hardship in people's lives. For, typical measures of access do not record the amount of time that one has to spend waiting for water, the social conflict generated by ambiguity surrounding for water management, the lack of variety of water access points, or the stress of seeing water points break down without a clear understanding of who is responsible for their maintenance (Sultana 2008, 354). Because of this, the positive statistics advertised by



Bangladesh's government and by other development agencies obfuscate the costs associated with a slum-dweller's relative degree of (in)access to water and how these deprivations might have repercussions for their placement within the slum's power network.

The development community's treatment of access as a binary mirrors its binary understanding of women's relationship to water. In attempting to pursue gender mainstreaming, many NGO and government planning documents now seek to answer the question: *is this project good or bad for women?* This reveals an oversimplified understanding of the role that water plays in women's lives and of the power network she must navigate in order to obtain this water. For, water represents a single component in a slum-dweller's calculations of how to best maximize his or her identification with traditional masculine or feminine gender roles. As such, slum-dweller's decisions in regards to access may seem unintelligible to the outside observer. For example, if a woman must choose between either travelling further in public in order to obtain a "safer" source of drinking water (as per international standards), thereby potentially compromising her security (and thus endangering her honor and that of her husband), or travelling a shorter distance, thus "settling" for a water source that is relatively less safe, she will almost always choose the latter (Sultana 2008). Discerning "how far is too far?" regarding the distance a woman chooses to travel or not to travel in her efforts to obtain clean drinking water depends on the woman's social status in the community, the relative safety of the area, and her family's assessment of her options. In short, this individual calculation may or may not fit within the visions of development planners (Sultana 2008).

Another way in which the access binary falls short as a measure of the availability of drinking water rests in the fundamental uncertainty characterizing water supplies in Bangladeshi slums. Many of the new drinking water access points developed and celebrated by NGOs or the state only activate for thirty minutes a day. This inflates the time that women slum-dwellers must spend queuing for water (Rashid 2009, 527). While such a limited period of water point activation is inopportune, far worse are those access points that activate at apparently random intervals. When determinations of water's relative availability remain in flux, women and their households are confronted with an array of decisions that imperil their families' honor and, on a more practical level, infringe on how a woman spends her already limited time. Surveys of Bangladesh's slum-dwellers indicate that their most pressing concern is not whether or not they are able to access water, but rather, the amount of time that they must devote to acquiring it, whether because of queues or distance (Rashid 2009, 527). What's more, problems associated with acquiring safe water are not constant throughout the year; the magnitude of difficulties faced in relation to water varies depending on the season. The three months that make up the dry season pose problems in relation to obtaining water, while the rainy season brings the threat of flooding (Rashid 2009, 325).

This uncertainty is further exacerbated by the fact that urban water development projects often operate under a lack of clarity regarding who owns the water and who is responsible for maintaining access points. In rural villages, shared water is located in a *bari*, or homestead cluster. There, water access points are run by established hegemonies of the most powerful community members, whose authority is generally well-established and therefore uncontested (Sultana 2008, 354). In contrast, social power dynamics in

urban slums are often murkier and prone to rapid change due to the transience of their populations and other factors that will be detailed in Chapter Three. As a result, power, and thus water management decisions engender greater conflict and thus uncertainty in the urban context (Sultana 2008, 354).

### *Conclusion*

The water-related challenges facing Bangladesh's slum-dwellers are myriad. Significantly, however, the degree to which a slum-dweller experiences the deprivations associated with living in a slum context is dependent on his or her relative positioning within the community's power network. Degrees of social power and the manifestations of this social power, including gender, impact how slum-dwellers perceive their ability to access water. In terms of sanitation practices, both health and personal cleanliness are duly impacted by the trade-offs slum-dwellers must perform in order to fulfill cultural expectations, personal preferences, and their own power-related communal standing. For, a slum-dweller's sanitary practices reflect his or her power within the community, thus enabling the slum-dweller to symbolically communicate his or her perceived or aspired to location within the power network.

The complexity of this negotiating process further impacts slum-dwellers' access to drinking water. Consequently, conceptualizations of access that rely on binaries structured around access or in-access inadequately encapsulate the trade-offs that slum-dwellers must perform in order to obtain water. For women in particular, questions of access must be contextualized by fact that the water-related choices they make either complement or defy conventional gender norms, which may or may not reflect their

preferences. Thus even in the simple act of obtaining drinking water for their families, women create and deepen cultural understandings of gender identities.

This complexity does not translate easily to government planning documents or NGO impact assessments. On the other hand, oversimplification of the complexity of power relations within the Dhakkan slum has caused problems for organizations attempting to combat human suffering in the slums, most notably when their projects fail to meet the needs of those they are endeavoring to serve. In the following section I thus explore how NGOs and the government of Bangladesh have approached the challenge of ameliorating water-related deprivations.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Ongoing Efforts to Address Dhaka's Water-Related Challenges

As illustrated in Chapter Two, the challenges and subsequent deprivations associated with water development in the slums of Dhaka, Bangladesh are multitude. The water-related deprivations that slum-dwellers experience and must contend with are situated within the context of social power hierarchies whose entrenchment plays a significant role in the trade-offs that the average slum-dweller must perform to obtain access sanitation and drinking water. NGOs and government bodies attempting to facilitate water access for slum-dwellers engage with this complex dynamic by default, although they may do so unwittingly. This shifting complexity, coupled with the rapid growth rate of Dhaka's slums would prove a challenging context for water provision in even the best-managed of cities.

However, Bangladesh's central government and Dhaka's municipal government are both plagued by endemic governance problems, including widespread corruption, political instability, tension between national and city governments, and haphazard interdepartmental coordination. Consequently, slum-dwellers receive little of their water supply through official government channels. Although, as Chapter One highlighted, NGOs continue to focus their energies on rural environments, they have proven far more successful than the central government at meeting the water-related needs of slum-dwellers in Bangladesh's urban settings.

The urban application of the participatory resource management models developed in rural settings represents the most recent trend in slum development strategy. I therefore interrogate the implications of the application of participatory resource management within the Dhakkan slum power network with a case study on the NGO Dushtha Shasthya Kendra. However, even the most successful participatory management projects are insufficient to meet the many and varied needs of slum-dwellers. In light of the limits of NGO services within the slum context, it is crucial that those projects that do get implemented are designed with a maximized awareness of the dynamics power construction and gender formation within the slum context.

First, however, I explore how the government of Bangladesh has attempted to facilitate water provision in the slum context and in what capacity it has (intentionally or otherwise) deepened the slums' power imbalances.

### *The Government of Bangladesh*

#### *Attitudes and Assumptions*

According to Bangladesh's 1972 Constitution, the government of Bangladesh is responsible for "creating an environment that allows its citizens to improve the quality of their lives through access to health, education and other basic services" (Rashid 2009, 574). While the national government has made notable strides towards fulfilling this role, particularly in regards to development in rural areas, the country's slum-dwellers have remained conspicuously absent from state efforts to improve the lives of its citizens and reduce poverty. Of greatest concern to development in the slum context is the fact that the government has failed to adopt a cohesive national strategy for the development

of the urban poor. Few central Bangladeshi government documents even recognize the *existence* of slum-dwelling populations (Rashid 2009, 576). This absence of policy is not accidental, but rather, is a product of the inaccurate assumption on the part of many government officials that slums are a transitory problem that can be effectively addressed with subsidy programs designed to discourage rural populations from migrating to cities.

This pervasive idea amongst national politicians—that the challenges associated with slum-dwelling are best fought by discouraging the existence of slums—has both short term and long term consequences for current slum-dwellers. In the short term, government officials are disincentivized from providing even basic services (such as water) for slum-dwellers, since doing so could be construed as encouraging urban migration (Rashid 2009, 576). In the long term, because the government perceives the existence of slums primarily as a migration problem, it is disinclined to pursue long-term planning for development in the slum context (Rashid 2009, 576).

National politicians' disinclination to work towards development in the slum context is fueled by mainstream, non-slum-dwelling Dhakkan citizens' general ambivalence toward or even resentment of slum-dwellers. As Chapter Two noted, Dhakkan slums often directly border wealthier areas. This juxtaposition not only deepens the felt deprivations of slum-dwellers mentioned in Chapter Two, it can lead non-slum-dwelling residents to perceive their well-being and space as threatened by the encroachment of poverty and crime. Insofar as the development of water or sanitation infrastructure signifies permanence for slum-dwellers, such initiatives can expect some degree of popular resistance (Rahman et al. 2009, 353). Thus, development in the slum context is dependent on the perceptions of those in more elevated positions of political or

social power. This power imbalance inherent in the act of perception strains relations between non-slum-dwellers and slum-dwellers, with implications for social dynamics within the slum itself.

### *Organization and Inefficiency*

The failure of the Bangladeshi central government to formally recognize slum-dwellers has precipitated the creation of haphazard jurisdictional boundaries and unclear mandates for the Dhakkan municipal officials attempting to address slums' dire living conditions (Islam et al. 2012, 254). For slum-dwellers, the absence of formal government recognition means they lack any claims to land tenure. The resultant constant fear of eviction forces slum-dwellers to live their lives in a state of fundamental insecurity and, furthermore, discourages investment in slum water development by NGOs, municipal agencies, and private entities (Rahman et al. 2009, 347). This creates an "institutional void" within the slum context, opening the door for informal power-construction by local leaders and vendors seeking to augment their own social status through illegal water provision (Hackenbroch and Hossain 2012, 417). In this way, the inaction of the government of Bangladesh towards the slums creates and sustains the power networks that dominate the process of water resource acquisition in the slum context (see Chapter Four).

