

Field work practice in urban slums: Issues and challenges in a megapolis of India

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1 Introduction

Since the dawn of social work as a professional practice, attention has been paid to the needs of people. Slums and low socio-economic neighborhoods by virtue of being disadvantaged have received particular focus. Slums exist in almost every geographical location but they were initially found in urban areas which were a hub of industrial activities and its inhabitants were largely migrants from rural areas in search of employment opportunities and better living standards. Instead, the seekers of better pastures are trapped in a vicious circle of underserved wants and poor living conditions. The social work profession has never ignored disadvantaged areas comprising of slums from their professional practice known as fieldwork.

2 Field work practice

Fieldwork is an inbuilt aspect of professional social work education that provides opportunities to the learner to know the ground realities and develop interventions accordingly. Through fieldwork, social work students learn to apply the theoretical content covered in the classroom to real-life situations for becoming a professional social worker. Shardlow and Doel, pp 3 (as cited by Dhemba, 2012) observed it as, “the two contexts for learning about social work practice, class and fieldwork need to be integrated, complementary and mutually consistent. They further point out that the challenge for student and agency supervisors, is to make this a reality”. In a community and slum setting, students get a direct opportunity to know and deal with real-life situations.

Fieldwork has been viewed by Hamilton and Else, pp 2 (as cited by Dhemba, 2012) as, “a consciously planned set of experiences occurring in a practice setting designed to move students from their initial level of understanding, skills, and attitudes to levels associated with autonomous social work practice.”

Kaseke, pp 3 (as cited by Dhemba, 2012) observed fieldwork’s definition and characteristics. It is understood as a tool of familiarising students for roles expected to be performed in the future as a social work practitioner. A meaningful fieldwork placement according to him involves understanding and clarity about the social work profession and the manner in which problems are dealt with. Learning, therefore, takes place at intellectual, emotional, and practical levels. Furthermore, fieldwork is not only an opportunity for aligning theoretical knowledge and learning, with the needs of society and the market place but also allows students to take responsibility for addressing people’s problems. Therefore, if handled effectively, fieldwork could become an important tool to respond to topical social development issues.

Fieldwork also develops in students, skills that would enable them to respond appropriately to the needs of clients. They interact with people, realizes the problems and reactions of people, and are also enabled to learn the perception of people towards social workers and their ability to help them. On this path, the technique of observation, responsibly establishing rapport with people, and helping them to cope with their problems enable social work students to acquire skills. Likewise, fieldwork also gives the student exposure and experience on the functioning of social welfare agencies and social welfare provisioning.

Acquainting students with actual social situations and preparing them for professional social work practice is therefore the general purpose of fieldwork. It is an instrument to assimilate students into the profession, to inculcate and absorb in them social work ethics, principles, and values.

3 Community and urban slums

The fieldwork training in social work enables the trainee to identify issues and concerns in a wide variety of practice settings and learn roles and interventions accordingly. One of the settings is the communities through community work. The community has the different understanding for different people and disciplines. Broadly, it can be understood as a communality of people and relationships among them. Communities are the settings for intervention for social workers and represent a valid and meaningful social concept. According to Krausova, 2006, pp 61(as cited by Pradeep and Sathyamurthy, 2017) the term community expresses the following:

- “a category of disadvantaged people – unorganized grouping of people who need help
- a community of interests – organized interest association, that express its interests and work on them
- a service community – organized connection inhabitants of the community, that are able to afford a help with a network of professional organizations
- a municipality – that means a social space, in which are built relations between providers of services and disadvantaged, who are able to establish their interests and support their realizations by an activity/action”

From this view, slums are communities that represent the case of shortcomings and in these settlements, social workers are placed to be familiarized with the notion of community, its issues and develop skills and techniques of professional intervention.

4 Slums in megapolis

Delhi, the capital of the country, a fast-growing megapolis has a population of 167.88 lakh people and half of the people (51.8%) residing are migrants (Delhi Statistical Report 2017). Large numbers of people who migrate to Delhi are not economically sound and not even able to afford the cost of rented accommodation. For them settling down in low socio-economic areas is a doable option. So, a sizeable population accommodates in slums, shanty, and squatter settlements.

