Social Distancing as Utopia: The Urban Poor's Perspective from Islamabad, Pakistan

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Introduction

The proliferation of COVID-19 all over the world is coupled with social distancing as one of the most acceptable and scientifically reliable strategies to deal with the pandemic. Even after immunization, it is still recommended that social distancing should be observed at all times. In Pakistan, timings of the marketplaces, wedding halls, social and political gatherings, and educational institutions were regulated to minimize physical contact and gatherings. Access to fundamental amenities like public transportation, subsidized utility stores, congregations, and prayer places were all regulated and given a wide range of Standard Operating Principles (SOPs) to be followed strictly. As effective as it is, the question remains to what extent this physical or social distancing is possible for the millions living in congested and underprivileged neighborhoods frequently branded as slums, squatter settlements, or informal settlements. We have already seen some evidence about density and the pandemic (Hamidi, Sabouri, and Ewing 2020), and some reviews focused on cities and their assessment concerning COVID (Sharifi and Khavarian-Garmsir 2020). Therefore, I have tried to present evidence from Islamabad – the capital of Pakistan – as a modernist and planned-from-nothing city on one hand and same as sources of structural vulnerabilities on the other hand for the urban poor of the city.

Methodology

This paper is based on extended fieldwork in 12 slums of Islamabad (Fig. 1) from 2018 to 2020. Islamabad has 11 formally recognized slum settlements and more than 50 otherwise (see also Waheed et al. 2022). This fieldwork was carried out in both formalized and informal slums located at various locations throughout Islamabad, like France Colony, 100 Quarter Colony, Issa Nagri, Muslim Colony (formal), and some nameless settlement in Sector E, G, and H (informal). The participant observation was coupled with critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2010 2013 2015; Jacobs 2004, Johnson 2011) of governmental discourses. I have purposefully limited myself to the urban slums of Islamabad where the accounts help us understand socio-economic, political, legal, and medical challenges faced by the slum residents amid the pandemic.

Findings

Like for everyone, water is a lifeline for Shoukat[1] who is a resident in one of the households among 55 others in one of the slums of Islamabad. His settlement does not have any dedicated source of water – neither water pipelines nor private/personal water pumps. Shoukat told the author that those who do not have access to normal water supply in their homes have to manage it first and thinking about the virus or social distancing comes afterwards. Therefore, Shoukat insists that following anything like social distancing or staying home during lockdowns is a luxury for them, which they are never entitled to, given the socio-economic and governing structures.

Shoukat believes that residents of informal settlements are discriminated and that this discrimination is rooted in the very governing mechanisms and planning rationalities with which the city was conceived back in the 1960s. The whole administrative logic of Islamabad is intentionally designed to leave similar neighborhoods in perpetual limbo ridden with crises and hazards of almost all types (Roy 2009). The governmental logic is to frame the urban poor as dirty, uncivilized, and resultantly unacceptable as responsible human beings are presented as evidence of impossibility to maintain social distancing among the slum dwellers.

Shoukat's account is representative of one complete form of life reality among the similar neighborhoods where bio-medically prescribed ways of life are impossible to be realized and lived. Similar, if not the same, is the situation for other "slums" of the city. They find themselves compelled to go out even for the very basics of their needs like water, toilet, food, and clothing. For instance, Nasir believes that the pandemic is serving just as another excuse to further deteriorate the slum dwellers' situation and normalize their exclusion. For Jamil, another resident of a big slum settlement, death appears to be inevitable; either at the hands of the COVID-19 or hunger.

Furthermore, almost every household is dependent upon a constant source of earning where many men and women go to work as domestic workers in well-

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[1] Pseudonym

to-do houses. Some of the slum dwellers also shared their experiences of being treated as potential carriers of the virus on the one hand and compulsion to work on the other hand.

Things are not different in other recognized and 'formalized' slums in Islamabad. For instance, slums in sector G-7 have been provided with the common hand pumps in the state's slum upgradation and rehabilitation policy back in 1999-2001. More than 10,000 people in those "slums" are dependent on less than 10 common water taps to meet their daily water needs. Amid the pandemic, when social distancing is all that is propagated and aspired by the governments around the globe, thousands of people in the "slums" of Islamabad believe it to be a conundrum in which they either can decide on something like water and food or their societal approval by following the protocols of social distancing.

Figure 1: A Young Boy Crossing one of the Entry Points Bordering a Slum Settlement in Islamabad (Photo: A. Waheed)

Social distancing is one of the most affordable and durable methods to contain the spread of the pandemic is yielding desirable results (Khataee, Scheuring, Czirok & Neufeld 2021; Cunha, Domingos, Rocha & Torres 2021; Pedersen & Favero 2020). This, however, does not mean that the strategy is all-inclusive and universally applicable to everyone everywhere. Shoukat's life is a microcosm of millions of people living in "slums" around the world. While living with them their everyday life, affordability, and sustainability of social distancing as an all-encompassing policy towards COVID-19 hardly seems inclusive let alone sensitive towards all socio-economic assemblages. It appears to be an exclusive, pro-middle class, and rich-friendly policy that would have adverse social impacts on the societies that are already disregarded, relegated, and sentenced to live in ghettoized spaces.

Conclusions

These findings are not peculiar to the case of Pakistan, rather, similar findings are available for the case of Bangladesh, Kenya, and Nigeria (Ahmed, et. al. 2020), India (Downs-Tepper, Krishna & Rains 2022), Brazil (Waheed, Qadar & Mehmood 2022), and Ghana (Morgan 2020). This research does not discredit social distancing as a feasible and rewarding response to COVID-19 but calls for a more thoughtful and inclusive approach to introduce and implement measures like social distancing in the global south. We should understand that social distancing is neither inexpensive nor practicable for everyone unless it is coupled with other class- and space-specific intercessions like provision of water, toiletry, cash inflows, and sleeping arrangements especially for the urban poor who are living in midst of urban planning and development authorities. In this way, not only social distancing would become possible and inclusive for them but will play an important part in bringing together all those who have been disregarded, ghettoized, and banished for decades despite providing essential services to city.

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