However, governance failures pertaining to water development in Dhaka's slums extend beyond an absence of policy. Indeed, Dhaka's urban landscapes are littered with the detritus of failed projects, such as a 1995-2001 urban renovation project that, in its earliest stages was deemed "one of the largest investments in the ecosystem in Dhaka to



date,” but was shuttered in 2001 due to dwindling funding, the fragmentation of authority, and an uncertain political climate (Islam et al. 2012, 254). This failed project illustrates how some of the greatest challenges facing the central and Dhakkan governments result from dysfunctional bureaucratic systems as much as from the actual exigencies of the slum-context.

*The Dhaka City Corporation.* The top municipal governing body in Dhaka is the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC). DCC was designed to operate autonomously under the authority of officials democratically elected by Dhaka’s urban citizens. In reality, DCC’s budget and therefore its authority are controlled by the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives (MLGRD), a central government ministry under the authority of the national parliament, *Jatiyo Sangshad*. Consequently, politically appointed officials in Bangladesh’s central government make many of the city’s utility management decisions (World Bank 2007, 56; Rashid 2009, 576). Because of this organizational structure, DCC has effectively become an implementation body, with little to no control over city planning or development decisions (World Bank 2007, 53). It relies heavily upon the central government for leadership and strategic planning—a task at which the central government has repeatedly fallen short. This bureaucratic structure undercuts DCC’s ability to coordinate the activities of its various subsidiary bodies and its ninety wards and compounds the inefficiency with which it carries out even the most basic tasks related to service provision (World Bank 2007, 53; Habib 2009, 263). As a result, DCC is plagued by budget shortfalls (Hackenbroch and Hossain 2012, 404).

*The Dhaka Water Supply and Sewage Authority.* DCC's troubles are reflected and deepened in the form of its semi-subsidiary body, the Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (DWASA), with dire consequences for water development in the city's slums. For, unlike one would logically assume, DWASA is not managed by DCC, but rather by MLGRD in the central government (Khan and Siddique 2000, 25). As a result, decisions pertaining to strategic development planning and even the management of natural resources in specific wards take place under the jurisdiction of the vast, politically driven central government. Nationally elected or appointed officials thus have ultimate decision-making authority over municipal water supplies (Khan and Siddique 2000, 25). The organizational bureaucratic deficiencies that plague DCC are consequently only magnified for DWASA because of the exceedingly complicated nature of providing water services to the whole of Dhaka. In light of its flawed management structure, it is perhaps unsurprising that DWASA has struggled to cope with the water challenges associated with Dhaka's burgeoning population and slums.

One of the greatest challenges DWASA faces is the fact that a large proportion of its treated water that leaks and thus falls outside of its ability to collect fees for treatment services. These "leaks" result from inefficient technology or infrastructure as well as illegal pipe tapping—an extremely common practice in Dhaka's slums, often performed via bribery of corrupt DWASA officials (Khan and Siddique 2000, 25). Because of its inability to maintain sovereignty over its treated water and consequent inability to meet its costs, DWASA charges exceptionally high tariffs for water access. In doing so, it passes on the costs of its inefficiencies in the form of a single rate tariff. This is particularly punishing for the poorest members of Dhakkan society, most of which

respond by continuing to tap DWASA pipes or pursue other means of illegal access (Khan and Siddique 2000, 26). As will be further illustrated in Chapter Four, illegal water acquisition in Dhakkan slums is a fraught process, reliant on the creation and sustenance of power roles and structures. DWASA's inefficiency and inadvertent incentivization of illegal water tapping thus indirectly fuels the entrenchment of power networks in the slum context. Government ineptitude (or absence) in regards to water provision in the slum context does not lead to greater communal cooperation, but rather, creates a power vacuum filled by informal slum-dwelling power brokers.

#### *Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)*

Whereas government bodies have largely fueled the creation and sustenance of slum-oriented power networks through their absence, the relationship between NGOs and power creation in the slums is more complex. For, NGOs have sought more active engagement in Dhaka's slums and thus have played a more intimate role in the creation of slums' social environments. That being said, an NGO's decision to operate in a slum environment is, in itself, complex and often made in defiance of a number of challenges whose full nature must be contextualized before one can fully understand NGOs strategic approaches to facilitating water access for slum-dwellers.

One of the most significant challenges posed to NGOs seeking to engage in the urban slum context relates the inherent uncertainty of slum environments. Specifically, NGOs are reticent to invest time and resources in slums, where the absence of land tenure means development must take place under the constant threat of government eviction. In this respect, the effects of this deep insecurity are felt similarly by both NGOs and slum-

dwellers (Joshi et al. 2012, 195). Because slum-dwellers have no legal rights to land, they tend to move frequently within and in-between various slums in the city. Uncertainty thus produces impermanence not only of the land upon which the slum is built, but also of the individuals comprising the slum community. NGOs attempting to introduce water access points or participatory resource management frameworks to Dhakkan slums consequently find that slum-dwellers themselves are hesitant to invest time or money in projects for which they may or may not be present to realize to fruition (Akbar et al. 2007, 26). Because many NGO water development projects rely heavily on a community's financial and temporal investment, slum-dweller ambivalence drives NGOs to gravitate towards marginally wealthier slums in the hope that their citizens will be more apt to use their disposable incomes for project development, or else to withdraw from the slum context altogether (Rahman et al. 2009, 358).

Other issues associated with governance influence NGOs' decisions whether or not to become involved in a slum's water development. The organizational and structural inefficiencies inherent in DCC's and DWASA's bureaucratic composition create a red tape maelstrom for NGOs interested in initiating new water development projects. Rampant corruption and expectations of bribery by DWASA officials further decrease the likelihood that an NGO might break even or at least not to lose money with their water investments (Akbar et al. 2007, 26). Indeed, NGO involvement in slum water projects often takes place more in *spite* of DWASA policy than because of it. Historically, DWASA has not allowed or supported outside mediation in water projects or even payment schemes. However, increasing expressions of demand by slum-dwellers and recognition of that demand by government officials have begun to shift DWASA's

attitude towards NGO slum involvement in a more positive direction (Rahman et al. 2009).

For, despite the myriad of disincentives for participating in slum water development, and despite the fact that they continue to direct the bulk of their energy towards rural populations, NGOs have succeeded in positively impacting Bangladesh's slums. Indeed, Rahman et al. found that: "the empirical evidence from the fieldwork clearly demonstrates that the local people get more benefits and services from NGOs than public institutions" (2009, 363). Certain Dhakkan health and sanitation sectors, including most solid waste disposal is run almost entirely by NGOs (Alamgir et al. 2005, 15). Any evaluation of the successes of NGO projects in Bangladesh must occur within the context of the primary strategic approach employed in some form by almost every NGO currently operating within the country: the participatory resource management model.

#### *The Participatory Resource Management Model*

Although the participatory resource management model has proven successful for NGO-run development projects in Bangladesh's rural settings, its implications and potential have yet to be fully explored within the context the of the power-networks of the Dhakkan slum. By definition, "participation" requires engagement with the community in which a development model is being introduced. As such, the model's cohesion within pre-existing communal structures determines the success or failure of the NGO and the project. Moreover, because any given participation project is situated within the context of a community's power structure, analyzing participation within the slum context can facilitate a greater understanding of the precise nature of the slum's

power network, including how gender might influence development (in the participatory sense or otherwise). I thus analyze the background, successes, and challenges of the participatory approach in the context of the shifting power dynamics of the slum setting.

### *Background*

In the early days of international development, most strategic models employed scientific and technological experts to arbitrarily impose water development projects on third world communities. The 1987 World Commission on Environment and Development, along with the 1980-1990 International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade, precipitated a major shift in development discourses towards a new community-oriented approach to development. “Participation” became the new buzzword of choice, representing a newfound appreciation for community knowledge as a tool of resource management (Smith 2008, 356).

In the years that followed, participation-oriented community water management schemes became the development tool of choice for NGOs working in Bangladesh and other developing countries. There were two main reasons for the widespread adoption of participation as the preferred development model. First, the participatory management model was first introduced around the same time that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other international donors were pressuring states to pursue structural adjustment schemes in order to bring runaway debt and spending under control (Smith 2008, 356). Across the board spending reductions led Bangladesh to pursue further cuts to DWASA and other already beleaguered municipal water agencies across the country. In this context, municipal subsidiary bodies turned to NGO-run community water

management as a less expensive alternative to purely state run water management, particularly in rural areas (Bennett et al. 2005).

The second motivation for the adoption of participatory water management was far more idealistic: participation was seen as a tool that would be—by its very nature— inclusive, environmentally sustainable, and ultimately empowering for all members of developing communities (Smith 2008, 356). It was seen as a model that could take into account communities' breadth of knowledge about their environments and that could, moreover, act as a tool of inclusion for women by integrating women more meaningfully into the development process. In their description of the participatory resource management model, Bennett et al. illustrate this interpretation of participation as an utopian vehicle of development:

In its broadest sense, the participatory approach is part of the search for a more equitable distribution of the social benefits that can derive from development. It implies that citizenship must be fully exercised by both men and women, respecting the right of every citizen to be involved in matters that affect them... From a gender perspective, participation plays a central role in achieving gender equity and is not conceived of in a pragmatic or instrumentalist form but as the right of both men and women to actively influence decision making and to have a say with real power in the processes that affect them. (Bennett et al. 2005, 197)

Almost three decades after community-oriented participation projects became the favored tool of international development in rural settings, Bangladesh's NGOs have begun applying participatory resource management models to water access projects in urban contexts. And because of the proven successes of participation in rural water management, often participation is included in urban models as a single, unquestioned unit. In other words, projects are designed under the assumption that appropriate technologies plus participation equals (inevitable) project success. In reality,

participation is a complex tool, a mechanism with the power to either facilitate or undermine greater equality and empowerment.