Officially the number of slums in Delhi stands out around 750 which includes both big and small slums, housing somewhere 3.5 lakh families (20 lakh people) in them, (Times of India, May 20, 2019). According to Registrar General of India in National Sample Survey, 69th Round survey, 2012 “Slum as a compact settlement of at least 20 households with a collection of poorly built tenements, mostly of temporary nature, crowded usually with inadequate

sanitary and drinking water facilities in unhygienic conditions”. UN-HABITAT, 2006-07 categorized “a slum household is a group of individuals living under the same roof in an urban area who lack one or more of the following: 1. Durable housing of a permanent nature that protects against extreme climate conditions. 2. Sufficient living space which means no more than three people sharing the same room. 3. Easy access to safe water in sufficient amounts at an affordable price. 4. Access to adequate sanitation in the form of a private or public toilet shared by a reasonable number of people. 5. Security of tenure that prevents forced evictions”. Insecure and temporary settlements are therefore slums.

The emergence of slums is closely related to factors like poverty, urbanization, industrialization, migration, high cost of living, and poor housing planning. They are normally unplanned with bare civic amenities like inadequate sanitation, drinking water or systematic garbage collection and disposal facilities, shortage of space inside the houses and no public spaces are typical causalities (UN-Habitat, 2006-07, Liang 2014, National Sample Survey, 69th Round, Government of India, 2015, Mahabir et al, 2016). An area is notified as a slum settlement by the government and is responsible to provide its residents, the rights to the provision of potable water and sanitation.

Slums are hence, underserved communities depicting a picture of poverty but are an important setting for fieldwork practice. The students are placed continuously year on year in different slums and other informal settlements by social work departments of colleges and universities offering professional social work education for observing and planning interventions.

5 Methodology

This section describes the methodological considerations followed for the present paper. An examination has been made of the social situation and social issues and its effect on people living in underserved communities of the capital city of the nation. Specifically, the following have been considered as **objectives**:

1. To examine the social situation of the slum communities existing and thriving in the megapolis of India and its linkage with poverty.
2. To explore the scope of social work interventions and changes through field work practice.
3. To understand the challenges for field work practice.

Research Design: Descriptive research design with qualitative approach has been followed to understand the objectives. **Sample and Time Frame:** Randomly ten case records have been examined of students who were placed in a community setting for one year from the Central University offering postgraduate program in Social Work. The themes identified for the content analysis were: 1. Community profile 2. Demographic Profile 3. Social issues and concerns 4. Interventions through fieldwork practice 5. Challenges for fieldwork practice and 6. Changes through fieldwork practice. All the data and information from the selected records were entered in the MS Excel datasheet and were analyzed according to objectives over two months.

6 Findings

Ten students both male and female were placed in different underserved communities or slums concentrated in the southern part of Delhi such as Madanpur Khadar, Tughlakabad, Indira Vihar, Basti Nizamuddin, and Munirka. All of these are considered low socio-economic areas with basic civic amenities and the majority of people were found to be

engaged in petty employments. Fieldwork practice began with a general understanding of the community as a conglomeration of people living together in a particular geographical location and its residents having access to amenities and services provided by the government and non-government organizations. The findings are discussed below:

6.1 Community profile

All of the communities have been notified by the government as slums, resettlement colonies, or unauthorized slums (Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, Government of India)

Generally, each of the underserved communities was densely populated and divided into various blocks. In some of the settlements, houses were multi-storeyed with permanent structures while others particularly unauthorized settlements had semi-constructed houses with thatched roofs, uncemented walls, and no bathroom and toilet facility. The streets were mostly cut by narrow, paved lanes about four feet across and in many cases five feet, although some of them as narrow as two feet, requiring passers-by to walk sideways between buildings. Small open drains line the lanes of these areas, carrying wastewater to some open sewer from which a constant stench comes.

6.2 Demographic profile

A review of fieldwork case records indicates that demographically residents hail from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Punjab, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Maharashtra, and even from Nepal. Except for one area, where more than ninety percent of the people were Muslims, different religious groups cohabited. Large family size of 6-8 members existed whose adult male members were engaged mostly in an unorganized sector like vendors of fruits and vegetables, plumbers, fitters, small grocery shops, etc. while women mostly worked as domestic helpers in nearby well-off colonies.

