

Shackled in motion:
Following the harm-chain of
climate migration

A photo-ethnography exhibition depicting stories
collected from Dhaka's informal settlements.



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methodology

In this photo-book, you'll find 15 stories across 7 themes depicting the struggle and resilience of Dhaka's urban poor living in informal settlements (also called slums), a significant percentage of whom are climate migrants.

The method used is an iteration of what researchers before us have called '**photo-ethnography.**' Through observation and conversations, this method is a means to understand people, their culture and their being, where researchers witness life as it is lived. The photographs and the written stories are meant to be seen, read and perceived in conjunction. This rendition, however, is not comprehensive, neither was it meant to be. Intended from the project's onset, this research endeavor was not meant to solely produce knowledge but to also transform into a powerful tool for awareness-raising.

Bound by project scope and time, this attempt at a photo-ethnography shows you the tip of the iceberg. It is not to make you, the viewer, settle with the feeling that you genuinely know about the lives of climate victims, but it is to create an urge to know them better and to join their pursuit of justice.

Funded by a small grant awarded to Tasnia Khandaker Prova, a cohort member of the 'Climate Action Champions Network' - a regional network of climate activists funded by the US State Department and implemented in collaboration with GenLab, this photo-book is a product of the collective effort of the research and photography team.

The project had 3 core team members: Tasnia as the lead researcher, Tahura Farbin as co-lead, and Ahmed Yasar Sameen as the project photographer. The core team was supported by Era Robbani, Shahriyer Hossain Shetu, Umme Habiba and Sadia Afrin Farin, who have each brought their own distinguished value to the project. The team also extends their utmost gratitude to Rubab Al Islam, who designed the photobook, offered creative advice and curated the exhibition that preceded this book.

The team appreciates the continued encouragement received from the Centre for Peace and Justice (CPJ), BRAC University and the Centre for Sustainable Development (CSD), ULAB.

The names used in the stories have been changed to retain respondent privacy. Consent was always prioritized and photos showing faces of subjects were deliberately avoided where possible.

Bangladesh is extremely climate-vulnerable. Ranked 7th in the 2021 Global Climate Risk Index,¹ Bangladesh produces only 0.56% of global carbon emissions.² As sea levels rise and temperatures exceed world records, climate disasters in the country have increased in number and intensity.

The impact, however, does not affect everyone equally. Periphery regions in rural Bangladesh where people are already suffering from limited access to basic necessities are forcibly uprooted from their homes, owing to climate change. Losing livelihoods and homes, thousands migrate to urban cities in search of a better life.

Instead of finding ease in Dhaka, incoming migrants have to grapple with a new, and at times more challenging, climate reality. Living in informal settlements, climate survivors find themselves on the frontlines of **facing extreme heat, polluted air and water sources, flash floods, climate-exacerbated health risks and much more.**

The harm-chain of climate change continues, following the desperate migrants wherever they seek respite.

theme 1

surviving urban climate change

[1]Eckstein et al, 'Global Climate Risk Index 2021,' January 2021, available at: https://www.germanwatch.org/sites/default/files/Global%20Climate%20Risk%20Index%202021_2.pdf

[2]'How the Climate Crisis is Impacting Bangladesh,'The Climate Reality Project, 9 December 2021, available at: <https://www.climateRealityProject.org/blog/how-climate-crisis-impacting-bangladesh>



a city in flames

the many shades of relief



a city in flames

[3]Translation 1: "I can't explain our suffering. No words are enough."

[4]Translation 2: "The fan, when turned on, absorbs the heat from the tin-ceiling...you all would not have lasted inside my house if you came in the afternoon (speaking to the teachers)".

[5]Translation 3: "We're bound to feel hot...it's not like someone can restrain heat, can they?"

We were speaking about last year's heat waves, when Abdullah says, "কষ্টটা কেমন কষ্ট এটা বলা যাইব না, বলার বাহিরে"³ Sitting on the other side of a wide wooden table, Abdullah shares that he is the first teacher in his family. 12 years ago, he migrated to Dhaka with everyone he calls his own, unable to afford the upkeep of his barren land and ancestral home.

Abdullah is aware of what climate change is. He knows how emissions get trapped, why we need to be concerned, and who we should blame - both at home and beyond borders. He also knows, without a shadow of a doubt, that things are getting worse.

Everything is on the rise, he notes - the number of lives that dengue takes each year, the empty saline packets that fill

alleyways, the span of time children stay sick and the blisters that leave marks on their skin - the effects of climate change are increasingly becoming more tangible.

While the hardship is palpable and obvious, the solutions are far from it. Ceiling fans meant to provide some respite during extremely hot days make things even worse. "ফ্যান ছাড়লে টিন এর তাপ আরও টাইনা নিয়ে আসে... আপনারা বসতে পারতেন না আমার বাসায়, যদি বিকাল এর আগেই আসতেন,"⁴ says Runa with a half-smirk.

She sighs and rhetorically asks, "গরম তো লাগবেই... গরম কেউ কি আর আটকাই রাখতে পারে?"⁵

the many shades of relief

As clouds gather over Dhaka's informal settlements, the anticipation of rain is met with mixed feelings. Relief from the scorching summer heat is accompanied by a new struggle. Heavy rainfall threatens to overwhelm the dismal drainage systems in settlements, causing sewage to spill onto public alleys.

Overnight, communities bustling with life transform into murky foul-smelling pools. Fingers tracing his skin, Hamid tells us of times when his neighborhood sinks and when myriad diseases find him - some visible from the onset with others hidden away.