### *Participation in the Urban Slum Context*

Because most NGOs introduced participatory resource management models first in rural environments, the applicability of participation for urban settings is as yet poorly understood. In order to effectively analyze the participatory water resource management approach's potential for success within the context of the Dhakkan slum, I now discuss the issues associated with the export of this model from rural to urban development settings.

*Knowledgeability.* In the early days of participatory resource management, one of the primary justifications for its implementation was the idea that in rural areas, village community members were more familiar with their environment and with the most effective (and even sustainable) modes of access to those resources than outside experts. This conceptualization of participation as tapping into “community knowledge” was found to implicitly afford greater weight to the experiences of women (many of whom had fulfilled the role of community water managers for their villages informally for generations) (Smith 2008). This justification and understanding of participatory resource management demonstrates both why participation has proven to be an effective paradigm in rural settings and why it has struggled to gain a foothold in urban environments. For, whereas village communities (and women within these communities) often possess intimate knowledge of their environment, the slum-dweller lacks this intimate familiarity with his or her environment's resource potentiality. Instead, natural resources more often



represent a source of stress and anxiety for the slum-dweller, whose knowledge of the safety and accessibility of his or her water supply is dependent not on traditionally ingrained knowledge, but rather on the promises of the slum's local power-holders.

Some NGOs have tried to sidestep concerns pertaining to knowledgeability by arguing that although slum-dwellers are unfamiliar with the resource of new slum environments, they bring with them traditions of resource management from their rural homes, thus rendering them more likely to successfully participate in resource management (Smith 2008, 362). Even were this assertion unequivocally accepted as true, the fact remains that slum-dwellers participating in resource management would be doing so at the direction of outside NGOs. Under this paradigm therefore, the value inherent in basing resource management around traditional and communal practices is lost, replaced by the external, Western, technology-focused models characterizing traditional development.

The relevance of community resource knowledge within the Dhakkan context is further undermined by the fact that within Dhaka's slums, it is far more valuable to possess what some NGOs have euphemistically termed "local knowledge," which refers to the mastery of concurrently operating power networks and holders (Hackenbroch and Hossain 2012, 413). Some NGOs have attempted to depict this knowledgeability as the urban equivalent to rural community knowledge of natural resources. However, while knowledge of local power dynamics can certainly facilitate the implementation of participatory resource management projects, it can just as easily be co-opted by local power holders or political committees. Moreover, because power networks are created and negotiated primarily within male domains, knowledge of power is inherently

masculine in nature. Thus, participation within the Dhakkan context will fail to serve the same function of building upon the traditional knowledge of rural women and may, instead deepen associations between traditional masculinity and power.

*Stability.* External force as a precipitator of internal change has been repeatedly proven ineffective as a model for successful development projects. For, the imposition of rigid structures of societal involvement upon a community almost always dooms participatory management to failure. Rather, effective participatory water resource management projects grow out of naturally occurring internal, communal, cultural cohesion (Bennett et al. 2005, 203). The sort of organic cohesion required for the development of sustainable water management, however, requires stability and a consistent cohort of participants. However, in Dhaka's slums, the central government's refusal to grant slum-dwellers legal rights or recognition means that slum-dwellers live in a state of near-constant instability and itinerancy, thus compromising the internal cohesion associated with successful participatory development projects.

In addition to precluding successful communal co-operation and cohesion, instability impacts the viability of participation projects in a number of other capacities. For example, instability of land tenure discourages slum-dwellers from actively participating in participatory management projects' creation or maintenance (Rahman et al. 2009, 351). Because slum-dwellers could be abruptly evicted from their homes by the Bangladeshi state without any prior notice, slum-dwellers generally perceive investing substantial time and money in resource management as injudicious. On a more attitudinal level, slum-dwellers' illegality perpetuates the sense that they are "temporary

settlers” whose primary mission must be retrieving water when and where they can (without any sense of responsibility for longer-term environmental preservation or the future of their community’s modes of access) (Rahman et al. 2009, 351). This is not to imply that slum-dwellers are incapable of participating in water access projects or that they would never consider investing time or money into water access points, but rather to highlight how slum-dwellers’ fundamental insecurity represents a force precluding and de-incentivizing slum-dwellers from these more socially altruistic and future-oriented impulses (Rahman et al. 2009, 355). By extension, if Dhakkan slum-dwellers were provided even informal assurances of land tenure or legality by the Bangladeshi state, they would likely become far more amenable to the prospect of investing time and money into community water infrastructure development (Rahman et al. 2009, 354).

*Discourse.* The terms “participation” and “community” have become such common parlance in NGO documents, that development workers often overlook the difficulty associated with implementing these concepts on a practical level. NGOs often form water development plans around the assumption that researching appropriate technologies and conducting needs assessments represent the “difficult” portions of project preparation, while community and participation are inherently simple (Jha 2012). In the context of this erroneous conceptualization of community, NGOs are prone to make a number of simplifying discursive assumptions, such as conflating “participation” with both “decision-making” and “consensus” (Jha 2012, 213). Such a reductive linguistic approach would be counterproductive in even the most hospitable of settings. In the complex power matrix of the Bangladeshi slum, however, oversimplified

understandings of the language of participation can render projects irrelevant or, worse, destructive to the livelihoods of slum-dwellers. For, ignorance of a slum's specific power network leaves NGO projects vulnerable to capture by local power holders (as will be illustrated at the end of this section).

*Community.* Imprecise discourse represents but one example of how, in the pursuit of replicable development models, NGOs can fall prey to simplifying assumptions. For participatory water resource management projects, the “community myth” represents perhaps the most pernicious of these assumptions. In development circles, NGOs often invoke “community” as an “idyllic, cohesive, organic, harmonious, and homogenous” entity, rather than as a complex social organization with internal tension and power differentiation (Smith 2008, 360). This idealized understanding of community leads NGOs to design participatory water resource management projects dependent upon fantastical constructs of an egalitarian communal body composed of individual units with comparable interests and goals (Sultana, 2008, 348). As will be demonstrated in Chapter Four, this version of community is utterly absent from the Dhakkan slum, where actors operate within a fluid network of power and where water resource acquisition is internally contested at every level.

In turbulent development situations such as Dhaka's slums, on-the-ground development workers often encounter a reality far removed from the visions of distant project designers. Projects whose success depends upon an idealized notion of community or a reductive simplification of slum-dwellers to interchangeable participatory units, unsurprisingly struggle in Dhaka's highly differentiated slum context.

However, development workers often have no choice but to pursue even the most poorly designed project to completion. And, for almost all modern NGOs, “completion” requires producing evidence of successful community engagement. Thus project designers’ over-simplistic understandings of participation and communities are reflected and replicated in project implementation. For example, when recording participation in water management committees, NGOs will record all attendees as participants (whether or not they were actively engaged in committee discussions) (Hackenbroch and Hossain 2012, 413). NGOs commonly employ this technique to demonstrate to their donors their success in engaging women in community water resource management when, in reality, women’s “participation” may have very well been limited to silently accompanying their husband to a water management committee meeting (Hackenbroch and Hossain 2012). The effects of this “token participation,” which result from incomplete understandings of a community’s power dynamics, go beyond inflated NGO reports. For, by indicating that women are only valuable as bodies to be counted within a committee, NGOs deepen communal perceptions of women’s impotence within the power network and undermine their aspirations towards greater agency in water resource acquisition.

Participation cannot in and of itself solve social exclusions. In Sultana’s study of water management committees in rural Bangladesh, she found that the majority of villagers she interviewed did not have any interest in attending meetings because they felt that their voices would not be heard (2008, 356). The poorest members of the community felt that their role was to pay their dues and let the elites oversee the decision-making. Those that did attend meetings would do no more than observe the proceedings, feeling that they lacked the social currency, expertise, or individual authority to

contribute (Sultana 2008, 356). Sultana's ethnographic study reveals how ultimately participation is a neutral tool, whose introduction to communities is more liable to deepen existing social inequities and power dynamics than to automatically generate new power networks. In the context of Dhaka's slums, this phenomenon will only be amplified by the heightened variability and fragmentation of its power networks.

*Case Study: Dushtha Shasthya Kendra*

In terms of water development in Bangladesh's slum context, the most significant NGO success story is Dushtha Shasthya Kendra (DSK), an NGO that in 1988 developed the "DSK Model" for providing water to informal urban settlements. The successes and failures of the DSK model closely correlate with its engagement with Dhaka's pre-existing power-oriented social conditions and, as such, represent a useful case study for this investigation. The following section will explore the DSK model in greater detail.

*Design and Strategic Approach.* DSK designed its water development model in response to the fact that Dhakkan slum-dwellers have no legal means of accessing water or sanitation, since DWASA is unable to supply water to populations whose rights as legal citizens have not been affirmed by the central government. Central to the DSK philosophy is the idea that with the right NGO assistance, the poor are capable of managing their own water supplies within a legal framework—a direct refutation of the government's denigrating stereotypes towards slum-dwellers (Akbar et al. 2007, 26). Accordingly, DSK negotiated a deal with DWASA and DCC linking informal slum communities to formal water utility services.

However, DSK initially struggled to gain a foothold in the slum context. Its 1992 pilot project was deemed a failure after *mastaans*, or local strong men (see Chapter Four) seized control of a newly created water access point and then refused to pay utility fees (Johnston 2009, 431). DSK continued to operate, however, and began to enjoy greater success after integrating participatory Water Management Committees into its model design. These committees are responsible for collecting fees (both DWASA bills and project repayment for DSK) and for maintaining the water point (Johnston 2009, 432). The modern day DSK model is depicted in Figure 1 (Figure 1 was designed based on research by Akbar et al. 2007, 27).

