

“I Want to Help Girls Like Me”: An Exploration of the Educational Aspirations of Teenage Girls in Kolkata Slums

Rebecca Ipe
University of Oxford

This qualitative study used participatory visual research in order to develop an understanding of the educational experiences of urban poor adolescent girls in Kolkata and to elicit their capabilities. The sample comprised urban poor girls who were undergoing formal education at a religious, philanthropic primary school in Kolkata. Findings from the drawings and interviews reveal the girls' ambitions to be future providers and breadwinners for their families, roles socially accepted as the preserve of men in India's male-dominated society. Ultimately, longitudinal research on these 'first-generation' girls may shed more insight into understanding educational pathways of girls from urban slums and provide more comprehensive understandings of social mobility.

Introduction

Educated girls are still a rarity amongst the urban poor populations where deprivation and inequality are starkly evident and education is a luxury in the struggle for survival (UN-Habitat, 2003, Ernst et al., 2013). This paper defines the urban poor as those living in informal settlements (also known as slums). Slums or informal settlements are characterised by makeshift housing erected on municipal land, a lack of basic services such as piped water and electricity, and grinding poverty. Informal settlements are an inescapable feature of major urban cities in low and middle income (LMIC) countries, and are expected to increase in population in the next few decades: “It is projected that in the next 30 years, the global number of slum dwellers will increase to about 2 billion” (UN Habitat, 2003, p. xxvi). The word ‘slum’ carries negative connotations which falls short of the complexities of the neighbourhoods described. From a critical reading of the texts generated on the subject of slums two attitudes emerge: righteous horror, evoked by UN reports which mercilessly detail the worst conditions of slums or the romantic “flower in the filth” phenomenon which popular media such as *Slumdog Millionaire* (Boyle, 2009) or *Born into Brothels* (Boo, 2012) typify. Certain uses and arrangements of words and actions that we may call cultural may be especially strategic sites for the production of consensus (Appadurai, 2004). This paper, therefore, takes a deliberate stance in using the

phrase 'urban poor' and relying on 'informal settlements' to describe these neighbourhoods.

Despite the ubiquity of informal settlements, there are gaps in the academic literature concerning education provision and equitable outcomes for urban poor children (Lewis, 2008). Many out-of-school children live in informal settlements, which are often bypassed in national surveys, indicating that the number of out-of-school children may be higher than estimated (Carr-Hill, 2012). In India, informal settlements are further divided into 'notified' (officially recognised) and 'non-notified slums'. 'Notified slums' may typically have better quality housing and municipal services while 'non-notified slums' are considered illegal and in constant danger of eviction. Studies conducted in informal settlements paint an almost uniform picture of hardship and deprivation (Subbaraman, 2014; Ernst et al., 2013; Marx et al., 2014). Moreover, 'notified slums' often battle similar adverse living conditions as 'non-notified slums' (Auerbach, 2013). Ethnographic and empirical research has revealed families can live in informal settlements for decades (Thorbeck, 1994; Tsujita, 2013). This not only disrupts the assumption that their residency is temporary, but it also indicates bleak prospects for upward social mobility. Research shows that the urban poor desire their residencies in the informal settlement to be temporary and perceive that education for their children is the only way to avoid a life of permanent poverty (Cameron, 2010; Tsujita, 2013). However, the demands of poverty and various inescapable elements associated with urban poverty, such as violence and economic instability (Abuya et al., 2012; Ohba, 2013), pose major barriers to accessing and completing education. Ethnographic work in South Asian informal settlements shows that they are often governed by traditional, patriarchal norms of culture, which bind women to their homes through notions of honour and respectability (Thorbeck, 1994).