We are told to return to the settlements after the downpour stops, when the streets are able to breathe again. A luxury that is not afforded to hundreds of thousands.



theme 2
**mothers and
daughters**

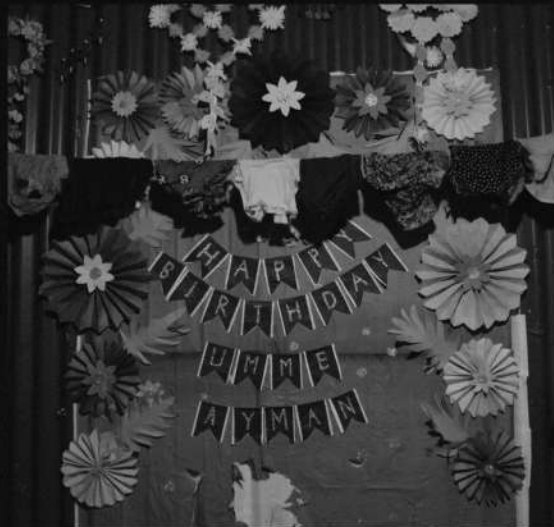
In situations of poverty, climate change has been noted to disproportionately affect women. The women and girls of Dhaka's settlements often face the brunt of climate-exacerbated precarity, overburdened by responsibilities and social expectations. Many women actively seek informal employment to afford basic needs, in addition to being the primary caregiver and household manager.

Women tend to exhibit a higher prevalence of gastric issues due to irregular eating and adaptive dietary factors such as reliance on spicy or stale food, among other prolonged health risks. Improper sanitation facilities and inadequate privacy often lead to harassment and violence. Further, adolescent girls in the settlements continue to face a relatively more acute threat of child marriage, owing to the absence of basic services and proper institutions of protection.

Multi-faceted vulnerabilities shadow the lives of women in Bangladesh, and for those living in informal settlements, fragilities are even more pronounced.

Umme Ayman's mother

to eat and feed



Umme Ayman's mother

Ema lives in the second story of a shared home. Neighbor to five other families on her floor and six more down below, the space available to Ema is tight and shrinking. Barely lit, makeshift stairs lead to her room. The climb is steep with poorly-bolted screws peeking out - indicating that the top floor residents either have stronger knees or greater struggles.

Ema is a mother of one and a daughter of migrants. Victim to the eroding river banks of Shariatpur, a plight that uproots many even today,⁶ Ema's parents moved to Dhaka when her older sister was only one.

She teaches at a school she was once a student of, but her path to an improved life was thwarted by a very tiny hole. A hole in her infant daughter's heart.

Ema's room, which is slightly bigger than her bed, has two almirahs - one full of clothes, the other full of medicine. Her husband has dropped out of university to be a full-time driver, hoping to afford expensive hospital bills. It is not an uncommon reality in the settlements, where one ailment plunges an entire family deeper into poverty. And when climate-induced illnesses barge into life, the burden almost breaks their backs.

Awake most of the time from the heat, Ema spoke about her nights filled with little and loud noises of coughs and sneezes - her new climate-reality.



to eat and feed

[7]Shaheen Mollah and Asifur Rahman, 'Desperate, they opt for firewood', The Daily Star, 10 Jan 2024, available at: <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/desperate-they-opt-firewood-3515516>

Smoke.

In her face, her coughs, and her awkward smiles.

Ayesha is cooking for her entire family. It's 1 PM on a Monday, and her husband should arrive home soon for lunch. The gas connection to her kitchen lasts only from midnight to dawn, and while she usually wakes up to cook during this awfully timed window, she did not feel well enough to do so last night. So instead, as both a solution and punishment, she fired up her clay stove.

We found her on an easier day - the weather was good per Dhaka's standards.

If the sun was any less hidden, a conversation with her in her kitchen would be hard to imagine. When she's not cooking, Ayesha claims to have no respiratory issues - Dhaka's air feels fine to her, despite the warnings issued by air quality monitors.

Ayesha's neighbor, Nazneen, along with numerous other settlement women, are not so lucky. Facing severe breathing problems, cooking can seem unbearable. Awareness of the health risks associated with regular exposure to firewood fumes⁷ does little to provide affordable alternatives.

Despite ranking as the seventh least livable city, Dhaka's living costs rival that of Toronto and Lisbon.⁸ As prices skyrocket, safe and nutritious food remains out of reach for the city's urban poor. Access to proper healthcare facilities becomes equally unattainable.⁹

Dhaka is both a megacity of diverse opportunities and severe limitations. Being one of the world's most polluted and populated cities, conditions in some parts of Dhaka barely meet acceptable living standards. **Paying higher rent per square meter than Dhaka's posh areas**, urban poor communities living in informal settlements tend to spend a considerable portion of their earnings on rent.¹⁰ With national inflation rates reaching record-high numbers in preceding years,¹¹ costs of almost everything have seen slow and sudden jumps. From the price of local groceries to that of power or water - the burden on urban poor families continues to be excruciating.

People belonging to the lowest income bracket in Dhaka continue to pay more out of their savings to receive much less.