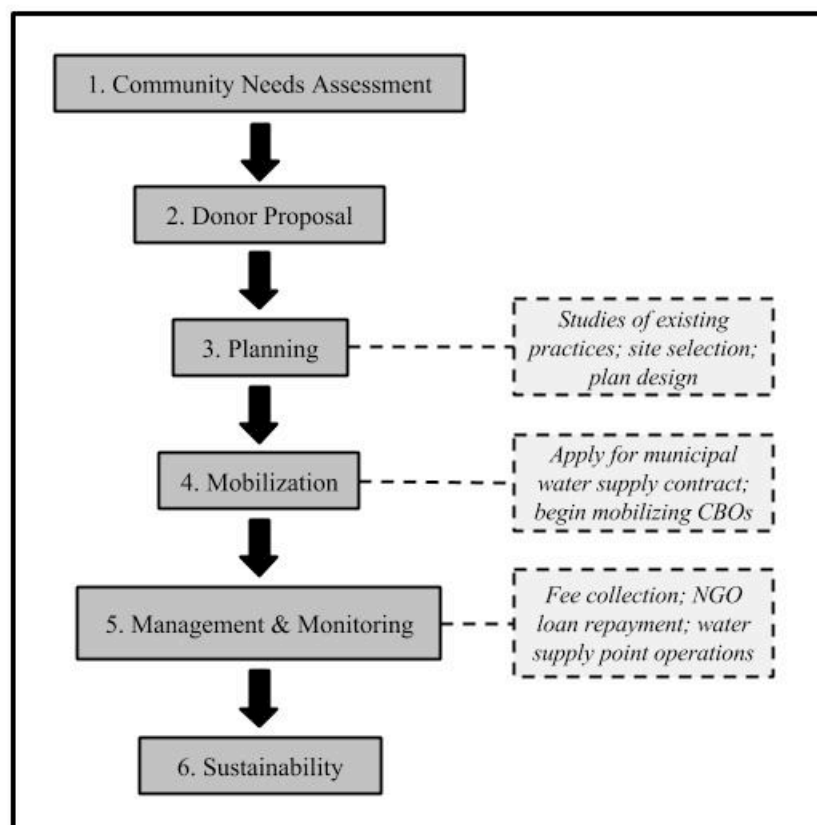


Figure 1: The Modern DSK Model

*Successes.* By strategically refining its model and by attracting funding from prominent international development institutions such as WaterAid, DSK has grown into one of the more successful NGOs operating in Bangladesh's urban environments. Over the last decade and a half, it constructed eighty-eight new water access points (twelve of which have been paid for in full and transferred completely to user groups) (Rashid 2009, 581). As of 2010, DSK had achieved 60-75% water and sanitation coverage in its fifteen target slums in Dhaka and Chittagong and had contributed to coverage in 155 additional slums (Dushtha Shasthya Kendra, n.d.). Studies show that slum communities implementing the DSK model enjoyed improvements in access to quality water supplies as compared to those that continued to operate under illegal water-tapping models (Akbar et al. 2007, 28). Unlike typical approaches by the Dhakkan or Bangladeshi government, the DSK Model explicitly makes a concerted effort to help slum-dwellers understand the mechanics and strategies for projects under construction (Rahman et al. 2009, 363). This has deepened the sustainability of DSK's project designs and generated hope that these water access points could be exported to other slum contexts in Dhaka and even Bangladesh's other urban centers.

DSK has also had a positive impact on governance in Dhaka's slums. The successful recuperation of costs and fees associated with DSK projects has resulted in an increasing recognition on the part of DWASA officials that slum-dwellers will pursue legal means of obtaining water for themselves if given the opportunity and the proper incentives. Outside of the humanitarian value in supplying slum-dwellers with greater access to water resources, DWASA has begun to see DSK co-operation as a means of generating new sources of revenue and reducing illegal water tapping (Akbar et al. 2007,



28). As a result, DWASA has become more amenable to water connectivity initiatives for informal communities (Johnston 2009, 432). The impact of DSK's success has also been felt at the national level: the drafts of the central government's most recent water strategy papers include a mandate to supply water regardless of land tenure or ownership status (Hackenbroch and Hossain 2012, 407). While this has not passed Bangladesh's parliament and, even if it did, would remain distant from the central government's real capacity to provide resources to its people, the inclusion of this rights-based water mandate in official government documents demonstrates DSK's success and influence.

#### *DSK, Participation, and Implications for Development*

DSK attributes its success to the strategy behind its approach, which is to implement “an integration of hardware and software,” by introducing affordable and effective technologies within a community mobilization framework that specifically reaches out to marginalized groups (including women, the elderly, and the poor) (Dushtha Shasthya Kendra, n.d.). Others, such as Rahman et al. attribute its success to its cooperation with pre-established Community-Based-Organizations (CBOs), community leaders, and the central and municipal government (2014, 358). What seems evident is that by integrating an accurate assessment of power networks within Dhaka's slums into its project designs, DSK was able to overcome its initial failures and build a foundation for sustainable water management. DSK should therefore be emulated, not only for its successful model design, but for its adaptability and commitment to working within the context of power networks. DSK demonstrates that even within the constraints of

informal urban environments, participatory water resource management can represent a viable strategic approach.

However, before the DSK model is scaled up or exported to other developing contexts, certain weaknesses within the DSK model require attention. First, funding has consistently proven problematic for DSK project initiation and continuation. Akbar et al. argue that, because DSK relies so heavily on outside donor contributions, it cannot possibly satisfy the long term needs of slum communities (2007, 29). This reliance on what can be an unreliable source of outside funding imperils the long term viability of certain DSK projects, particularly those in their earliest stages. Adding to DSK operation costs is the continued expectation of bribes by DWASA and DCC officials. For, most DSK projects have made the strategic decision to integrate into, rather than fight against informal power networks. While this has contributed to the sustainability of DSK projects in the short term, DSK development practitioners will ultimately have to confront the longer-term consequences of complementing unbalanced power relations.

Furthermore, as a relatively small NGO, DSK is simply incapable of meeting the massive demand for water in Dhaka's slums. As a result, even slum-dwellers with access to DSK projects continue to face lengthy queues for water and sanitation access. Certain projects are showing signs of deterioration, particularly where community participation committees have broken down (Akbar et al. 2007, 38). Moreover, new DSK water management committee leaders have, because of their authority over water supplies, accrued power rapidly, thus upsetting traditional power structures in Dhaka's slums. This disruption has led to inter-social conflict and, in some cases, violence (Akbar et al. 2007, 38). As this illustrates, the scaling up of the DSK model for water development in slums

requires a more nuanced understanding of power within the slum context than DSK is currently able to provide.

Ultimately, sustainable water development in the slum context requires that governments and NGOs achieve an understanding of the slum's power networks and primary power-holders. This chapter has illustrated how power contexts both impact and are impacted by government and NGO work within the slum context. Development projects simply do not exist in a vacuum and therefore successful water infrastructure development is contingent upon arriving at an accurate understanding of the nature of the power negotiations that slum-dwellers conduct on a daily basis. In order to better understand this negotiation process, I now turn to the task of developing a model that accurately captures the interconnected power relationships of the Dhakkan slum's power networks.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Power and Identity Creation in the Dhakkan Slum

While water development structures are externally *defined* by NGOs or the Bangladeshi state, they are internally *implemented* within the slum. Consequently, slum communities' responsive analysis of costs and benefits contextualizes externally designed projects within pre-existing forums of power and identity-creation. Assumptions of community homogeneity in Dhaka fundamentally misrepresent the network of power structures that characterize its contested and transient slum world. In order to successfully develop sustainable water solutions for Dhakkan slum families, one must first understand the complexity of the power relationships defining slum-dwellers' lives and interactions and their implications for the process of identity creation.

The absence of a firm grasp of local power dynamics compromises the very foundation of development. As Chapter Three demonstrated, often development is undermined by the simple act of misunderstanding or misunderstanding the reality of a given community. In order to better avoid this sort of failure in the future development of Dhaka's slums, strategic development planners must employ a model that reflects how contemporary slum-dwelling Dhakkans gain access to water within the context of networked power dynamics. For, the constraints of Dhakkan slum's power networks and the strategies that slum-dwellers employ in the process of acquiring water resources for their households within this context are iterated in the manner in which individuals and

their communities construe both gender and their relationship to constructs of self-identification.

*Developing an Accurate Community Water Access Model for Dhaka's Slums*

The fundamental weakness of social or political models lies in the fact that the nature of any given situation or community is highly specific to a localized point in time and therefore any rigid normative framework will fail to reflect the nuanced complexity of a given environment. That being said, creating culturally specific models (i.e. creating a model of power relations in a Dhakkan slum versus all slums) can provide insight into complex systems. Using Hackenbroch and Hossain's 2012 survey of Dhakkan slum-dwellers, I propose a model of Dhakkan slum power-relations that can, despite its inherent simplicity, provide insight into Dhakkan slum-dwellers' methods of water acquisition.