Urban poor women must adhere to these cultural norms while navigating an ever-changing social landscape, where the effects of globalisation offer opportunities to imbibe new ideas and find potential employment. Susanne Thorbeck's years of ethnographic research in a Sri Lankan informal settlement revealed how notions of honour constrained women to the point where communal strife was rife and women rarely had opportunities to band together to work out solutions to community issues. According to Gail Kelly, "in traditional societies early marriage is a major impediment to expansion of schooling among girls, especially at upper-primary or secondary years." (Kelly, p. 19). Yet, research amongst poor communities in India suggests that girls' access to education is growing, thanks to government incentives such as conditional cash transfers and a social revolution that has risen in tandem with the rise of a well-educated middle class and information technology workforce. However, recent research points out that girls' education remains a complex issue amongst poor communities who battle with the tension of keeping the girls home to serve the family's needs versus sending them to school for returns that may never materialise. Jeffery et al.'s (2005) anthropological work in a rural village in India

revealed that girls were encouraged to pursue primary education, as that was seen to raise their "value" in the marriage market. Tsujita's (2013) survey of informal settlements in Delhi noted that many young women were either homemaking or working in factories; few of them possessed anything more than primary education. Yet, if the proliferation of low-fee paying schools in informal settlements is anything to go by, parents are willing to invest what little they have in perceived quality education for their children (Tooley & Dixon, 2007). Studies repeatedly document the urban poor as perceiving education as the pathway out of poverty. As Lancy Lobo (1995) observes in her survey of informal settlements in India, "almost the entire workforce living in the city slums depend mainly on a variety of lower category, less paid and footloose jobs" (p. 32). With these menial, often peripatetic jobs being the main form of employment among urban low-income families, education is seen by parents as a way of breaking into the competitive white-collar workforce that promises better wages and more economic stability.

This study aims to probe the educational experiences of adolescent girls living in informal settlements in Kolkata, India. So far, there is a distinct lack of research on this subject. Studies on urban poor girls' experience of education tend to focus on violence and the risks associated with schooling or on low-fee private schools (Kabiru, 2013; Oduro et al., 2013). Previous exposure to and experience in urban poor Indian communities had shown me that girls lack power in their communities and are often regarded as liabilities thanks to the exigencies of dowry, which although officially outlawed by the Indian government, is still widely practised today. I was especially interested in the 'deviants,' girls who defied this popular stereotype and who managed to obtain higher education despite great adversity. This study's definition of positive deviance stems from studies by nutritionists Zeitlin et al. (1994) who labeled deviants as those with low SES who demonstrated outcomes that exceeded expectations.

My research was motivated by wondering whether slum girls who were currently being educated possessed a greater sense of their capabilities and how they identified these capabilities. A capability is "a person's ability to do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being; (it) represents the alternative combinations of things a person is able to do or be" (Sen, 1993, p.30). The capability approach as described by Amartya Sen eschews utilitarian approaches to educational development and "sets out to be sensitive to human diversity; complex social relations, a sense of reciprocity between people; appreciation that people can reflect reasonably on what they value for themselves and others; and a concern to equalize, not opportunities or outcomes, but rather capabilities" (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007, p.3). Most women in informal settlements are shrouded with the language of oppression and shame, and have a narrow span of activities and roles that are prescribed to them by the dominant patriarchal culture under which they operate. The capability approach, with its emphasis on existing abilities rather than future economic attainment, thus provided an ideal theoretical backdrop for this study

The Urban Poor of Kolkata

Kolkata contains close to 300,000 informal settlements, home to 1,409,721 of the city's population (Chaudhuri, 2015; Kundu, 2003). According to information from the 2011 national census, this is about a third of the city's urban population. Hinduism is the predominant religion at around 70 % of the population, with Islam following it at 20%. Other religions such as Christianity (0.88%) and Jainism (0.47%) figure at less than 1%. The cycle of poverty trapping urban poor Kolkatans has raised media interest (Niyogi, 2012,) as a quarter of its population lives below the poverty line. Many of the urban poor do not possess identification cards because of their 'unauthorised' residence, thereby lacking voting power and the ability to attract government attention.