[8]The Economist Intelligence Unit. (2023). Global Livability Index 2023 Report. <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/global-livability-index-2022/>

[9]FAO. (2020). The urban poor in Dhaka spend up to half their income on food, according to new research presented today. Retrieved from <https://www.fao.org/bangladesh/news/detail-events/zh/c/1264912/>

[10]Rashad Ahamad, 'Slum dwellers pay more rent per sqft than posh areas,' The Business Post, 24 July 2021, available at: <https://businesspostbd.com/national/slum-dwellers-pay-more-rent-per-sqft-than-posh-areas-21308>

[11]Meraj Mavis, 'BBS: Highest inflation in over a decade,' The Dhaka Tribune, 05 June 2023, available at: <https://www.dhakatribune.com/business/economy/284831/bbs-highest-inflation-in-over-a-decade>

theme 3 transactions of life

few choices, many bills

odd and 'even' jobs

few choices, many bills

Right outside the gates of the largest settlement in Dhaka, a crowd is gathered at the back of a midsize truck. A small banner hangs from its side, indicating that essential food items are on sale at a subsidized price. As we stop to watch, a woman walks past us, ire and frustration visible on her face and steps.

Without any questions posed, she looks at us and angrily demands justice. She asks that we, clear outsiders with our office lanyards hanging from our necks, speak to 'higher ups' and tell them that the system is rigged. The bags of rice and flour that she received after hours of waiting are priced almost the same as her local bazaar. She walks away, still muttering and

still irate, before we can even ask for her name.

Choya, a climate migrant, complains of the very same. She added that waiting in line during the day means that people are expected to choose between their daily wage and cheaper food, and the latter is not always guaranteed. She spoke of bills piling up - electricity being the most expensive, followed by gas and water.

The burden of bills coupled with price hikes has been disorienting for most settlement-dwellers. After monthly payments, Choya barely has enough money to afford full meals.



odd and 'even' jobs

[12] Translation: If there was a village home I could escape to, I would leave...everything is ruined when you come to Dhaka"

On a rack right next to her door, Shafrin has a special place reserved for her umbrella. It's her sole companion on days the sun shines a little too harshly, and on days the rain only dribbles but doesn't storm - because when a thunderstorm hits Dhaka, streets are clogged, potholes are fed, and our city's foot soldiers are tested in battles that can't be won.

Shafrin is a domestic worker in a residential area adjacent to her settlement. She says that her employer gets upset when she asks for leave. Despite being on the frontlines battling Dhaka's impossible and erratic weather, if sympathy falls short so does Shafrin's monthly income.

Her neighbor Rubiya works in a garments factory. She stays standing for long, excruciating hours, and more often than not, her salary is delayed - by sometimes five or ten, and even twenty days. With prices of daily staples higher than she has ever seen, Rubiya wonders if enough food will reach her family's table tomorrow. She also fears a day when she can no longer afford her son's school fees.

“গ্রামে জায়গা থাকলে, চলে যাইতাম... ঢাকায় আসলে সব নষ্ট,”¹² Rubiya says. Shafrin nods in agreement. They both recall the homes that their grandparents left them and the heartbreaking scene of watching them being swept away by floods.



theme 4

people and places

Settlements can be extremely compact, with 250,000 living per square kilometer.¹³ 95% of the standard houses found in Dhaka's informal settlements can be compared to an average-sized car.¹⁴ **Local infrastructure stands on frail, low-quality materials, easily susceptible to damage and destruction.** As seasons change, and gradually become harsher with climate change, settlement neighborhoods become much more vulnerable.

Mass dependence on illegal connections for electricity and water supply indicates that poor-quality wiring and unsafe gas lines are in every other household, making settlements prone to high risk and inevitable accidents.¹⁵ Fire outbreaks, water-logging, poor sanitation and drainage are major concerns plaguing settlement-dwellers.

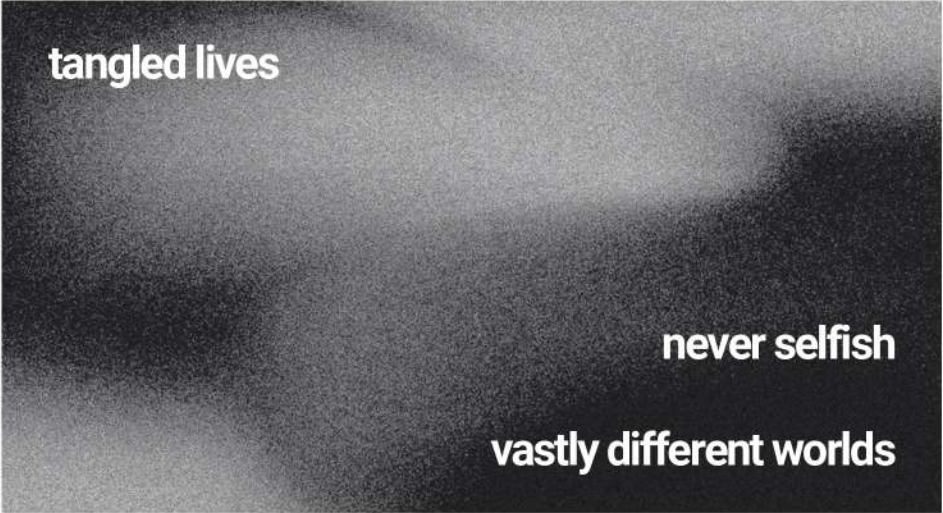
Against harrowing uncertainty, **settlement-dwellers survive together, nurturing a deep sense of communal support.** Helping neighbors, sharing food, and supporting relatives here and back home are common traits.

Both misery and joy are felt in unison.

[13]Islam, N., Mahbub, A., Nazem, N.I., Angeles, G., Lance, P., (2006). Slums of Urban Bangladesh: Mapping and Census, 2005. Centre for Urban Studies, Dhaka.

[14]Ahmed, I. (2014). Factors in building resilience in urban slums of Dhaka, Bangladesh. Procedia Economics and Finance 18. 745 – 753.

