



Pavement dwellers' sanitation activities – visible but ignored

Deepa Joshi and Joy Morgan

Pavement dwellers are often invisible to government, development partners and researchers, even though they comprise 2 per cent of the urban population and their entire lives are on full display to passers-by every day. Shelter and security, convenience and privacy are considered essential for all, yet even these are lacking for the poorest of the urban poor.

Much research has been conducted on slum dwellers, yet only a few studies¹ focus on those who live on the streets. In some countries (e.g. Bangladesh), there is official recognition of the homeless but no programmes, either official or non-governmental, that cater to this group. All their urban poverty programmes focus on those living in slum settlements. In other countries (e.g. India), the homeless are recognized by the government, and so there are programmes for this group as well as for slum dwellers. In India there is a Night Shelter programme. In both countries, however, the political will is to discourage the homeless, who are commonly considered to be social threats and economic parasites.

In India, a study by ActionAid found that those living on the pavements try as much as others to find a permanent place to stay. Night after night, the same respondents cooked and ate at the same places, bathed at the same places, slept at the same places — unless forced to move on. This research was critical in persuading the Election Commission (1999-2000) to recognize that all numbered lamp-posts could be used as a valid address for the pavement-dwellers, who could then be eligible for voters' identity cards (the basic resident identity necessary for all civic functions).

How people arrive on the streets

Economically poorer and socially more vulnerable than other urban poor



Collecting water during the rainy season



A broken handpump in Mirpur, Dhaka, Bangladesh

groups (see Box 1), pavement-dwellers are a socially diverse group including children living on their own, the helpless aged and destitute, disabled, women and men of all ages, although the majority are usually men. Children are very vulnerable, and young boys often risk molestation as much as girls and women.

Migration is not only caused by poverty. Social trauma and emotional hurt has often resulted in individuals making hasty decisions to migrate. This means that pavement dwellers are often more emotionally vulnerable.

Many assume that pavement-dwellers are vagrant in nature and that shelter and a roof above one's head is



Children playing by a pond in Dhaka, Bangladesh



Bedding often consists of newspaper and cardboard.

possible for anyone that desires to have one. The general public often believes that pavement-dwellers are ‘vagrants’, beggars, thieves and drug-addicts (see Box 2). This mindset is a key constraint to helping pavement-dwellers. Research and census data show that more than 90 per cent of pavement-dwellers work.

Those who do not, are mostly the elderly, destitute and children, who survive by begging.² Many of the street dwellers incur expenses for their regular pavement home, such as bribes to brokers for ‘helping’ them stay on the streets.

Pavement dwellers’ sanitation

Life for the pavement dwellers is very tough. Water and sanitation needs and preferences vary with gender and age. For young boys engaged in begging, they make more money if they stay dirty, and so they make little effort to bathe and clean themselves. Rag-pickers don’t see the need for cleaning every day, as they will soon be filthy again. Privacy for defecation is not an issue, as there is reasonable cultural acceptance of masculine exposure. Young boys often defecate, urinate and even bathe in the open.

The needs of adolescent boys

By contrast, adolescent boys are very particular about ‘looking clean’ and ‘smelling good’. The pressure to belong to society, and at least look like other adolescent males, is high. Defecating, urinating or even bathing on the streets are not preferred options for them. Given that most of these older boys aspire to work as servers in cafes, they

make efforts to look clean and presentable. They make substantial investments to use public latrines and bathing facilities, to buy toothpaste (not brushes), soap and shampoo, and to launder their clothes.

Adolescent girls

Girls are rarely found living alone on the streets. They are usually paired with young or adult men, who offer masculine security in return for emotional or sexual favours as ‘husbands’. However, whether living alone or with others, the pressures of living on the streets are much higher for these adolescent girls. If young, there is the burden of working, coupled with looking after other siblings and keeping ‘home’ on the pavements. For the adolescent, looking clean helps secure male attention and the universally assumed male ‘support’.

In South India some adolescent girls who were earlier inhabitants of the pavements now live in a government-supported social welfare centre. The situation at the hostel was similar to life on the streets. The premises were filthy and appeared not to have been cleaned for a long time. There was a single toilet and bathroom for the nearly 200 girls and that too without a regular supply of water. The very young girls reported having a bath only once in one or two weeks. They mentioned that there is no provision of hot water (bathing with hot water is the cultural norm in South India). The older girls mentioned the problems they were having with menstrual hygiene.

‘We wash the menstrual cloths and all of us dry them on the terrace. But the cloths are in short supply and

often they are interchanged or stolen.’

The hostel was supervised by one female cook and a male watchman. It was reported by several girls that the watchman abuses them sexually, but there is no one to report him to. ‘At least, the hostel provides shelter and food.’

Box 1. The first night on the street

A family of four (husband, wife and two young sons) were spending their first night on the pavement, near the stadium. The family had taken a long and hard decision to migrate because poverty had increased as a result of various circumstances, starting with land erosion by the river, followed by loss of employment. When they lost all hope of living and surviving in the village, they packed what they felt was required and left for Dhaka. The bus driver demanded that all ‘lumpy’ luggage was stored on the roof of the bus. In the morning, the family could not find their bag of clothes, utensils and bedding. It had either fallen off or had been stolen. No compensation was available. On arriving in Dhaka, they stayed with the man’s younger brother and his family, who live in a slum.

