ARISE
Accountability in Urban Health

WASH-related violence in urban informal settlements in Bangladesh, Kenya, India and Sierra Leone: Co-producing knowledge for just health systems

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Introduction

Urban informal settlements are characterised by poor water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), inadequate waste management, overcrowding and viewed as problematic in health systems policy and programming. For residents, multiple intersecting inequities shape their agency and vulnerability to human rights violations. Power manifests in symbolic, structural, and direct violence for individuals experiencing urban informality and is highly interdependent and exacerbated by intersectional inequities. There is limited literature exploring experiences of WASH-related violence, yet for those living in urban informality it constitutes an everyday concern. Moving towards just health systems requires addressing epistemic injustices by addressing community concerns and priorities - it demands co-production approaches that identify community capabilities and a reconceptualisation of informal settlements as sites of progressive change.

Methods

The ARISE hub aimed to enhance accountability and improve the health and wellbeing of marginalised populations living in informal urban settlements. We employed community-based participatory research with communities in urban informal settlements across Bangladesh, India, Kenya and Sierra Leone to explore WASH-related vulnerabilities and actions for change. These data draw on participatory methods including community-mapping, transect walks, daily diaries, interviews, governance mapping, surveys and photovoice. We analysed data thematically and applied an adapted version of Galtung's (1969) violence framework[1].

Pay for disabled toilets with locks removed, Viwandani, Nairobi. **Credit**: I.Chumo.
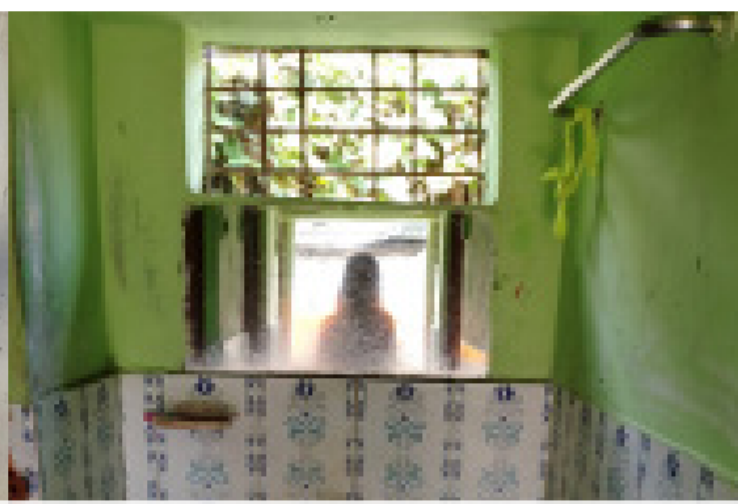
Picture from Sulphat Bihari Camp, Ward No. 27, Rangpur city corporation, Bangladesh. The Bihari community refers to a group of people who migrated from the Indian state of Bihar to Bangladesh during the Partition of India in 1947.

Male waste workers loading recyclable waste after segregation into trucks for sale up the value chain. Bangalore, India. **Credit:** Partho Mukherjee.

Absence of drainage and inadequate protection from rain in informal settlements lead to loss of income and increased workload for informal waste workers in Bangalore, India. **Credit:** Partho Mukherjee.

Results

Symbolic violence

Symbolic violence manifested in stigma for those engaged in WASH-related livelihoods and was exacerbated by intersecting inequities such as disability, caste and gender. In Kenya, pit emptiers reported using alcohol and drugs to numb the stigma and smell from working in the pit latrines.

"Many of us are normally drunkards. When you are under drugs (alcohol and miraa) you rarely feel the embarrassment, stigma and the bad smell... Without alcohol you can rarely work inside a full pit latrine." Manual pit emptier, focus group discussion, Kenya

They also reported conducting work at night to avoid stigmatisation:

"Mostly we do it (emptying) at night around 9PM because everyone is inside their home and they will not discriminate against us based on our work..." Manual pit emptier, in depth interview, Kenya

Structural violence

Structural violence in the form of poor infrastructure and accountability mechanisms was evident and linked to direct violence across all settings. For example, men waste-workers in India and Kenya work at night in poorly lit streets to collect waste and empty toilet facilities. They pay 'levies' to avoid arrest and for police 'protection' while working. Inadequate streetlights, unsafe roads, distance to WASH facilities and the existence of water 'cartels' added to insecurity for residents.

"At night, usually there are no floodlights and the work is very challenging because it is easy to fall off and hurt yourself. This makes some of us dispose of [waste] in trenches and undesignated places" Manual pit emptier, in depth interview, Kenya

"NJ (a field facilitator in an ARISE partner organisation in India) also told me that policemen from the local thana (local police station) come daily to take 100 Rs from every contractor, and additionally a monthly 500 rs. It is also not just that a couple of policemen visit from a single given thana. Rather every policeman from that thana (police station) comes to harass them. I also corroborated this with one of the waste-pickers." Researcher's diary entry, June 1, 2022, Bangalore, India

Direct WASH-related violence

Direct WASH-related violence was linked to WASH use. In Sierra Leone, sexual violence was linked with access to water, creating fear among girls and women; coercion also emerged as some engage in transactional sex with water point distributors. Community safety volunteers, community leadership, functioning streetlights and bylaws were reported ways of improving a feeling of safety in communities.

'Good water supply should also be provided to the community to reduce the incidence of teenage pregnancy and rape, as these issues normally occur to girls in the course of searching for water." Key informant, Dwarzak, Sierra Leone

'Also, the availability of water tanks in our community has reduced teenage pregnancy and school dropout because our children no longer have to walk longer distances to fetch water.' Older woman, Dwarzark, Sierra Leone

In Kenya, women with disabilities were particularly threatened as they were unable to hear intruders while accessing WASH services. Further, older women and households with children felt the need for their own private toilets to avoid moving around at night:

"Sometimes even my children used to relieve themselves inside the house because they are scared of going outside to the toilet. The house has two rooms so one of them is usually not locked... Sometimes at night because there is a challenge with security the children used to use that side to relieve themselves there and that used to stress me...when it is hot there is a stench." Deaf woman, Korogocho, Kenya

In Bangladesh gendered vulnerabilities meant girls were particularly fearful of using facilities. This also intersected with technology use - girls were fearful of being videoed using toilet facilities at night and content being circulated.

"It's really scary to use the community toilet. The boys hang out behind the toilet and use drugs, and sometimes they even peek through the windows. It's so shameful. We never go there alone at night, and if we can't find someone to go with us, we just avoid using the toilet altogether, which is really bad for our health." Woman, Sulphat Camp, Rangpur city corporation, Bangladesh

Conclusion

Co-production revealed that WASH-related violence cut across livelihoods and WASH use. To support transformative health system priority setting and interventions that address social determinants of health, the values, concerns and capabilities of communities need to be centred, and acted upon, with attention to intersecting vulnerabilities and emerging threats.

BEFORE

AFTER

Credit: Cockle Bay, Freetown. Biofil toilets built with ARISE Responsive Funding in response to community priorities highlighted across the research lifespan.

1. Galtung, J. (1969). Violence, Peace, and Peace Research. Journal of Peace Research, 6(3), 167-191.

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