[15]Dhaka Tribune, "Illegal electric, gas connections turning slums into bombs", 29 Nov 2020, available at: <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/231818/%E2%80%98Illegal-electric-gas-connections-turning-slums>



tangled lives

never selfish

vastly different worlds



tangled lives

In 2023, the month of February alone saw three devastating fire hazards in Korail.¹⁶ Tragedies such as these are uncomfortably common in Dhaka's informal settlements. Every year, news breaks of lost shelters, assets and identities.

Pilot attempts to build greater community awareness and resilient housing have improved the state of uncertainty for many settlement-dwellers, but not everyone can reap benefits. Not all feel safe.

Alif, a local community leader, sees a backhanded silver lining amid these regular ruins. প্রত্যেক ধাপে ধাপে আগুনে পুড়ার [পোড়ার] পর, কড়াইল উন্নত হইসে,¹⁷

noting how tin-sheds replaced bamboo roofs after a fire burnt their house to ashes. A hefty price to pay for what news outlets called a 'revamp'.¹⁸

"If you attempt to gaze at the sky above Dhaka's settlements, your eyes will first find chaotic webs of wires. Above bedrooms, through kitchen doors, on bathroom walls - wires are a constant in life here, as is the fear of short-circuits at night.

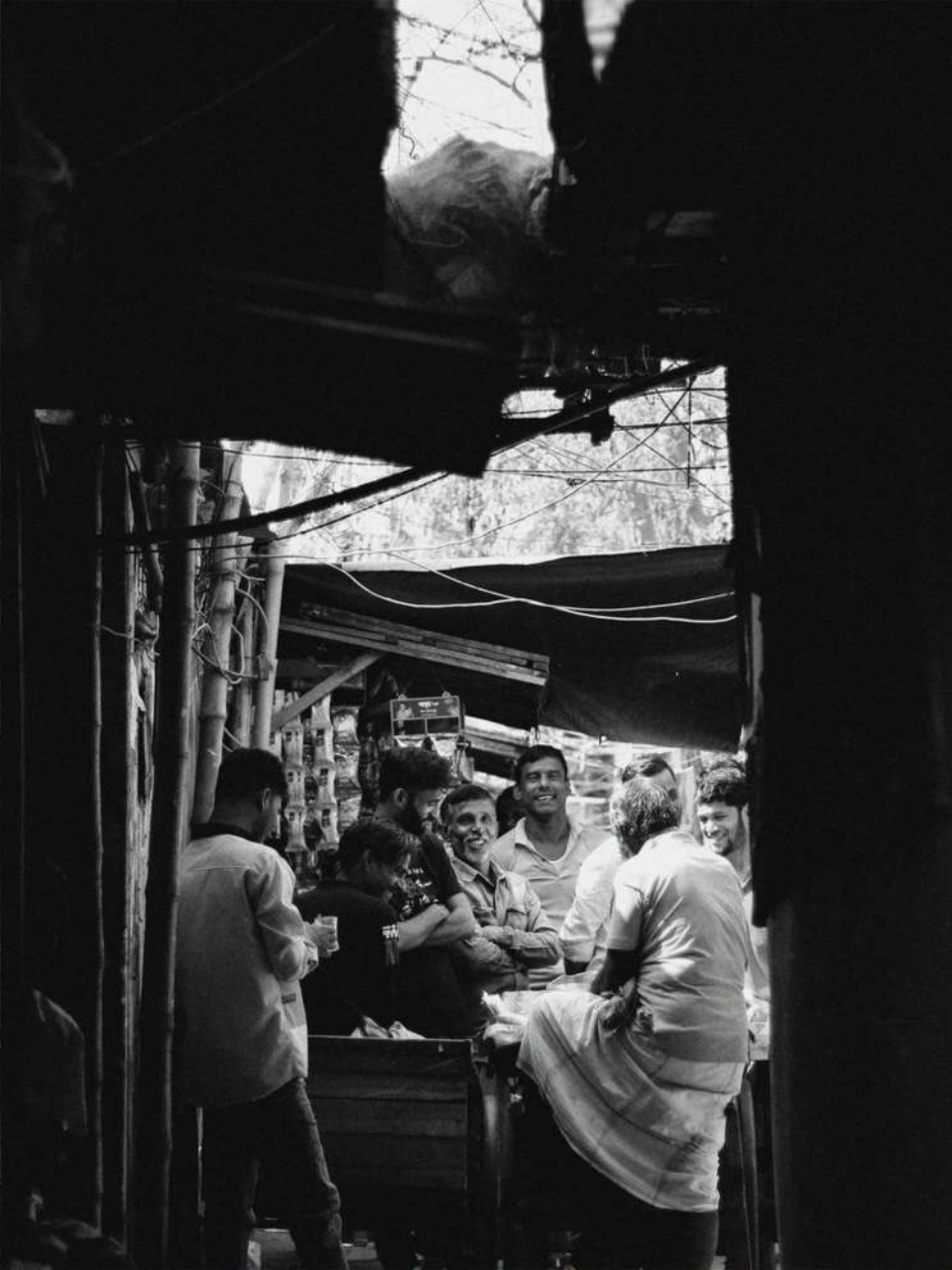
With houses built leaving no space in between, if a fire starts, it never stops at one individual or family. It devours hundreds in mere minutes, if not thousands.

And as the shock of loss wears off, they build again - to live again.