6.3 Social issues and concerns

Each of the student spent initial few days in becoming familiarised with issues and concerns of the residents of the communities. Content analysis revealed the following:

- **Lack of sanitation:** In almost all the communities, it was noticed that the sewage system was not proper and waterlogged here and there on the streets. The situation worsens during the rainy season as insanitary conditions become breeding ground for mosquitoes and cause of diseases like dengue and malaria. Further, heaps of garbage were littered outside the houses and in absence of garbage disposal, any barren land becomes the place to dump it. Defecation in open spaces aggravates unsanitary conditions.
- **Related to sanitation is the poor quality of health care services available in these areas.** Public or even quality private health care facilities were not found but besides the non-existence of institutions, attitude towards maintaining a good state of health was half-hearted. To substantiate, many NGOs from time to time organize health camps and in one of the communities, government-run health center was located with medications and routine check-up facility available but, its access by few people indicated a lack of health-seeking behavior. As such most of the women were found to be anemic, suffering from low or high blood pressure, and other health issues.
- **Vaccination and Immunization:** Poor attention towards this health need prominently prevailed in many of the communities, despite many initiatives by local NGOs. Pregnant women were not vaccinated during the antenatal and postnatal period and so

was the case with regard to immunization of newborn children. In some of the houses, male children were vaccinated neglecting girls more to this effect leading to childhood illnesses such as polio, meningitis, mumps, and measles. Another issue that burdens the health was an unwillingness to adopt family planning practices. The concept of a small family not wholeheartedly practiced by couples and in case of unwanted pregnancy, abortion is the most preferred way followed by women.

- **Early marriages and Teen pregnancy:** In some of the communities like Madanpur Khadar, Basti Nizamuddin girls were married at an age of 14 to 17 years which increases the chance of early pregnancy leading to problems such as miscarriage, repeated abortion, preterm birth, and underweight children.
- **Menstrual Hygiene:** During groupwork, female students noticed women and teenage girls lacked information and awareness about menstrual hygiene. Sanitary napkins are not used due to stigma and financial strain allowed them to use old cloth during the menstrual phase. The government schools provided free sanitary napkins to school-going girls but on completing school they revert to older ways.
- **Water Scarcity:** A common problem faced by people in all the communities was non-availability of potable drinking water and water tankers provided by the Delhi Jal Board supplied water on scheduled days only. People lined up in queues with their drums and other storages utensils with frequent clashes for want of maximum water. In some communities, taps were fitted but used by the respective house owner only.
- **Illiteracy and unemployment:** The issues of school drop-out and illiteracy still plague people living in slums and low socio-economic communities. Two main reasons were noticed, first being the migrant status of the people in the community and second, inability to afford educational expenses. Being migrants, the search for employment opportunities is more important, and sending children to schools remains a low key interest for parents. Children drop out of school to earn money to support their families and the number of girls dropping out was higher than boys and students seem to be having vague aspirations for the future as they were 'unaware of what to do next'. Girls take up jobs like house cleaners, cooks and boys start working in factories or other informal petty jobs to support their families on the account being clueless.
- **Substance abuse and alcoholism:** Addiction to cigarettes, marijuana, and alcohol among youth and teenagers was observed by students in some of the communities like Basti Nizamuddin and Indira Vihar Camp. Lack of parental guidance and bad companionship have been stated as major reasons for getting involved in this malice.
- **Child sexual abuse:** The cases related to child sexual abuse were also found during fieldwork. Families avoid reporting the cases because of the fear of bringing disgrace and the feeling of being helpless.

So, the range of issues noticed in the urban slum communities had been quite diverse that reinstates comment by Doda, 2005 that "social pathos have existed as long as humans began living in groups".

6.4 Interventions through field work

Students learnt a lot from their exploration of concerns and issues in these slum clusters of megapolis of Delhi. Some of the efforts made by them during the course of field work included:

