

Abstract

Bustees are places where physical, social, economic and political vulnerabilities collide, creating a multi-layered blanket of vulnerability for their residents. Although income is central to day-to-day survival in an urban environment in which cash income is needed to meet a household's basic needs, work options are limited to low-paid and irregular work, primarily dependent on physical labour. This forces households to rely upon loans and labour mobilisation strategies to get by. Unsanitary, poorly serviced, and densely populated environments – frequently situated in environmentally hazardous areas – mean ill health is both endemic and chronic, playing a routine and devastating role in the lives of the urban poor. The repercussions of resource scarcity at the household level are compounded by the social and political exclusion of the poor from urban governance structures and processes. Amidst a lack of formal institutional support, and in the absence of formal rights and entitlements, the process of facilitating and maintaining patron–client relationships is a central coping strategy for the urban poor. It is a means of trying to manage uncertainty and improve their access to resources. For the majority, however, these strategies are limited to helping households to cope, rather than advancing their interests. Informal systems of governance at the *bustee* level reproduce and exacerbate existing inequalities, with access to power, information, resources, employment and other lucrative income-generating opportunities limited to a close circle of well-connected *bustee* households.

Keywords: urban poverty, inequality, Bangladesh

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