[16]Tribune Desk, 'Timeline: Recent fires in Korail slum', Dhaka Tribune, 26 February 2023, available at: <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/dhaka/305702/timeline-recent-fires-in-korail-slum>)

[17]Translation: "Every outbreak of fire led to improvements in Korail"

[18] Maher Sattar, 'Bangladesh revamps Dhaka slum after massive fire', Aljazeera, 06 Feb 2017, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/2/6/bangladesh-revamps-dhaka-slum-after-massive-fire>



never selfish

Not all were tales of misfortune and setbacks, some spoke of how far they have come and how well they have survived.

Reflecting on her lost land and severed connections, Sabah has enshrined her past life in distant memories. She talks of unimaginable loss - of livelihood, neighbors, and familiarity - with a straight face. Having been displaced over two decades ago, her grief is no longer loud. Albeit still present, it feels silent and deep.

She speaks of what she found in Dhaka when she first arrived: an open canal for baths, mud and dirt for roads, oil lamps for light, and a perpetual fear of being ousted

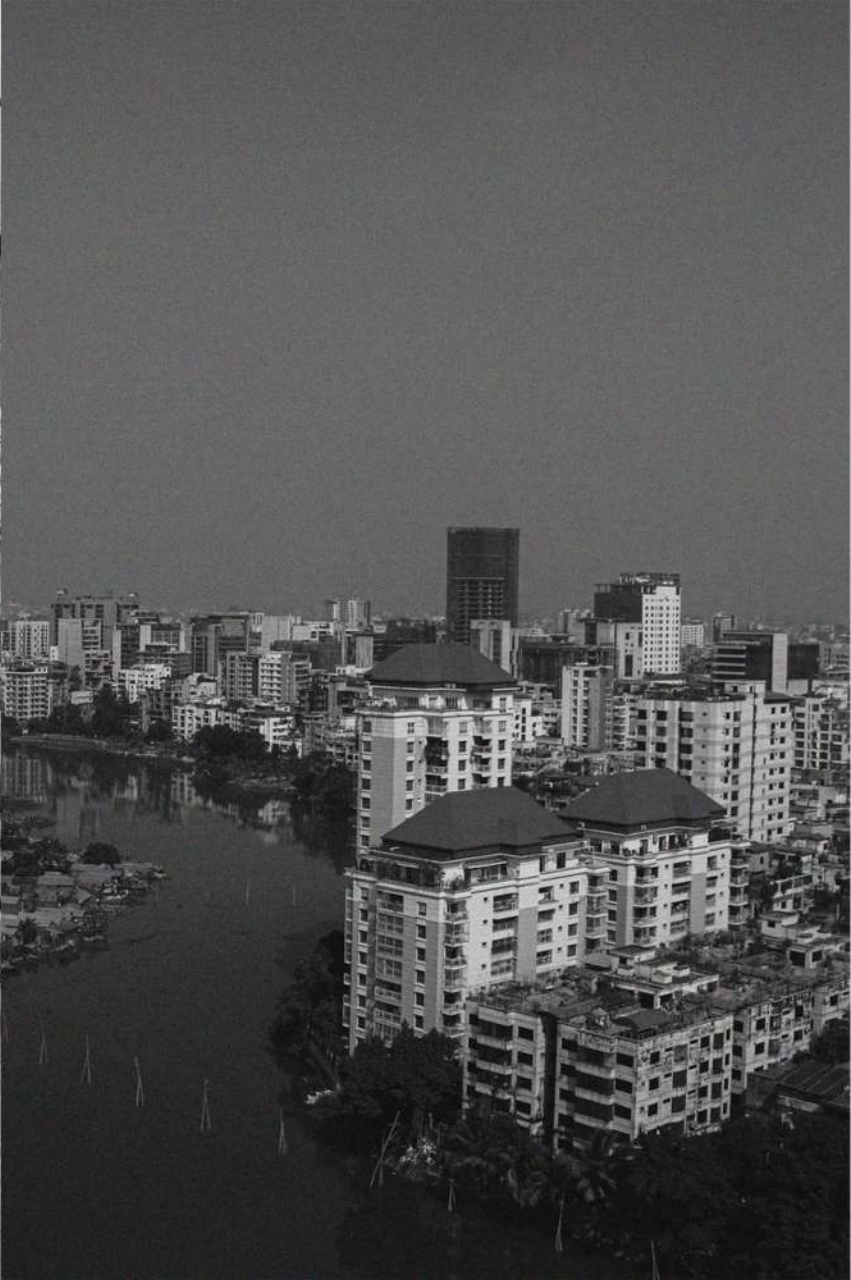
by authorities.

Life has somewhat improved since. Individuals, NGOs, government offices have helped lift the invisibility cloak on their collective suffering. Settlement-dwellers are now better seen, seeking pathways to be better heard.

Dhaka's settlements function through a unique mesh of informal governance, community support and trust networks - all treading along the edges of legality. Stolen pipes bring life-saving water to children, and borrowed gas cylinders allow family meals on the floor. A neighbor's child is looked after as one's own. When floors become too hot for children, they are

passed to aunts living in a cooler room downstairs.

Acquiring resilience through projects is a communal journey. While not all, many are reached.



vastly different worlds

Next to potholes, both deep and shallow, barefooted infants and children are playing with make-shift toys. Tyres, container-cover frisbees, and an odd tricycle among them. Close to the waterway overlooking high-rise apartment blocks, sits a group of young men sorting out waste. Resourceful rag pickers, also called 'tokais', are busy separating unusable rubbish from plastic they can later sell to recyclers.