‘Insha’Allah, we were well looked after for a few days. But their house is small and their resources meagre. We knew we were becoming a burden. This is our first night on the pavement. We have bought and eaten some food. The bedding consists of newspapers and old cardboard sheets begged from shops. The problem is with clothing — how will we bathe and wash — since we only have the clothes we are wearing?’

Box 2. Misconceptions

'Give them a proper house and they'll turn round and sell it, pocket the money and be back on the street the following week. It's their chosen lifestyle. It's because they don't have any proper education. Unless there is compulsory education for everyone, they'll never learn. They are incapable of understanding what a better standard of living entails!'

'These people have a wonderful standard of living. They have no overheads, no housing costs, no utility costs. They live from day to day. They beg or they work and earn just what they need to feed themselves. Why should they spend a couple of thousand rupees a month on a small apartment in some run-down part of the city, when they can live here for free in a good neighbourhood? They're never going to change!'

Public opinion on pavement-dwellers in India.³

The adolescent girls living on the streets in Hyderabad said that they either use the railway tracks very early in the morning or the toilet complexes by paying Rs2 to ease themselves. Having a bath costs Rs5 to Rs6 and washing clothes costs a further Rs10. Most girls cannot afford these payments regularly and they usually restrict their bathing and cleaning to the time of their monthly menstrual cycle. Coping with menstrual hygiene is another challenging task. Most of the girls are aware of sanitary towels sold in the shops, but there is simply no money to buy these. It is almost impossible to wash and re-use cloths because of the lack of washing places and places to dry and store them (rather than the lack of water to wash them). Most reported using pieces of old cloth or garments they found on the streets instead, which they throw away after use.

Adult men and women

Turning to adult men and women, personal sanitation needs are for defecation, bathing and washing clothes. For all these activities, convenience, safety and privacy is desired by both women and men, but while men can choose to bathe, defecate and urinate in public, women experience a much greater discomfort in doing so, given the conditioning that this behaviour is not socially acceptable.

The lack of latrines or the inappropriateness of available spaces leads to countless stories of women being unable to perform their basic biological functions, except under the cover of darkness or at early dawn, when most people are asleep. This plays havoc with their bodies. In addition to their own personal hygiene needs, which include maintaining menstrual hygiene, women also assist in meeting the sanitation needs of men, children and the elderly and for keeping clean a certain area of the immediate 'home' environment.

As the majority group amongst pavement dwellers, and perhaps the least vulnerable, life is still not easy for adult men living on the streets. This study indicates that even the slum poor appear to be privileged in comparison to the non-slum poor. Regardless of whether they live in Bangladesh, India or Kenya, the urban poor living on the streets have not been provided with sanitation services. In most places this category of the urban poor is largely 'invisible' to urban service providers. Instead they struggle to make their own arrangements. In Dhaka, the main option for adults is to use toilets at work places or at public institutions (mosques, boarding houses, transport terminals, stadiums and *Ansar* (local police) camps and sports clubs) because there is a lack of other public toilets.

Shaheen, a rickshaw driver, is well-aware of the sanitation privileges available to him as a young man.

'We can bathe wherever we find water and urinate anywhere along the roadsides. We find access to public latrines easier, given the friendships we develop with the guards, caretakers or even the players at the clubs. Women living on the pavement often carry a mat to make a shield around themselves if they need to defecate or urinate in the open. They go together in groups at night to use the disused dilapidated latrine. They bathe at the public taps when we (men) are not around or shield the space with mats and sheets. When I marry, my wife will not live with me on the pavement. I will try to find a house or else keep her in the village.'

'Pay and use' toilets

On the streets in India, 'pay and use' privately owned and operated toilets (commonly known as *Sulabh Shauchalayas*) are widely available for



Social trauma and emotional hurt often cause individuals to leave their villages and end up living on the pavement in the city.

Rs1 for using the toilet and Rs5 for taking a bath (£1=80 rupees at the time of writing). However, these are either inappropriate or unaffordable for daily and regular use.

'When I can afford to pay, early in the morning I wait patiently in the long queue in front of the toilet. If I don't have the money, I have to defecate in the open,' says Bhuri, a 38-year-old woman who lives behind Jama Masjid mosque with her husband and two children. She earns her livelihood by paying telephone bills for the shopkeepers. As in Bangladesh, middle-aged married women like Bhuri don't hesitate

Box 3. Sanitation options

Fifty-five-year-old Marium is widowed and lives with her son and daughter-in-law on the pavement at the back of a multi-storied building in a commercial area of Motijheel in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

She does not see defecation as their major problem. She uses the toilets of the local sports clubs early in the morning and sometimes late at night. 'I am rarely refused access to the toilets by the caretakers. They are annoyed with me, but say that they would rather let me use the toilet than be disturbed by my constant begging'. Alternatively the residents also use open drains. My small grandsons go to the disused, dilapidated latrine of a club, where access is more or less unrestricted.'