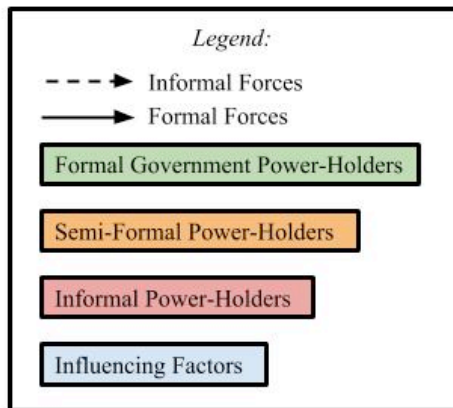
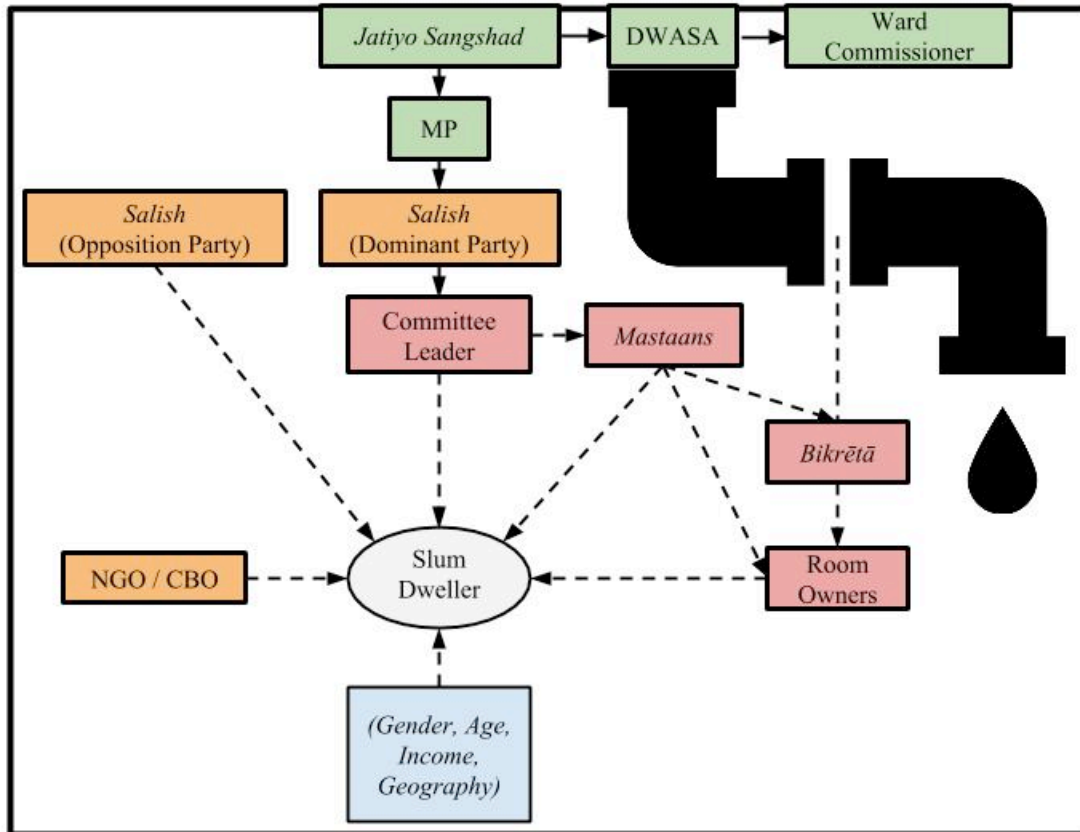


Figure 2: Access Model for Dhakkan Slum-Dwellers' Water Acquisition Process

*Formal Government Power-Holders*

As Figure 2 reflects, both formal and informal institutions, individuals, and forces influence the average Dhakkan slum-dweller's access to water resources. Of the formal

institutions, the *Jatiyo Sangshad*, or national parliament, holds the greatest officially sanctioned power. As highlighted in Chapter Three, the *Jatiyo Sangshad* controls DWASA—the body technically charged with meeting Dhakkans’ water and sanitation needs. In reality, because Bangladeshi slums have not been formally recognized by the government and thus are considered illegal settlements, most slum-dwellers have no traditional legal means of accessing public DWASA water facilities (Rashid 2009, 576). Slum-dwellers’ only real hope of gaining formalized access to water lies with *Jatiyo Sangshad*’s primary political parties, the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladeshi National Party (BNP).

#### *Semi-formal Power-Holders*

National politics have a surprisingly pronounced impact on the minutiae of slum-dwellers’ lives, including their ability to access water. For, in Dhaka, a slum’s daily governance is often delegated to the authority of the *salish*, or political party committee. The *salish* fulfills a number of roles that would ordinarily be fulfilled by official government institutions in a more formalized, legal setting. For example, the *salish* has primary responsibility for resolving conflicts, violent and otherwise. In the event of crime it is the *salish* that works out agreements with the police (Hackenbroch and Hossain 2012, 413). The *salish* is directly linked to the *Jatiyo Sangshad* through the district’s Member of Parliament (MP), most of whom use the slum as a voting bank. Because of its connections to the MP and to other, formal city institutions, the *salish* is a body of incredible power and authority (Hackenbroch and Hossain 2012, 413). Unsurprisingly, therefore, its highest leadership position—the Committee Leader—

represents a highly coveted position for young (male) slum residents. Having a household member elevated to Committee Leader can be tremendously advantageous both in augmenting the households' capacity to acquire water resources and in elevating its social and political prestige. As Rahman and Siddique were told by one slum-dweller: "Everyone with young adults in their family has at least one with a desire to be a Committee Leader" (qtd. Rahman and Siddique 2000, 360).

Some of the complexity found in the power networks of Dhakkan slums rests in the fact that the governance of slums is contested by a plurality of simultaneously operating *salishi*, each representing a different political party. Because the *salish* affiliated with the current national government party is generally recognized as having dominance over other competing *salishi*, the average slum-dweller's political party affiliation has enormous influence over his or her household's capacity for acquiring water resources. Neither the AL nor the BNP have designed their policy platforms specifically to appeal to slum-dwellers (neither party has even officially called for the Bangladeshi government to give slum-dwellers legal recognition), however, if an MP is elected with the support of a dominant *salish* (and therefore the votes of the slum-dwellers under its control), the MP is generally expected to provide certain benefits to the dominant power-holders within the *salish* (Hackenbroch and Hossain 2012, 410).

Accordingly, national elections can profoundly impact both formal and informal power-holders. If, for example, the AL party wins an election, lower level BNP government officials (such as DWASA's ward commissioner) find their authority completely undermined (Hackenbroch and Hossain 2012, 411). In the interim period between an election cycle and the hiring of new municipal officials, slum-dwellers might



find their already minimal legal access to public water supplies undermined. The impact of a political party transition is further iterated throughout the slum context with the transition between the old dominant *salish* and the new *salish* (with impacts for all slum-dwellers regardless of party affiliation). As a result of this transient power orientation, local political leaders often focus parochially on the next election cycles in lieu of seeking long term social investment for Dhaka's slums. Moreover, these shifting political dynamics complicate the process of self-identification by obfuscating the traditional hierarchies that would typically serve the function of orientating slum-dwellers within the power network (See below).

Despite the fact that *salishi* substantially impact slum-dwellers' lives and capacity for resource acquisition, the average slum-dweller generally does not have the time or social currency to engage with the higher levels of *salishi* politics, and thus relies on his or her Committee Leader to navigate these fraught political waters by proxy. In return, Committee Leaders collect fees from slum-dwellers (Hackenbroch and Hossain 2012, 410). In an environment where one's amicable proximity to power-holders is just as if not more important than one's income in determinations of one's ability to acquire water resources, slum-dwellers accept these fees as part of the cost of living in slums and thus generally pay without resistance.

The integration of political power and municipal authority thus deepens the dynamism of power construction in the Dhakkan slum. As a result, individual slum-dwellers' relative positioning within the slum's power network is in constant fluctuation. It is thus slum's informal power-holders—with their greater distance from political variability—whose hold on power has the greatest consistency within the slum context.

### *Informal Power-Holders*

While the *salish* has considerable power within the slum and a degree of influence over the MP, it has little direct or indirect power over DWASA and thus is limited in its capacity to control a slum's water resources. As a result, a number of informal institutions have sprung up to facilitate and monetize slum-dwellers' access to water. The most significant of these is the *bikrētā*, or "vendor." The *bikrētā* ensures slum-dwellers' continued access to water through "friendships," or bribery connections with local police officers and DWASA officials that allow the *bikrētā* to tap DWASA water facilities with impunity (Hackenbroch and Hossain 2012, 407). The more successful *bikrētā* employ *mastaans*, local strongmen who, among their other functions in the community, negotiate these bribes and inform *bikrētā* of impending inspections. *Bikrētā* occupy an established place in the community and are further protected in their operations by slum-dwellers who will rally to warn the *bikrētā* via word-of-mouth to shut off his water access points if a non-corrupt DWASA inspector is moving through the slum (Hackenbroch and Hossain 2012, 407).

The more extensive a *bikrētā*'s familial and social connections, the more free time he is able to devote to establishing and maintaining political relationships with *salish* members and even to becoming a Committee Leader himself (Hackenbroch and Hossain 2012, 407). This demonstrates that water acquisition in slums is a community effort built upon familial, political, and financial relationships and, furthermore, that power networks are woven into these connections and the act of obtaining water resources. In some cases, working as a water *bikrētā* is one of the most profitable income-generating strategies available to slum-dwellers. The *bikrētā*'s position is associated with

geographic permanence and a steady income—both of which are rare commodities in the slum context. These features enhance *bikrētā*'s social status and power and, furthermore, render them attractive contact points for NGOs and government bodies endeavoring to establish a foothold in Dhakkan slums. Because of these factors, *bikrētā* are able to charge slum-dwellers far higher rates for water than DWASA charges the average non slum-dwelling Dhakkan (Kapoor and Hussain 2006, 266). And again, because of the intractability of the slum's power network and the limited options available to slum-dwellers, these higher fees go largely uncontested.

Water access is typically negotiated verbally in room cluster units represented by “homeowners,” or unofficial landlords who charge slum-dwellers' for the spaces in which they live. Homeowners work closely with the *bikrētā*, often colluding in order to extract higher prices from tenants (Hackenbroch and Hossain 2012, 407). Like *bikrētās*, homeowners are highly attractive to NGOs. For, homeowners are often more explicitly motivated than the average slum-dweller to invest and participate in water access point creation and maintenance because improved water resource access enables them to charge higher rates of their tenants. While homeowners generally are more motivated than the average slum-dweller to support NGOs and engage in participatory water management, their interests are far from analogous to those of the average slum-dweller. For, whereas the average slum-dweller is generally more interested in how to best obtain water resources for his or her household while minimizing fiscal and social, homeowners are primarily driven by profit (Hackenbroch and Hossain 2012, 413).