Through volunteer networks in Canada, I had located a religious, philanthropic school in Kolkata that catered exclusively for children in poor areas. This school is run by a Christian organisation funded by donors in high-income countries such as Canada and Sweden. Due to time constraints arising out of my master's degree, I finally chose this school after emailing several schools in India, as this school was willing to let me do research in the timeframe I had requested. All research sessions were conducted in an empty classroom the headmistress had allotted me, with an interpreter present at all sessions. This was in keeping with the school's ethics requirements. The school is a religious philanthropic school, which has been running in the area for two decades, and prides itself on its trustworthiness. While the headmistress is an Indian Christian and the school is run on funds raised through churches in the West, the teaching and administration staff reflects India's religious diversity and the interpreter/teacher was a Hindu. Apart from mandatory chapel services in the morning before classes, the school does not contain extensive religious instruction such as a madrasa. While Christians make up less than 1% of Kolkata's population, the city has a long history of Christian charities working amongst the urban poor, most notably in the legacy of Mother Teresa.

Participatory Visual Research to Elicit Capabilities

As a Canadian-Indian, I was conscious that I held power thanks to my education and my residence in a high-income country. However, in my experiences in volunteering with Indian girls from poor urban communities, I knew that they could be full of surprises, unwilling to fit in the "Third World Woman" stereotype beloved by international development organisations (Dogra, 2011). To elicit these capabilities, I opted to use participatory visual research among adolescent girls from urban slum areas. Participatory research has had a history of being used in poor, rural communities (Chambers, 1997) and has revealed important facets of the lived experiences of hard-to-reach, itinerant populations such as street children, and homeless populations in post-conflict contexts (Mizen & Ofusi-Kusi, 2010; Packard, 2008; Lykes, 2010). Notably, participatory visual research has come to the fore with its perceived accessibility and participant-driven

aspects of the process. Proponents of participatory visual research argue that it provides participants with a space to share their opinions and worldviews, especially those whose opinions are not usually solicited by their communities or the wider society (Coronel & Pascual, 2013).

"Participatory and collaborative research can have the potential to alter the larger institutional environment within which a newly realized "voice" can emerge. Further, the participants can use their "voice" to engage in critical discussions and help challenge dominant and hegemonic discourses, even if only in certain contexts and at certain times" (Shah, 2015, p.71).

Apologists for visual research contend that such methods possess the power to "unlock" the door to the data secreted in participant minds and that researchers can "dig" more deeply into the unconscious activities of the brain' (Gauntlett, 2007, p. 185). Whether visual research methods do possess such quasi-magical powers is debatable: Buckingham (2009) accuses such exaltations of visual methods as "naïve empiricism." Gallo (2001) cautions against the seduction of transformation: the lived experiences of marginalised populations as expressed through visual image may well only serve as emotional triggers rather than steps towards policy change.

More and more education researchers, however, are turning to participatory visual research in hopes of gleaning data that can shine insight into children's experiences, especially their lived experiences of school and the educational landscape, in hopes of improving upon education policy (Allan, 2012; Groundwater-Smith et al., 2014). Participatory visual research holds special promise for finding how the micro level (i.e. schoolchildren, teachers, principals) is affected by the macro level (education policy and processes of social change such as globalisation). My use of visual research methods is not an attempt to probe the recesses of my participants' brains to mine "hidden" deposits of data. Rather, my research methodology is informed by an "understanding of images as tools with which communicative work is done" (Rose, 2014, p. 27). The visual data that my participants would give me were to function as windows into their experiences and lenses that magnified the issues they perceived important and wanted to explain to me.

Fieldwork and Data Collection

I conducted fieldwork for two weeks in a school located in the Chinatown area of Kolkata. The neighbourhood contains diverse informal settlements and the school has been present for more than two decades. I had located the school as one that was focused exclusively on serving low-income children from the area. The headmistress of the school functioned as a 'gatekeeper' to my research participants and we had been in email correspondence prior to my visit. I opted for convenience sampling, as I had limited time and resources at

my disposal. The headmistress indicated the girls whom she thought would fit my study and from there we narrowed the group down to five. Two of the girls were thirteen and three were fifteen. I had decided to use the draw-and-write method, which has been used by several researchers in mostly developed country settings (Sewell, 2011; Einarsdottir et al., 2009; Elden, 2012). Nossiter and Biberman (1990) argue that drawings “focus a person’s response” as well as inducing “respondent harmony and parsimony” (p. 15). I intended to ask the girls a series of questions and they would draw out their responses. We would then go through these drawings in a group interview session. These interviews would be semi-structured and would revolve around the drawings, stimulating active discussion and participation rather than the question-answer-question of a more structured interview. These interviews, using the drawings as a springboard, were meant to elucidate the thoughts and opinions of the girls. I hoped that this method would encourage the girls to lead the conversation to topics they deemed important so that “the marriage of visual methods and ethnography seems natural” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 410). While group interviews may produce peer-influenced responses, they were deemed the safest option to cooperate with ethical requirements. Also, an interpreter who was also a teacher was present.