Standing on the borderlands of these two vastly different worlds, we end the day reflecting on the screaming disparity of futures - hopeful on one side, stolen on another.

By definition, informal settlements grow and expand in 'unhealthy conditions'.¹⁹ A breeding ground for waterborne and infectious diseases, rampant with health hazards,²⁰ settlements fail to provide a safe environment for anyone.

Respiratory problems, diarrheal diseases and skin infections are worryingly prevalent.²¹ Neighborhood healthcare facilities are ill-sourced to manage a high volume of patients. Primarily seeking advice from pharmacists, patients tend to stock up on common pain and cold medication. Out-of-pocket costs are high, and better healthcare is unaffordable for most.

Constant outbreaks of diseases, coupled with a lacking health service ecosystem, have resulted in urban settlement dwellers suffering from poorer health, relative to rural communities.²²


[19]Uddin, N. (2018). Assessing urban sustainability of slum settlements in Bangladesh: Evidence from Chittagong city. *Journal of Urban Management*. Volume 7, Issue 1. 32-42.

[20]Hanchett, S., Akhter, S., Khan, M. H. (2003). Water, sanitation and hygiene in Bangladeshi slums: an evaluation of the WaterAid- Bangladesh urban programme. *Environment and Urbanization*.

[21]Hanchett, S., Akhter, S., Khan, M. H. (2003). Water, sanitation and hygiene in Bangladeshi slums: an evaluation of the WaterAid- Bangladesh urban programme. *Environment and Urbanization*.

[22]Mberu, B., Haregu, T., Kyobutungi, C. & Ezeh, A. (2016). Health and health-related indicators in slum, rural, and urban communities: a comparative analysis. *Global Health Action*.

theme 5 **in pursuit of good health**

A dark, textured rectangular area with a grainy, stippled appearance. It contains two lines of white text. The first line is in the upper left, and the second line is in the lower right.

stigma and pain

neighborhood solutions

বিকাশ

বিশ্বের একটিমাত্র মুক্তিযুদ্ধে মানুষ
নিরস্ত্র মেয়ে বিজয় ককরন

বিকাশ

বিকাশ



ইল
র্জ
করুন
না সময়
খয়াল করে কিনুন
বাডেল প্যাক

FASTEST 4G

গলোবালিক FASTEST 4G-
বনেটের ওয়া এম্বলি

বাংলাব্যাংক

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stigma and pain

[23]Translation: "My daughter had a urinary tract infection, and I too suffered from severe discomfort"

Runa's husband's welding business is doing well. They can afford a 2-room accommodation, a television, a deep fridge, and two almirahs. Each of the four legs of both almirahs stand on two red bricks. During monsoon, when her low-lying room floods, the added height prevents water damage.

Aside from bills, Runa shares that medical expenses make a dent in her savings every month. She and her daughter are repeat patients. "মনে করেন, মেয়ের প্রস্রাব এর ইনফেকশন, আমার ওইসবে জ্বালাপোড়া,"²³ Runa continues to share how they suffered from 3 to 4 bouts of UTI this past summer.

Excessive sweating and a lack of clean drinking water have birthed a hidden crisis for settlement women. With social stigma barring some from talking about their ailments, many continue to suffer in silence.



নতুন কর্তৃপক্ষ
ওজ্যলাইন-এন
খাওয়ার স্যালাইন
ORSaline - N

আকস্মিক বা যে কোন ধরনের শাওরলা
পানোযোগ্যতার অভাবজনিত কারণে
পুষ্টিগত ক্ষতি



সি.এম.সি. ফার্মাসিউটিক্যালস লিমিটেড

015-960-194 178
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neighborhood solutions

[24]Translation: "We are poor people, can we be expected to afford medicine everyday?"

Rajib is carefully stowing away boxes of medicine. From ceiling to ground, his small neighborhood pharmacy has medicines packed on all the three shelves surrounding him. His bestsellers, however, find a special place on his desk. Orsaline is one of them.

In the vacuum left by the lack of unaffordable and proper healthcare facilities in the settlements, pharmacies dominate. If illnesses persist, patients are asked to visit the local clinic. Cough medicine, paracetamols, and antibiotics are sometimes sold in smaller quantities than the recommended dose.

Some customers buy their daily requirement, to return tomorrow if they don't forget.

Echoing what we saw, Mina, a pharmacy customer, spoke about her daily negotiations to buy just enough medicine to get by.

“আমরা গরিব মানুষ, আমরা কি আর প্রত্যেক দিন ঔষধ খাইতে পারি”²⁴

theme 6

little dreams and nightmares

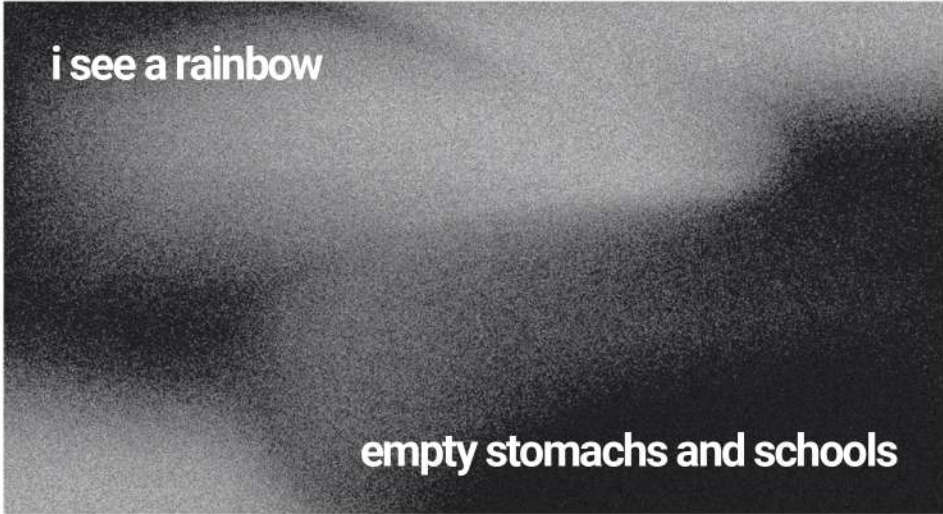
Children living in Dhaka's informal settlements face extremely deplorable conditions. **Crammed spaces, poor sanitation, and limited opportunities** for recreation are the reality that thousands of settlement children live with.