This illustrates yet again the point raised in Chapter Three: that development in the urban slum context must take into account differentiated power distributions. A

hypothetical NGO introducing a water development project in the slum context without grasping the different power relationships of its stakeholders might assume that all slum-dwellers possess similar motivations in participating in water resource management schemes, and thus in its project's implementation inadvertently augment the social currency of a community's primary power-holders. For, while homeowners might be actively interested in developing improved toilet facilities and / or water access points in or near their residences, they are often less interested in longer-term projects whose focus on lifestyle or social change might ultimately undermine their authority within the slum's power-network.

*Mastaans*—a class of “strong men” responsible for enforcing power dynamics within the Dhakkan slum—represent another significant variable in slums' power networks. A *mastaan*'s power and social status vary widely, from informal young male thugs employed by *bikrētā* or homeowners for fee collection, to more institutionalized roles operating at the behest of the *salish* (Hackenbroch and Hossain 2012, 409). The *mastaan* is an essential component of what makes the Dhakkan slum power network so unique. For, unlike social power dynamics in other contexts where one's understanding of one's location within a power network may be ambiguous, power within the Dhakkan slum is constantly broadcasted and solidified by the actions of the *mastaans*. The *mastaan* strengthens the linkages between the slum's primary power holders and deepens the grooves of the maze slum-dwellers navigate in pursuit of water resources. As shall be demonstrated in Chapter Five, *mastaans* play a fundamental role in gender and identity construction in Dhaka's slums. In this, the *mastaan* actively creates, expresses, and reinforces his masculinized, embodied, physical power.

### *Implications for Development*

Because they represent the muscle of the slums' political and social power holders, and because some NGOs have been on the receiving end of antagonistic *mastaan* coercion, international aid workers and NGOs often depict *mastaans* as "controlling the slums" (World Bank 2007). While it perhaps seems obvious to single out *mastaans* as the main roadblock to development in the slum context, to do so is to fundamentally misunderstand the Dhakkan slum's power-network. For, *mastaans* do not produce the slum's power dynamics: they reflect them, by carrying out the wishes of the slum's formal and informal institutions and power holders. Thus water-oriented NGOs may have a negative run-in with a *mastaan* not because the *mastaan* himself is adverse to the NGO's project but because, for example, the introduction of legal water acquisition mechanisms could create a source of substantial unwanted competition for the *bikrētā*.

As this demonstrates, understanding the primary actors involved in power exchanges (as well as their relationship to the slum's power network) is crucial to building sustainable models for water development. Often the roles listed above are not distinct (i.e. the same individual might hold the position of both Committee Leader and *bikrētā*). The sustainability of development initiatives in the slum context requires that projects acknowledge and respond to pre-existing power networks and, moreover, identify the role that any given-slum dweller plays in larger power-oriented negotiations. For, because a slum household's ability to access necessary water resources is dependent on its proximity to and relationships with those possessing political power, NGOs attempting to introduce, for example, participatory water resource management projects should do so in the knowledge that participants may view a project as more beneficial to

their lives if it conforms to (rather than attempting to subvert) pre-existing power networks.

As demonstrated by the case of DSK and other water development projects in Dhaka's slums, the introduction of participation-oriented projects entails a process of contextualization within existing hierarchies and power networks. Whereas participation is often treated in development discourses as a static mechanism or tool used to enhance project effectiveness or, the reality of its implementation in urban settings is one of deepening complexity for slum-dwellers' communal power negotiations (Sultana 2008, 349). Sultana describes this complex calculus of resource acquisition well: "People make trade-offs between maintaining power structures for overall livelihood needs and having access to safe water, whether they participate or not" (2008, 356). Consequently, development projects should be designed and implemented in the knowledge that slum-dwellers' non-participation can—counter-intuitively—represent a rational decision. NGO assumptions that conceive of participatory water resource management as an automatic force for a society's good may blind them to the ways in which it can be co-opted by both formal and informal power holders to increase their own societal status.

Power networks thus represent a difficult paradox for development thought. If an NGO designs their water access project so as to complement rather than compete with a slum's pre-existing power-holders, the project will likely enjoy greater participation from slum-dwellers in the community and well as a greater likelihood of sustainability. Projects designed in this manner reinforce standing power structures and thus often deepen historical marginalization. If, on the other hand, an NGO pursues development strategies intended primarily to empower the marginalized and thus disrupt standing

power networks, it diminishes its chances of enduring for any meaningful amount of time. While the solution to this puzzle is unclear, I would suggest that NGOs attempting to operate in challenging development conditions (like those found in Dhaka's slums) should identify one particular area of focus, be it resource provision, empowerment, or whatever else, and focus their efforts with precision and specificity, rather than attempting to be all things to all people. Regardless of the chosen approach, it is clear that an accurate understanding of a slum's power network should be embraced in advance of any further decisions regarding project planning or design.

#### *Power and Implications for Identity Creation*

Power as a force within Bangladeshi slums should not be represented as a binary (in the sense that one either possesses it or does not). Rather, power in the Dhakkan slum exists on a number of axes upon which one orients oneself in respect to gender, age, income, geographic location and political affiliation (See Figure 3). These axes interact with and influence the construction of the broader power network depicted in Figure 2. In considerations of water resource acquisition, each of these qualifiers partially determines the role that water plays in the life of the slum-dweller and thus what lengths they will go to obtain it.

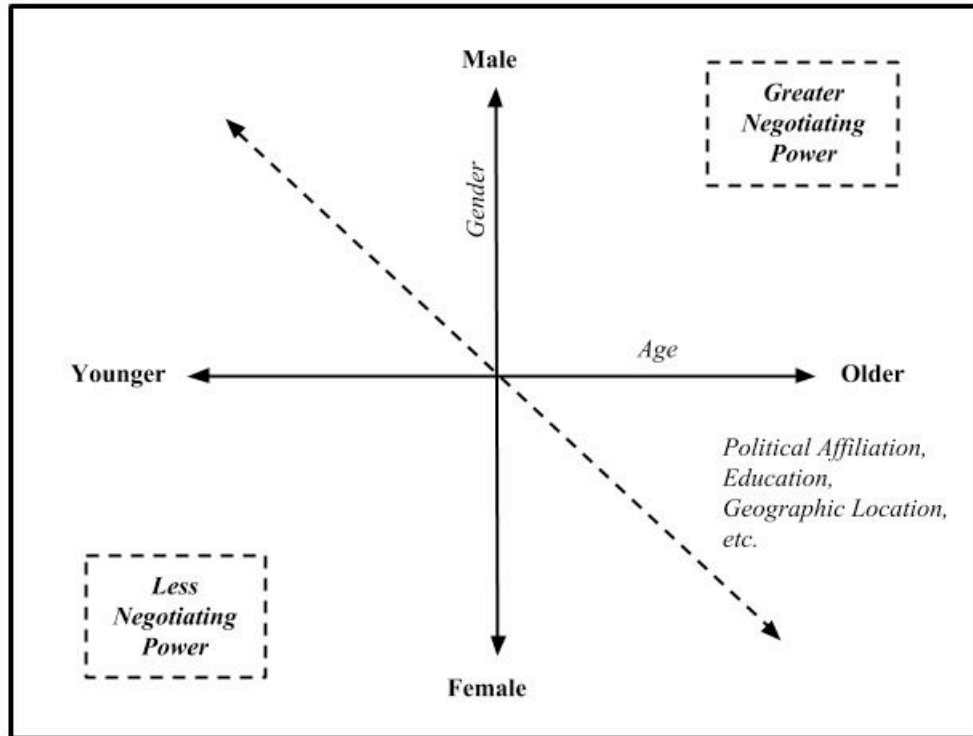


Figure 3: Axes of Identity Creation within the Dhakkan Slum

Development projects that rely upon engaging communities through incentivization must be cognizant of how slum-dwellers interact with these axes in the process of identity creation. For, incentivization by its very nature is built upon perceived preferences that differ according to one's relative position on these axes. Because of the high degree of complexity characterizing slum power networks, often slum-dwellers may be uncertain as to where, precisely they fall on the axes on any given time. This can prompt micro-level personal clashes which, depending on slum-dwellers' relative location in the power network can impede their ability to access water or interact with the necessary actors or, in the case of more elevated power-holders, impact the capacity of other slum-dwellers to acquire resources for themselves. Uncertainty surrounding one's relative social and political positioning, either within the context of the



larger power dynamics of Figure 2 or the more individualized signification of Figure 3, represents a significant source of stress for all slum-dwellers. Successful development therefore requires a reckoning with the fluidity inherent in the process of navigating one's position. Because of the constraints of this study, I focus on gender as a single dimension of this identity creation process in order to illustrate its relationship with the slum's power network and larger implications for development.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Gender Construction in the Dhakkan Slum and Implications for Development

In order to best understand the network of power operating in urban slums and the impact of this power dynamic on water resource acquisition and development projects, it is useful to center the analysis on a single dimension of the slum power identification process: gender. In discussing gender in the developing world, it is easy to fall back on facile assumptions about the respective roles of men and women. In reality, even in the developing context, gender is a contested subject, established and then reiterated within the context of power negotiations. I begin by contextualizing gender within the larger Bangladeshi cultural context. I then analyze how practices surrounding water acquisition in the slums interact with and inform these larger cultural structures.