I prepared certain exercises in order to at once amplify and triangulate the drawings. I used three main art exercises:

- i) I asked them to draw their present community on a piece of paper. After they had done this, I then asked them to draw their imagined/ dream community.
- ii) I showed them the picture of the two hands (Fig.1.1) where they have to draw their life in the past and their life as they would like to live them in the future.
- iii) I put out a set of Dixit™ cards² and asked them to choose a card which best represented their imagined future.

Dixit is a board game containing cards that have fantastic and whimsical images on them. Players must choose appropriate phrases or sentences that match their card’s image as close as possible. The appeal of these cards lies in their connotative possibilities: an image on a card can represent different things/narratives to different people. These exercises were conducted over the period of fieldwork as it takes time to draw and the girls would often have to leave for class without finishing their drawings. After they had completed the first exercise and talked about their drawings, we would move on the next exercise they would not feel burdened by spending time away from their classes. In addition, the headmistress selected girls who had struck her as ‘bright’, which might distort the resulting data as these are girls whom their teachers believe to possess a high level of capability. Hindi and Bengali are the primary languages spoken in Kolkata and the teacher who acted as a translator was fluent in both as well as English. As an American-

born Indian, my first language is English and my mother tongue is only spoken in South India. I have a working knowledge of Hindi and can carry on everyday conversations. However, I decided an interpreter would be invaluable as she could ensure nothing would be lost in the interviews. In addition, I cannot speak Bengali. The teacher translated each question of mine for the girls as I asked them. During the interviews, the girls chose to speak to me in English and subsided into Hindi or Bengali only when they struggled in finding the appropriate words. They appeared proud of their knowledge of English and wanted to practice their language learning with me. Certain words they used such as 'peon' or 'steamer' speak of the colonial heritage of the English language in India, as these are words I have never heard in conversations in the English-speaking countries I have lived in. The presence of the interpreter may also have contributed to a possible bias, as the teacher was a respected figure and the girls may have felt constrained by her presence. On the other hand, this particular teacher informed me that she was often an impromptu counselor for the girls as they went to her with their troubles and her interest in their educational trajectories had motivated her to act as interpreter.

A list of questions that I used is attached to the appendix of the article. The questions were used to both gather vital statistics and function as narrative springboards. I also tailored questions to the flow of the conversation. For example, if a girl mentioned that she wanted to be a headmistress, I asked her why she chose this career and what she intended to do with it. If a girl said she liked a particular aspect of her community (which she had included in her drawing) I asked her to elaborate, which often led to a further discussion.

Analysis, Findings, and Discussion

As the headmistress would not allow me to record the interviews, I had to write everything that was said to me in a notebook. I then transferred these notes to a laptop computer immediately after the interviews and used them in my analysis. In addition to writing down the dialogues, I also noted observations of the girls as they were drawing, observations of the school and its programs and interviewed the headmistress and staff to understand more about the history and social processes of the school. I participated in school activities and lived in the school (which had guest accommodation) for the duration of my stay. The names of the girls have been anonymised to ensure privacy.

Spatial inequality occupies the high moral ground when discussing the sociopolitical aspects of urban slums (Ernst et al.,2013) As part of my ethical stance, I deliberately avoided all mention of the word "slum." The word "community" was therefore deliberately chosen as a fairly neutral term to refer to the physical space where the girls lived.