- Visit to government schools like the primary wing of South Delhi Municipal Corporation (SDMC) schools, Sarvodaya Kanya Vidhyalaya, and other schools to get acquainted with schemes such as mid-day meals and other co-curricular arrangements that could motivate parents for enrolment.
- Conducted ‘best out of waste’ and ‘Financial Literacy’ sessions with children and women as group members respectively in the community.
- Assisted a Project named ‘Swabhiman’, a program for health and empowerment of women, and attended various workshops conducted by health experts and doctors.
- Networked with the local government healthcare system and stakeholders such as ASHA worker, ANM, Anganwadi centers, and understood their functioning.
- Conducted group meetings with women and adolescent girls on topics such as, ‘menstrual health and hygiene, good touch and bad touch, self-defense, the importance of education for girls, gender sensitization’, and rendered assistance in distribution of sanitary napkins through NGOs.
- Antenatal Care and Post Natal Care services for women in the community were Mapped by female students and facilitated in organizing ‘health checkup camps’. Other, generalized health care activities were organized by almost all the students in each of the slum communities.
- Taught the students in NGO run and managed ‘remedial education’ classes for 1 - 8 standard which included touching their school course and general knowledge component. Recreational activities were organized as well with the group members.
- Assisted in conducting ‘street plays and rallies ‘for awareness generation on socially relevant issues like effective use of water, effects of illiteracy, etc.
- Facilitated documentation work relating to the monthly progress under different projects for placement NGOs and also compiled annual reports and newsletters.

7 Challenges for field work practice

The quest to respond to issues faced by community people was accompanied by challenges for young practitioners. It probably emanated from complexity in the understanding notion of urban poverty and its relation to other social problems as well. “It is argued by sociologists that social problems are best understood in the social institutional context. Although the causes of social problems are multiple, it is contended that they are usually the manifestations of the failure in the social institutions themselves. When an institution fails to address the basic needs of people, social problems occur. A common person easily blames that certain social problem is due to the failure of individuals themselves but one needs to have a broader sociological and cultural contexts”, Indrani, 1998 (cited in Doda, 2005). For fieldwork practice, challenges were two-pronged: those related to the student's understanding and secondly structural and individual issues interfering with social work intervention.

7.1 Student’s related challenges

- At the beginning of fieldwork, it was a bit difficult to interact with people due to the discomfort in working in the slums. The feeling of being uncomfortable was more among the male students as they were hesitant in communicating with women and vice versa.

- As the majority of the people were migrants it made it difficult to organize and manage children and other groups formed for social work intervention as they leave for their native places during harvesting season.
- Due to academic immaturity, conceptualizing poverty was difficult as most of the houses in all of the communities were cemented and have household facilities but grossly lack infrastructural facilities like clean drinking water, proper roads, drainage arrangements, and general cleanliness. As structural issues could not be dealt at this level, the role of the students was merely limited to organizing the community as a collective, seeking support from the local leaders, drafting an application to the Municipal Corporation, and timely follow up as a response to these basic needs.
- Sustainability of intervention done by students in the field placement could not be maintained as there was no proper handover to the next student trainee or the staff of the placement agency. It affected the continuity of interventions and motivation and support from community member's in an endeavor to bring a change.

7.2 Structural related challenges

Problems or issues that are inherent in the whole system and are not caused by any specific or individual factor can be understood as structural problem (Doda, 2005). For voluminous and tightly packed population in urban slums bare minimum facilities were provided creating difficulties for its residents and students:

1. Sanitation issues like open drains and garbage disposal system were found missing and students felt helpless as their effort was limited to creating awareness and approaching the municipal corporation for addressing them.
2. A densely populated area with a limited water supply cannot afford to waste water. The struggle to deal with this problem-focused around regular and timely visits to water departments for the continuous supply of water tankers and sensitization to promote the saving of water.

7.3 Individual's related challenges

Apart from non-performance of structural aspects of society, challenge for fieldwork practice also emanated from the behaviour and attitude of people. Some of the problems rooted in the individual's mindset included:

1. Health facilities were available in some of the areas but most people lack appropriate health-seeking behavior. The process of acquisition of new behavior is long and difficult to bring the desired change in the short term of placement.
2. While working with adolescent girls and women, students observed that due to ignorance, women still follow archaic measures for maintaining menstrual health and hygiene. Talking on these intimate issues is still a taboo, due to which females hesitate to participate in awareness programs and males remain aloof as they consider these discussions as matters of feminine interest.
3. Out of ignorance education is still not considered a valued construct as indicated through a high drop-out rate. Students struggled to bring a change in perception towards education and future opportunities that would open after being educated.
4. Student trainees encountered the problem of exploitation and violence against women existing in physical, mental, and emotional forms. Intimate partner violence is

committed in almost every household in the form of wife battering, assault by in-laws for dowry. Gendered violence is both a manifestation of structural incompetence and cultural representation of patriarchal authority and power. Women did not file a police complaint against their husband that minimized the scope for students to spread awareness through street plays.