#### *Gender in Bangladeshi Culture*

##### *Purdah*

*Purdah* (literally translated as “curtain”) represents one of the more significant manifestations of gender dynamics in Bangladeshi culture. *Purdah* refers to the wide variety of norms and practices culturally constructed to preserve a woman’s honor. Bangladeshi women practice *purdah* in a variety of ways, including remaining indoors during certain hours of the day, taking separate paths than those used by men, wearing a veil, or wearing a burka (Shehabuddin 2002, 227). The manner in which a woman

observes *purdah* is greatly influenced by the social class to which she belongs; women belonging to the poorest socioeconomic brackets in general only observe *purdah* abstractly. For, the practical exigencies of poor women's lives prevent them from remaining indoor all day or from purchasing the specific cloth required for the construction of the burka—two of the most common practices associated with *purdah*. As such, in traditional Bangladeshi society, a closer observance of *purdah* is associated with greater wealth and social standing (Shehabuddin 2002, 227).

This is not to imply that poor women do not value *purdah* or that they do not aspire to fulfill its demands. To the contrary, the construction of gender identity for the typical Bangladeshi woman rests heavily on the preservation of the spirit of *purdah* (Shehabuddin 2002, 227). Within the context of Dhakkan slums, a woman's observance of *purdah* can represent a symbolic act of self-identification—an assertion of her and her household's situation within the slum community's larger power network. Associated with this idea is that of the *ghare* “inside” versus *baire* “outside” worlds inhabited by women and men, respectively (Goetz 2001, 61). The *ghare / baire* divide represents a duality of gender roles whose clear bifurcation has been blurred in the transition from traditional agrarian settings to the urban slum context. Within the exigencies of the slum context, women and men declare their gender identities in terms of where they fall on the spectrum of observance / dis-observance of the boundaries of *ghare* and *baire*.

As is true of other aspects of Bangladeshi society, the practice of *purdah* and its cultural role in the construction of gender identities is changing in tandem with the spread of Western influence and increasing urbanization. Urban women largely practice *purdah* in a far more limited sense than their rural counterparts (Naved 2005, 198). The more

limited practice of *purdah* in the context of Dhaka's urban slums does not, however, indicate greater urban tolerance or progress. Rather, slum-dwelling women are constrained in their ability to fulfill *purdah* by the increased demands on their time associated with the growing prevalence of alternative livelihood strategies requiring income generation outside of the home. Within the slum context, therefore, women's observance or non-observance of *purdah* does not necessarily correlate with her preferences or, for that matter, with the overall cultural expectations of her slum community, which is far more likely to mirror village traditionalism than the Western progressivism found in Dhaka's wealthier districts. Furthermore, much like the question of water access discussed in Chapter Two, observance of *purdah* falls upon a spectrum whose range is antithetical to oppositional binary construction.

### *Honor and Shame*

It is significant to note that while the Western observer may perceive *purdah* as a pure manifestation of women's low status in Bangladesh's power hierarchies, the women in question (and the men in their lives) generally do not see their status in these terms. Rather, the traditional Bangladeshi understands *purdah* and associated cultural practices in terms of the honor of the individuals concerned (Karim 2014, 204). Because women are considered the primary "custodians" of honor in a household, brothers, fathers, and sons are primarily shamed through their sisters, wives, and mothers (Karim 2014, 204). Community leaders frequently invoke honor as a justification for *purdah* as well as for other practices that NGOs might deem disempowering for women: "our women do not do that because we have honor" is the common refrain (Male Bangladeshi villager, qtd.

Karim 2014, 198). Traditionally, kinships ties represent the most significant source of obligation and thus contested claims to honor in Bangladeshi culture. As a result, kinship ties play an outsize role in the process of gendered identity creation in the slum context. For, whereas Bangladeshi men generally define themselves in terms of their occupation (a label that within the slum context connotes a great deal about a man's relative power within his community), Bangladeshi women linguistically identify themselves first in their relation to men (as wife, mother, sister, etc.) (Ruback et al. 2002, 100).

Within the Bangladeshi context, honor is fundamentally gendered in nature. Men can accumulate honor, enhancing their masculinity and social status by, for example, successfully securing their household's livelihood. Women, on the other hand, are able only to accumulate shame (Karim 2014, 204). This has profound implications for Dhaka's slums, where honor represents the power network's social currency. The accumulation of honor both produces and reflects the accumulation of power, whereas shame is associated with the loss of power. Within the Bangladeshi context, the terms "honor" and "shame" do not bear any relation to an individual's sense of these emotion, but rather signify the external community's interpretation and imposition of these experiences upon the individual. For slum-dwellers attempting to carve out their livelihoods in the context of the Dhakkan slum, honor thus represents a form of exchange whose significance cannot be overstated. Because these slum environments lack both stability and capital, a slum-dweller's ability to acquire and retain honor thus can outweigh even money in terms of its significance for the creation of power and power networks.

However, whereas for a male slum-dweller, the fulfillment of masculine cultural norms rests on his ability to accumulate honor, the female slum-dweller's primary means of fulfilling her gendered role and thus maximizing her limited claims to power involves successfully avoiding the accumulation of shame. In attempting to elude shame in all of its forms, women must painstakingly maneuver a potentially treacherous social landscape.

#### *Micro-Level Power Contestation*

Honor and the traditions surrounding it influence Bangladeshi women's marriages and their household status. In Dhaka's slums, the cultural and political leaders described in Chapter Four retain their hold on power by reinforcing historical micro-level age, class, and gender-oriented hierarchical relationships (Goetz 2001, 47). These fields of micro-dominance are reinforced by both overt and subtle cultural traditions. For example, Bangladeshi women are expected to marry older men; the average Bangladeshi bride is ten years younger than her groom. Sheer statistical probability makes it likely that the woman will outlive her husband, meaning that she must then confront life as a widow (Goetz 2001, 48). In this culturally reinforced tradition, women's power is compromised twice: first in her subordination as a younger marital partner and second in her ultimate movement into widowhood—the most socially vulnerable position within the Dhakkan slum. Conversely, a slum-dwelling man's power is heightened by his demonstrated ability to marry and dominate a young wife. Therefore it is perhaps unsurprising that in urban Bangladesh, a woman's relative youth at the time of her

marriage is the single most important factor in determining whether she will encounter domestic violence in her marriage (Naved 2005, 298).

The culture of Bangladesh— and Dhaka in particular—is undergoing rapid and uneven changes along a number of social and economic trajectories. The transience and insecurity of the slum context heightens the social tension associated with these cultural changes. In attempting to accumulate honor and avoid shame, slum-dwellers must navigate the contradictions. Already, the practical exigencies of living in slum environments are changing the nature of this process, with implications for gender and identity creation.

#### *Gender, Water Acquisition, and Implications for Development*

Because of the transience and insecurity of Bangladesh's urban slums, the respective roles and identities of men and women are subject to fluctuate in response to changing power environments. For, in slums the gendered responsibilities of Bangladeshi men (such as providing adequate sanitation for their wives) and the gendered responsibilities of Bangladeshi women (obtaining clean drinking water for their families, observing *purdah*) are compromised by the specific exigencies inherent in living in a slum. NGOs attempting to design water development projects within the context of urban slums must therefore recognize not only the complex power network of which gender is a single factor, but also the reality that people's actions (or inaction) in regards to water may not be in accord with their felt preferences. In other words, living in a slum may force a slum-dweller to compromise many of the practices with which her or she

would otherwise assert his or her identity, including preferred methods of water resource acquisition.

For, accessing water within the slum context depends not only on one's ability to successfully negotiate political power networks, but also on one's ability to self-identify within culturally founded gender-constructs. Sultana describes this phenomenon:

In understanding how people access water, it is important to note that decisions are not just based on some rational mechanism that exists a priori, but rather in a negotiated reality that involves multiple claims, identities, relations, and emotions... Processes and practices in nature–society relations are found to be not only regulated by rules, norms and customs, but also negotiated through constructions of gender, embodiments, and emotions, producing variegated emotional geographies of nature/water. (Sultana 2011, 166)

It is crucial to note that there is nothing passive about the act of “negotiation” associated with water acquisition in the slums. In development discourses, negotiation is often used with normatively positive connotations, evoking as it does a sense of a community's cooperative management of its shared resources. In reality, the act of negotiation is a direct product and producer of a slum's power networks at all levels formality and informality. In rural areas, often the act of negotiation is a one-time occurrence, conducted with authorities whose power has been established and entrenched for generations; consequently NGOs can establish their participatory resource management schemes in the context of pre-existing and universally accepted power-dynamics. In contrast, power negotiation in the slum context is not an event but an ongoing process, iterated and reiterated through shifting individual self-identifications associated with gender construction within a power network built upon unstable political foundations.

In the slum environment, a woman's ability to self-identify and therefore situate herself within the power network is compromised by the fact that the exigencies of life in



the slum prevent her from performing the roles by which Bangladeshi women traditionally augment their status in the rural context. It is from this automatically weaker negotiating position that women must find ways of acquiring resources for their households—a process that often requires trade-offs. For example, a household may decide that it is in a woman's best interests to work towards achieving social harmony and avoiding conflict by *not* participating in an NGO's participatory management project, even when participation in said project may ease the woman's water-related burdens (Cleaver 2012, 51). This active non-participation may or may not fit in with a woman's actual preferences. Because the gendered identity of Bangladeshi women is so bound up in their capacity to provide for their families, this decision surrounding participation could in fact represent a forced subversion of how a woman would prefer to fulfill her understood femininity. Thus the act of strategically determining how to best negotiate one's position within the slum power network is a decision with implications both for a household's relative resource access and for gender identities within the household unit and the larger social context.