Views of Slum Communities from the Inside While the girls were aware of the financial needs of their communities, their descriptions of their communities were balanced, neither overwhelmingly positive, nor negative. I argue that this finding is important in the field of educational research, as children's conceptualisations of space often run counter to expectations generated by quantitative descriptions of childhood poverty. Lomax's (2012) participatory visual research amongst children in an estate in the United Kingdom depicted the children's views of their neighbourhood through photographs they had taken. They chose to focus on green spaces and friendships, demonstrating an awareness of the stigma attached to council estates, and taking photographs that reflected the positive aspects they felt went unacknowledged by popular media.

As Lomax (2012) notes, "visual creative methods make visible children's perspectives in ways which disrupt adult-centric discourses offering an important corrective to media, policy and academia about children's lives" (116). Mirroring the children in Lomax's study, the girls emphasized the green spaces in their drawings as the "oases" in their communities. Sonali (Fig. 1.1) described the park (with the "pond" beside it) as the main area of play for the children in her neighbourhood. She explained that she and her friends loved fishing in the lake, especially during the holidays. Sonali's drawing is done in mostly brown pencil, but she uses green and blue to depict the natural spaces and shrubs in her neighborhood, which indicates that these are important to her. A similar phenomenon occurs in Sneha's drawing, which is mostly monochromatic but makes use of green to represent grass. For Priyanka, natural areas turned out to be segregated: she talked of a field near her home which she could not play in because, "the boys play football there so I cannot go." Conversely, there was a "huge rock" in her community where the women and children would gather in the evenings to talk and spend time with one another. Priyanka said that this was her favourite part of her community and that she liked playing with the other children while the mothers and other women talked.

Fig.1.1 The left hand represents the 'past' while the right depicts the imagined 'future.'

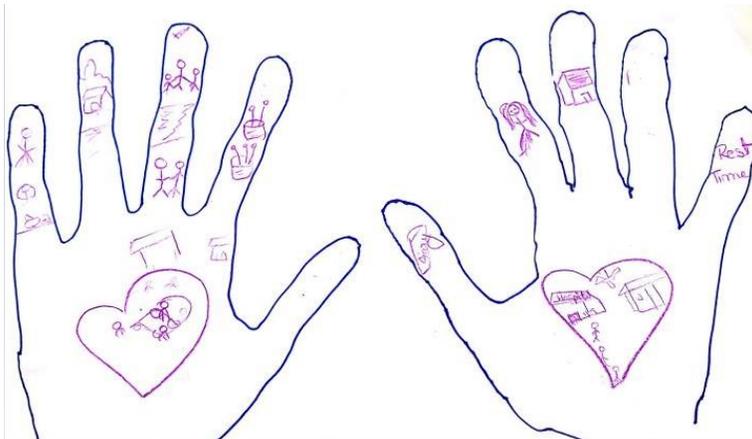


Fig 1.2 Sonali's drawing of her present community. Note the green and blue to represent the 'natural' areas of her community.