Basic education and proper nutrition are privileges not every child enjoys. Among the children in settlements studying in primary school, a substantial percentage drop out in secondary school. **Many are forced to work from a young age, some working 64 hours a week in harsh environments.**²⁵ Left with only difficult choices, childrens' dreams are snubbed early on. For female children, the vulnerability is further layered as the fear of harassment, even violence, is constant.

As climate change worsens, children are exposed to greater threats of diseases and ailments. Long-term effects impede their ability to break out of the cycle of poverty that they were born into.

Neglecting settlement-dwellers leads to thousands of futures being forsaken.

[25]Anka Malik, 'Children in slums: Living in inhumane conditions,' 20 November 2019, *The Daily Star*, available at: <https://www.thedailystar.net/supplements/news/children-slums-living-inhumane-conditions-1829566>



i see a rainbow

empty stomachs and schools



i see a rainbow

The day feels grim, coated in shades of gray and grease. The sun is bright enough to blind one to color and comfort. Sweat dripping from foreheads. Half-filled plastic water bottles in hands, bags, and drains.

The first step inside the school feels like a plunge into bursts of hue and nervous giggles. The roofs are insulated, a welcome break from the scorching heat outside. But the sight of a waving pakha²⁶ in a student's hand and an unmoving ceiling fan quickly confirms that the electricity is out and the relief felt is momentary.

Not every child present has a village home. Some students blamed rivers for their loss of a second home, others blamed storms. By a show of arms, the more fortunate with two homes vote Dhaka as their least favorite place to stay.

Explaining why that is, a student says - "গ্রামে ইচ্ছা মতন বেড়াইতে পারি... গরম লাগলে নদীতে যাইতে পারি, গোসল করতে পারি, কিন্তু ঢাকাতে পারি না"²⁷ Another student chimes in with her memories of greenery and 'better' gusts of wind.

The only redeeming quality of Dhaka is its ability to gather friends, students agreed. From all corners of Bangladesh, under one roof and one community. Unforgiving summers and drenching monsoons, loud horns and dust-filled air - the worst of Dhaka feels slightly better with a friend.

[26] Translation: Plastic hand-fan

[27] Translation: "In the village, I can roam around freely...if I feel hot, I can jump into a nearby river, bathe in it, but in Dhaka, I can't do any of these things."



empty stomachs and schools

[28] Translation: "There's no food at home...my aunt gave us some rice grains, Maa is cooking it now"

Schools in the settlements get their share of visitors. From parents to school supervisors, they all seek to confirm the progress of young minds blossoming. Settlement schools are a safe space for many, where children mostly sit in big circles. Facing their peers, rhymes on the tips of tongues and choreographed dance moves ready to break loose.

Some children lay low as we throw questions to the class. Others enthusiastically answer. One such extrovert was Mita, chirping away at the students sitting beside her. The school teacher, however, paints a reality that contrasts to how Mita is perceived today.

A month has passed since the last day Mita came to school, hungry. "বাসায় কোনো খাবার নাই... পিসি একটু চাল দিলে, মা ওইটা রান্না করতেসে,"²⁸ she had told her teacher. Soon, her mother arrived - Mita's plate of rice with a side of dried chilis was ready.

While some students struggle in silence, others' hardship evades subtlety. The school teacher reports that amid heat waves, a student lost consciousness. Some others left early, unable to finish their classes inside the tinned structure they call a school, gasping for clean and cold air.

Cities are home to the majority of the Earth's population, housing about 4.2 billion of them.²⁹ Climate change vulnerability in urban areas is relatively more acutely felt in informal settlements with low adaptive capacity.

Among informal workers, rickshaw pullers are unique in their exposure to high climate risks, with limited capacity to build resilience. **Conservative estimates put the number of rickshaw pullers in Dhaka city to be around 1.5 million,**³⁰ where 60 percent of medium to high-income residents rely on rickshaws for their daily commute. This line of work provides employment to a considerable number of unskilled laborers, who leverage factors like easy entry, low investment, cash income and widespread availability to source a sustainable income.