5. The socio-economic situations created low esteem and insecurity among men which gets ventilated in anomalous behavior like inflicting violence particularly towards their spouse as well as other people. The creation of economic opportunities, elimination of insecurity was not within the limits of the students undergoing field work training.
6. Another most incessant concern felt in these slums was sexual exploitation and abuse of children and parent's unwillingness to initiate any kind of action against the abusers.
7. Students are not sufficiently matured enough to challenge cultural malpractices like the early marriage of girls, handling sensitive issues emerging from teen pregnancy, and lack of family planning measures. Interventions could not move beyond counseling, organizing campaigns, awareness generation efforts.
8. Social exclusion within the community is considered as part of caste hierarchy and division based on religious, regional, and ethnic identities that made it difficult to build rapport with diverse population groups, understand their issues and reasons for the existence of such a divide.

8 Changes through field work practice

Despite challenges, field work practice led to changes in the life of community members and facilitated the academic growth of the students. These transformations have been grouped as changes in communities and changes in students. Each of them is described as:

Changes in communities: Some of the changes that happened in the life of community members included:

- The student's visit to different educational agencies and then sharing of information regarding schemes for the promotion of education enhanced parental motivation for enrolment of their ward to schools.
- The activities undertaken through groupwork with children motivated and helped them to change their habits of drug intake and gambling.
- The sessions on different socio-economic issues like education, dowry, domestic violence etc by the trainees provided information to the community members about the pros and cons, available legislative measures.
- The awareness sessions on reproductive and child health issues and health care practices with groups of girls and women with the help of professional doctors by female students facilitated in gaining information by the participants on these topics.
- Awareness generation among women and adolescent girls on gender-sensitive topics like maintaining the safety and security of females.
- Community members learned the effective use of water, effects of illiteracy etc through 'street plays and rallies' organized during fieldwork tenure.

Changes in Students: Fieldwork practice was meaningful as it led to the following:

- Experiential learning of witnessing non-numeric aspects of urban poverty like the hardships of migrants, the life of drug abusers and alcoholics, discrimination against women and children in the form of deprivation, abuse and violence.
- Facilitated the practice of principles of social work like the principle of acceptance, confidentiality while organizing awareness generation activities with diverse groups of people on different social issues.
- Facilitated the development of skills of professional social work like rapport formation, observation, purposeful engagement with community members, convincing people, cooperation and negotiation.
- Engagement with community people instilled self-confidence through community profiling, activities are undertaken through group work, sessions on awareness generation, street plays, campaigns etc.

9 Discussion and conclusion

The primary role of social work in promoting social development is well recognized in recent years. And the role becomes critical in situations of persistent poverty due to its crippling effect on the functioning and well-being of individuals in society (Twikirize, 2013). The notion and understanding of poverty have changed income line approach no longer holds relevance (Sulaiman 2014). Urban slum communities of megapolis may promise a slightly better standard of life for its migrants but many end up living in pathetic conditions. The state of public services was not decent enough but physically, the houses were certainly better. However, its inhabitants suffered from illiteracy, ignorance and meager income level that is hardly sufficient to pull or push them from the hollow state of being well-off.

For social work practitioners, the complex rooting of social issues made it difficult to fully understand whether the problems in community exist at a structural level or are manifestations of poverty. The duration of fieldwork was also short that allowed less time for developing thorough understanding and holistic interventions. As such based on their understanding, the interventions planned were limited to epidermis level in the form of counseling sessions, sensitization sessions for awareness building rather than focussing on structural issues. However, both are interdependent and cyclical, without a change to the structure, organization or policies in the system, problems can't get alleviated.

These problems have been existing and affecting people but cannot be completely eradicated. Students placed in different slum communities across Delhi authenticate this argument. Considering the state of urban slums, the government has a lead role to develop sustainable strategies for health, sanitation, transport, education and employment to reduce or end the cropping of slums and its manifestations. A social worker can extend support for realizing the policies and changing mindset of people for adopting healthy life practices through a behavioural change approach. The community itself has the potential to overcome many problems by itself and the support of government and social workers could facilitate them to reach millions of miles towards a better future.

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