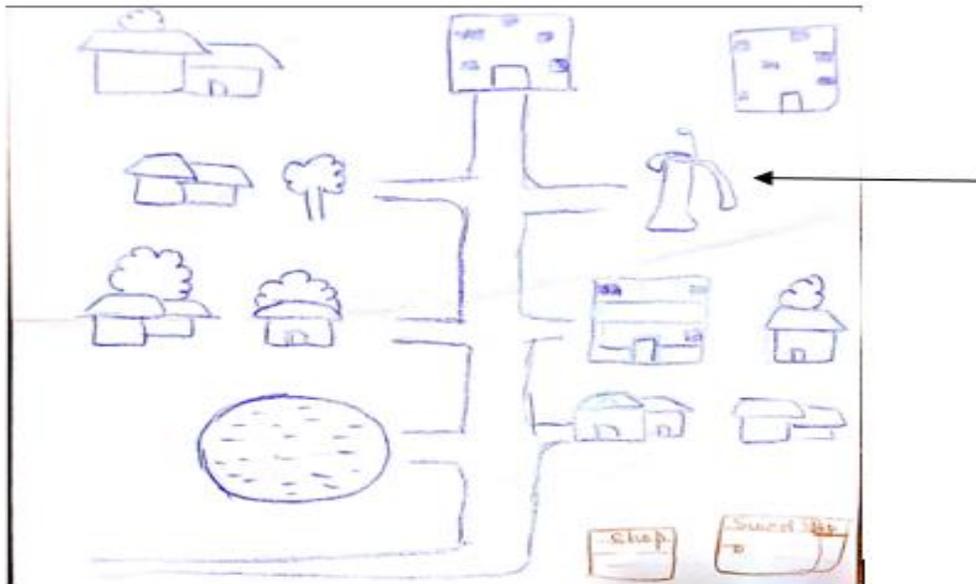


Based on her explanation, physical spaces were measured off into socially acceptable places to inhabit. As a girl, she felt that she was thus barred from entering a space occupied by boys, while she was allowed to be in a place marked out by women's gathering together and women's conversation. Such spatial segregation may point to the reasons why women have little power in their communities. Narrowly prescribed spaces and roles can essentially lead to a community fractured by gender hierarchy where men occupy spaces of power and decision-making and women are relegated to areas marked "safe" (i.e. without the presence of men) and anodyne. A green space was an area to play and enjoy being a child but it was not without boundaries demarcated on lines on gender. This emphasis on the importance of green spaces arose in their "dream communities." Each girl spoke of the desire to have a garden or a park near them and Sneha, who had declared that there was nothing she liked about her present community, became quite enthusiastic when describing her dream community and said she would like her own garden with swings and a seesaw and lots of greenery. For each of the girls, green spaces represented not only the freedom of just being children but were also important for their sense of aesthetic. Green beautiful spaces were all described by the children as necessary for their well-being and each of them spoke of there being "proper" green spaces (unlike the makeshift green spaces which arguably are not intended as oases of calm in the city) in their imagined futures. These desires for areas of play and renewal echo Nussbaum's list of functionings, especially in terms of play, imagination and the senses (Nussbaum, 2006, p. 76-78).

The Water Tap: Deprivation and Conflict The water tap is almost a ubiquitous feature of an Indian informal settlement. Each of the girls drew the water tap or "pump" in their

drawings as an important salient feature of their community. However, they voiced their displeasure with the tap, noting that waiting in line for water (which usually came on for two hours in the morning) was not healthy to community life. Sonali said that there was often a lot of fighting for water and that conflict was sometimes sparked by people cutting in line. While the water pump was an important feature in the girls' lives, they also perceived it as problematic and crippling to not only their daily functioning, but also to the welfare of the community. The concept of 'all facilities' (explored in-depth later) included the girls' dream of twenty-four-hour access to water in their future homes, a water supply that would not have to be shared with neighbours. Indeed, Sonali adamantly expressed a wish for no neighbours, citing perennial conflicts as a motivator for this wish.

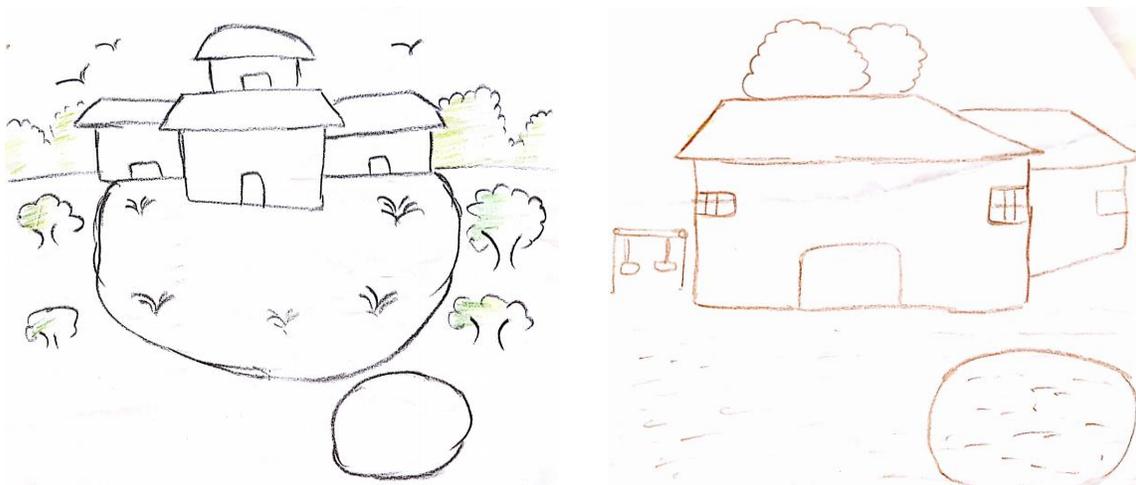
Fig. 1.3 The arrow points to the 'water tap', a ubiquitous and contentious feature of urban slums.