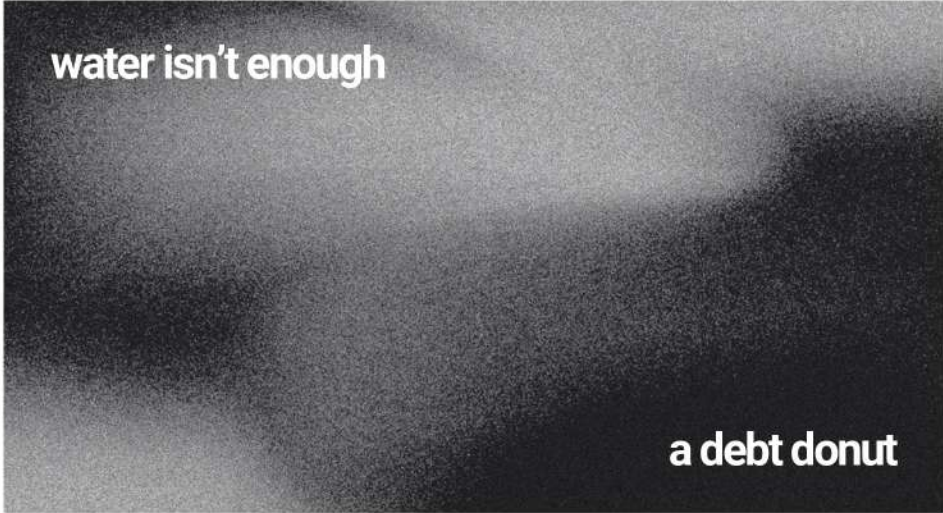
As extreme weather events become increasingly common, rickshaw pullers living in settlements often have no choice but to continue working under harsh conditions.

To fend for themselves and their families, settlement-dwellers often put their own well-being on hold.

[29]IPCC, 2022: *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability*. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [H.-O. Pörtner, D.C. Roberts, M. Tignor, E.S. Poloczanska, K. Mintenbeck, A. Alegria, M. Craig, S. Langsdorf, S. Löschke, V. Möller, A. Okem, B. Rama (eds.)]. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK and New York, NY, USA, 3056 pp., doi:10.1017/9781009325844.

[30]Karim, M. R., & Salam, K. A. (2019). Organizing the Informal Economy Workers: A BILS Study of Rickshaw Pullers in Dhaka City. Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies-BILS, 9. <https://bilsbd.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Labour-A-BILS-Journal-July-December-2019.pdf#page=10>

theme 7 **on three wheels**

A dark, textured rectangular area with white text. The text is arranged in two lines: "water isn't enough" on the top line and "a debt donut" on the bottom line.

water isn't enough

a debt donut



water isn't enough

[31] Translation: "If you are hungry, you have to work even with blisters on your back."

Walking through the densely packed rows of tiny, aluminum tin huts, separated by narrow alleyways enough for only one person to pass through, we meet Azad. He is returning after an eight-hour shift of pulling rickshaws. This line of work has been his only source of income in the last 20 years, ever since his arrival in Dhaka from Kurigram.

He recounts the unbearable heat he experienced last April. On the days it seemed that the sun was out seeking vengeance, drenching backs with sweat and despair, drinking only water wasn't enough to restore his strength and spirits. Azad spoke of rickshaw pullers needing four to five glasses of saline solutions.

But the price of this packaged respite was not always affordable, forcing many to either forsake daily income targets or continue their battle with heat. In the words of Akiz, another rickshaw puller who shared his plight with us - "পেটে যদি ক্ষুধা থাকে, তখন পিঠে চৌসা পড়লেও কর্ম করতে হবে."³¹

Unmatched to previous years, Azad continued speaking of last year's stifling heat and his desperate attempts to flee it. Sitting under the canopy of nearby trees, Azad sought little breaks. Many other rickshaw pullers joined him, some complaining and others too worn out to speak.

In a city that already suffers from a low count of trees, the scarcity is even more palpable in informal settlements. With little to no trees, the settlements stand witness to even shade being a rare privilege in Dhaka for the most climate-vulnerable.



a debt donut

In one tiny room, there are eight people. A small group of three is whispering among themselves, two are lying on their sides facing different walls, and the rest are casually sitting. The hard cement floor is covered with bamboo mats, and pillows lay in particular order. The little belongings that the people in the room have are hanging in two layers on the tin walls. The walls also double as a cloth-drying rack.

It's noon and bright outside, yet the room is dark. With no windows and no electricity, the room feels a few degrees higher than what weather apps are suggesting. We sit on the floor, along with six people out of eight, willing to talk to us. Lonely rays of light find us through scattered holes in the tin walls. To see faces better, we turn on the flashlight of our phones.

The six people facing us have two things in common - first, they are all rickshaw pullers here to take their mid-day rest, and second, they are all in debt. Not just one but with multiple loans due, they spoke about borrowing money again to pay off other looming debts.

This practice of community lending speaks of both camaraderie and conflict. Money, from one hand to the other, traps them further into poverty.

reflections and limitations

The settlements that the researchers have explored for this project are not new or uncharted.

Rather, the sites have been routinely subject to introspection, curiosity, and even surveillance in many forms. The researchers did not intend to add to the existing pot of information that already exists on Dhaka's urban poor, but to remind you, the attendee, that as pages of time turn on this city, their plight remains. Sitting in a mesh of tragedy, joy, belonging and exclusion, informal settlements are a part of Dhaka's fabric.

The researchers were mere visitors, not always present.

Rather, insights, conversations and anecdotes shared by community respondents were analyzed to draw clearer conclusions about settlements. The researchers were not, and did not attempt to be, 'one' with the study sites. They acknowledged the privilege with which they explored the settlements, with a ready option of leaving when they wanted.

During extremely hot, rainy or cold days, the researchers reflected on their ability to stay safe, and their inability to truly understand the precarity facing settlement-dwellers.

The researchers were not always welcome.

Rather, they arrived and explored the lives of the respondents when permission was granted. The settlements are usually bustling with commotion and activity everywhere. The photo-book only paints a portion of the lives of a few, it evades the lived experiences of thousands. The researchers see this photo-ethnography as a stepping stone to learn from and advocate for settlement-dwellers at a larger scale in the future.