Some small children defecate on paper, which is then folded up and thrown away by the parents. For this, they might be scolded and forced to clean up, by shopkeepers or the guards of the buildings. Marium's young daughter-in-law uses the latrine, bathes and washes her clothes at her work place, and so completely avoids the use of public toilets.

to use public spaces. However, young adolescent girls report that, 'public toilets are not safe places to visit. It is easy to molest a woman in the toilet as she can be caught in a very vulnerable position.' They reported that toilet complexes are also used as places for willing sex or sometimes to force women into sex.

More inclusive policies needed

In the prevailing policy environment, great emphasis is attached to transferring state responsibility for delivering basic services to 'democratically' established local community institutions, which are expected to take over management and financial responsibility. Little thought appears to have been given to whether participation in such bodies is possible for large groups of the urban poor, who not only live in extreme poverty but are also largely unrecognized or termed illegal by most governments. Encouraging participation without addressing 'illegal identities' and the needs of those without housing or land, and without recognizing the different needs of gender, caste, age and disability reinforces inequality.

About the authors

Deepa Joshi was the principal researcher for this study, with Fouzia Mannan and Kavitha Potturi, and she currently works on gender, diversity and livelihood issues at the International Water Management Institute, Colombo. Joy Morgan has worked in the water, sanitation and hygiene sector since 1982; she is now a freelance consultant based in the UK. This work is part of the research findings from a DFID-supported study on poverty, gender and sanitation in India, Bangladesh and Kenya reported more fully at www.eng4dev.soton.ac.uk/research

References

- 1 Begum, A. (1999) *Destination Dhaka: Urban migration - expectations and reality*. Vedams Books (P) Ltd, New Delhi.
- 2 Mennon, S. (2001), *Workers who shelter on the pavement*. Labour Files 7 (6-7), pp5-13.
- 3 Hollick, J.C. (2000) *Apna Street*. www.ibaradio.org/India/apna/apna.htm. Accessed 2005

webwatch

Water and Education

- **World Bank Tool Kit on Hygiene, Sanitation and Water in Schools**
The Tool Kit is a useful resource describing the basic principles behind hygiene, sanitation and water provision in schools, how to carry out a sector assessment and details about each stage of the project cycle. It includes a section on 'Going to Scale', offering guidance on how to provide basic sustainable water, sanitation and handwashing facilities in every school.
<http://www.schoolsanitation.org/BasicPrinciples/Going-to-Scale.html>
- **The Joy of Learning: Participatory lesson plans on hygiene, sanitation, water, health and the environment**
This guide is a useful addition to the school curriculum aimed at children aged 2 to 14, providing participatory learning activities on hygiene and sanitation. Lesson plans cover the three areas of hygiene (including personal and food hygiene), sanitation and water, with information sheets for planning, implementing and evaluating participatory learning activities, adjusting each activity to local conditions and cultures, using easily available, affordable materials.
http://www.irc.nl/content/download/22392/260548/file/TP45_JoyOfLearning.pdf
- **Life skills-based hygiene education**
A guidance document on concepts, development and experiences with life skills-based hygiene education in school sanitation and hygiene education programmes, focusing on the 6–14 age group. The three sections offer a general introduction to life skills-based hygiene education; a general overview of the content of life skills-based hygiene education; and a set of examples of lesson plans. The main target groups are policy and decision makers, international organizations and non-governmental institutions with links to school sanitation and hygiene education programmes.
http://www.irc.nl/content/download/11504/168690/file/life_skills.pdf
- **CARE Bangladesh: The Sanitation and Family Education (SAFE) Project**
The SAFE project used effective hygiene education outreach strategies to promote behaviour change and a behaviour-based monitoring system. Key to its success was an incremental approach targeting priority behaviours with locally appropriate interventions and community participation in programme design, outreach, monitoring and evaluation.
<http://www.care.org/careswork/whatwedo/health/casestudies/bangladesh/eng.asp>
- **UN-HABITAT Human Value Water Sanitation and Hygiene Education Programme**
UN-HABITAT is implementing the Human Value Water Sanitation and Hygiene Education Programme as a component of the Water for African Cities Phase II Programme in Côte d'Ivoire. The programme is promoted through the curriculum, using resource materials and teacher training, as well as capacity development of utilities for the provision of sustainable school and community water and sanitation services.
<http://www.unhabitat.org/content.asp?cid=3254&catid=270&typeid=13&subMenuId=0>
- **SSHE School Sanitation and Hygiene and WASH programmes**
For the past decade, UNICEF country programmes have included school sanitation and hygiene education as an integral part. Projects have been carried out that focus on promoting life skills, a healthy and safe school environment and outreach to families and communities. The IRC SSHE webpages are an essential resource, with details of projects and case studies, a range of publications including tools, manuals and a newsletter.
<http://www.irc.nl/sshe>

Compiled by Julie Fisher, Water, Engineering and Development Centre, UK for WELL. WELL is a resource centre network providing access to information and support in water, sanitation and environmental health for the Department for International Development (DFID) of the British Government.