One of the greatest challenges facing NGOs attempting to implement participatory water management programs in the Dhakkan slum context concerns how they might best incentivize community participation—a challenge that is particularly difficult in light of the trade-offs that slum-dwellers must make in order to effectively navigate slum power networks and to maximize resource acquisition while minimizing costs to themselves and to their household. For women Dhakkan slum-dwellers, the value of time or privacy may equal or exceed the value of money. However, in the slum context, time and privacy can be mutually exclusive commodities. Consider the

following scenario: a woman forgoes the opportunity to save time by obtaining her household's water at an access point closer to her home, travelling instead to a farther location. This seems counterintuitive until one observes that the closer access point is used by a far greater number of slum-dwellers, resulting in longer queues and thus greater time spent waiting under the scrutiny of the public eye. In travelling to a more distant location, therefore, the woman chooses to trade time and convenience in favor of greater privacy. While some gendered generalities can be made surrounding slum-dwellers' incentivization to participate in participatory water management, often this balancing of preferences and environmental exigencies varies by household and individual. However, by better understanding the trade-offs that women make in deciding whether and to what to degree to participate in water management, NGOs can more effectively serve slum communities.

It should be noted that incentivizing women to participate in water resource management is not an automatic means of empowerment, even within the confines of the NGO's participatory water resource management committee. For, once a woman has joined a water management committee, she is not somehow freed of gendered familial and societal expectations. As revealed in the earlier section of this chapter, Bangladeshi women culturally are expected to minimize their selves by becoming less seen, less heard, less obtrusive. NGOs, on the other hand, often seek to respond to international donor pressure by *maximizing* women's presence. These contradictory pressures can lead to what Sultana terms "participatory exclusions" whereby women are present in management groups but are constrained from meaningfully participating by any number of factors, including, "rules of entry, social norms of women's behaviour and actions (e.g.

speaking in a public forum, gender division of labor), social perceptions of women's abilities, entrenched territorial claims by men, personal endowments and attributes of women (e.g. education), and household endowments and attributes (e.g. class)" (Sultana 2008, 350).

The exclusionary factors Sultana lists are not binary in nature (i.e. one's household endowments will not lead to exclusion or inclusion), but rather, represent the myriad of factors that can influence one's relative power within the participatory water management committee structure. In Bangladesh, as in much of the developing world, the two most prominent determinants of one's negotiating power (both in and out of the committee context), are age and gender. However, as Figure 3 reflects, in Dhakkan slums, other factors such as political affiliation, education, and geographic location (as in relative proximity to a given water access point) impact one's relative positioning in the power network. These factors' influence on slum dweller's situation within their community's power network is mirrored by their significance within the context of the participatory resource management committee. Thus even water acquisition facilitated by NGO development initiatives can underline rather than subvert deep power-oriented inequities by conflating a slum-dweller's physical presence in participation projects with his or her decision-making power.

At all levels of societal relations in Bangladesh, the power to make decisions is strongly associated with masculinity. Men are responsible for carrying out the "macro-level" power negotiations (with the *bikrētā* or *salish*), thereby identifying and securing their position within the power network. The enforcement of these negotiated power relationships is associated with masculinity as well, in the form of the *mastaans*. The

*mastaans*' use of physical force and financial extortion firmly entrenches the slum community's male power-holders as the subjects creating and reiterating the power nexus, while women, by contrast, are left to navigate the grooves of the maze that the male leaders of the community have created. Because within Dhakkan slums there exists such a clear differentiation between power creators (men) and power navigators (women), participatory resource management projects designed without any explicitly recognized decision-making power for women will result in women bearing greater burdens of water management tasks without corresponding increases in their empowerment as individuals.

However, Dhakkan slum-dwelling women are far from powerless—they have, after all, proven highly successful in this act of navigating and achieving water access in the context of the extremely limiting slum environment. Because many NGOs espouse interest in participatory water management as a vehicle of “empowerment for women,” it must be established in what form, precisely, a woman's power will be augmented by her participation in water management. In this, it is useful to distinguish, as Ivens does, between practical benefits and genuine empowerment (Ivens 2008, 64). While the practical benefits of improved water access (which include physical security, safety, health, and time) are relatively straightforward, genuine empowerment is more difficult to achieve and to measure. For, empowerment in the slum context is not only highly individualized: it is also contingent upon the successful realization of practical benefits. Studies focused specifically on whether or not women have been “empowered” by participating in resource management have thus far been inconclusive; indeed, Cleaver found that even development initiatives that appear to empower women can easily fall

into the trap of effectively reinforcing women's traditional role as resource provider (Cleaver 1998, 354).

Ultimately, while slum-dwelling women's participation in resource management can offer them alternative avenues for negotiating power on behalf of their families, their act of participation in and of itself is not one of intrinsic empowerment. Moreover, it must be noted that often slum-dwelling women themselves are far more interested in the practical benefits associated with improved water resource management than in abstract visions of empowerment. Therefore development planners encounter yet another conundrum: should NGOs attempt to empower even those who are disinterested in empowerment or, more accurately, whose access to resources depends on their continued ability to operate within existing societal power networks?

In attempting to navigate this and other paradoxes associated with development in the urban slum context, NGOs encounter the dual intractability and instability of the slum's power network. For those living within this power structure, the act of identity creation is crucial to asserting one's position of power relative to one's peers. And of all axes of identity creation for slum-dwellers, gender is perhaps the most contested as communities attempt to apply traditional, rural gender norms to the actions of men and women in the slum context. NGO development in slums cannot be considered in isolation from these processes from their association with traditional constructions of honor and shame.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Concluding Recommendations

In this wide-ranging investigation into the issues associated with water infrastructure development in the slums of Dhaka, Bangladesh, I have demonstrated how the success or failure of a given development project lies in the power dynamics underlying slum-dwellers' interpersonal relationships. I began by identifying the water-related challenges and deprivations faced by slum-dwellers, showing how even questions of deprivation and access embody far greater complexity than traditionally assumed within development circles. This spectrum of water-related needs and exigencies mirrors the process of translating traditional norms and behaviors to the urban slum context in the sense that slum-dwelling women and men encounter both water and power as purveyors of complexity and negotiation

As the subsequent examination of the contemporary strategies pursued by the government of Bangladesh and NGOs to solve these deprivations revealed, the process of developing sustainable and actionable water access projects is therefore incredibly challenging within the context of the exigencies associated with living in an urban slum. Of all the strategies currently being pursued by development bodies, the participatory resource management model appears the most promising. However, because this model was developed in rural contexts, its applicability to the urban slum requires further investigation. Regardless of the strategic approach taken to improve water resource

access in the slum context, I argue that development planners must accurately conceptualize the social power dynamics of a given setting before their development projects can hope to achieve any measure of success. To this end, I dove into the power network of the Dhakkan slum, both from a macro perspective (examining the roles of the primary power-holders) and from a micro perspective (interrogating the process of identity creation as it relates to gender). On this latter point, employing gender as a vector of study revealed the degree to which slum-dwellers, in navigating power structures characterized by sudden shifts and unseen social dynamics rely upon traditional methods of identity creation to solidify their expression of their selves and their relative location within the power network.

While this research focused primarily on the situation of slum-dwellers in Dhaka, Bangladesh, I argue that certain lessons can be scaled up to other NGOs and development bodies. To this end I propose seven recommendations pertaining to development planning in the context of the urban slum.

Before embarking on development in an urban slum, project designers should:

1. Seek to understand the preferences of slum-dwellers as pertains to the given development project, while understanding that these preferences are formed within a complex social environment that may require trade-offs;
2. Emphasize partnerships with government bodies in the knowledge that doing so enhances slum-dwellers' legitimacy and thus capacity to ultimately claim rights for themselves within a legal framework;
3. Design participation-oriented programs with the explicit intention of fulfilling slum-dwellers' stated aims and differentiating practical benefits from empowerment;

4. Identify primary motivations for beginning operations within the slum context and attempt to duly focus all efforts with specificity around those motivations recognizing, again, that this may require trade-offs;
5. Fully investigate and understand the power network of a given slum community, including the primary power-holders, the main currencies of power (political influence, honor, etc.), and points of greatest vulnerability to change (such as, for example, political party committees);
6. Pursue a nuanced understanding of gender that goes beyond oppositional dualities to instead encompass the complexity of the power networks and cultural contexts in which gender relations are determined;
7. Plan for long-term community investment in order to accumulate the social currency required for meaningful involvement in the slum context.

Ultimately, it is only by truly understanding the nuances of power creation and identity formation in a given community that external development can hope to facilitate meaningful and sustainable long-term improvements in people's quality of life.



## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

### Bengali Terms

*Baire* - Outside

*Bari* - Rural cluster of houses in a Bangladeshi village

*Bepurdah* - To be in violation of *purdah*

*Bikrētā* - Vendors

*Fatwa* - Religious proclamation, typically issued by a Mullah

*Jatiyo Sangshad* - Bangladesh's National Parliament

*Ghare* - Inside

*Hadith* - The words of the Prophet

*Mastaan* - Strongman

*Mullah* - Local Islamic religious leaders

*Pak* - The degree of cleanliness required for worship

*Poy poriskar* - Individualized form of cleanliness above religious requirements

*Purdah* - Curtain

*Tel-shaban* - A man's ability to provide sanitation options to his wife

*Salish* - Political party committee (plural form: *salishi*)

*Samity* - Village organizations

*Sunat* - Culturally acknowledged correct way of living

*Wazu (ozu)* - The practice of cleansing oneself in order to achieve *pak* for one's prayers

## APPENDIX B

### Acronyms

AL - Awami League

BARD - Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development

BNP - Bangladesh National Party

BRAC - Does not represent an acronym (formerly stood for the Bangladesh Rehabilitation Assistance Committee then the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee)

CBO - Community-Based Organization

DCC - Dhaka City Corporation

DSK - Dushtha Shasthya Kendra

DWASA - Dhaka Water and Sanitation Authority

IMF - International Monetary Fund

MLGRD - Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives

MP - Member of Parliament

NGO - Non-Governmental Organization

UN - United Nations

UN-HABITAT - United Nations Human Settlement Program

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