Visions of the Future: The Imagined Communities of the Girls Rather than focusing on their future community, the desire for "my own house" was strongly expressed by all the girls. Social mobility was encapsulated in the dream for a house of one's own: a departure from slum living where residents encroached illegally on municipal land. Sonali explained that she intended her family to come and live with her in her house. This intention was echoed by the other girls, who all expressed a desire to have their natal families live with them in the house. In a country where cultural conventions place the man as the figurehead and breadwinner of the family, I was surprised by how the girls had conceived of themselves as being the future providers of their families. Each girl aimed for jobs that can only be achieved through further education: engineer, doctor, air hostess, school principal, pastor.

When discussing the concept of 'all facilities' (repeated several times during our conversations) they explained that there should be good shops and medical facilities wherever they lived. Sneha commented, "there should be a proper doctor helping all members." Incidentally, Sneha fell off the bed and fractured her elbow mid-way during the research and when I questioned her, she told me that she had not seen a doctor because there was no doctor in her community. She had instead gone to the chemist's shop where they had fitted her out with a cast. A lack of medical facilities for these girls was thus seen as a handicap that should be righted and given that they could not change their area at present, they were determined to move into an area where proper facilities existed.

Fig 1.4 The drawings of the girls' imagined community demonstrate a desire for space and the ability to own a home large enough to house all their family members.



Travel and Mobility as Indicators of Independence The girls spoke of travel and exploration as opportunities to develop and display their agency. When Sneha was discussing her drawing, she pointed to the ship she had drawn and said she wanted to go on a "steamer" ship. "Steamer" is the word she used and to her it represented exciting new lands and possibilities of adventure. She also added that when she was grown up, she wanted a motorbike which she could ride about in the evenings. In India, motorbikes have long been the preserve of men, with women being told that motorbikes are not feminine. Indeed, the names of popular motorbikes such as "Bullet" suggest a hard-nosed conceptualisation of masculinity that sits at odds with the standards of femininity that women are expected to conform to. Poor women in India tend to have extremely restricted mobility: a free-moving woman is seen as a "loose" woman (Chakraborty, 2010). That the girls expressed such desires suggests that they wanted to move past social norms put such restrictions on women and occupy spaces and places traditionally deemed for men.

Their selected vocations were regarded as instrumental to this bending of gender restrictions. Sonali selected the job of a headmistress and talked at length of how such a position would enable her to be both independent and able to make a difference to poor girls like her. In the interviews Sonali appeared strongly intrinsically motivated. She explained that girls in her native state of Orissa were often married off from the ages of 13 (she was 13 at the time of the study) and she intended to show them that alternate futures were possible. She spoke at length of the importance of education and told me that she wanted to have her own personal library in her dream home. For Sonali, education would not only help her achieve her goals but would also be the catalyst for other girls “like me” to achieve their goals. Sonali presented her future self as mentor and motivator for those girls; her own experience of hardship would make her ideally placed to understand and help girls in similar situations.

Fig. 1.5 Sonali’s vision of her future. She liked the snow as it represented exotic locales and travel and presented an image of how she wanted to be an independent and motivating role model for girls like herself.



Likewise, Aishwarya exhibited strong ideas about communal responsibility. The card she selected (image below) was how she pictured herself as “a light in this world.” She wanted to show people the light of Jesus in the world. Aishwarya’s goal of becoming a pastor was also unusual, given that in the Indian Christian tradition, men are predominantly pastors. Aishwarya’s past was streaked with tragedy: her father had fallen from the second storey of a building and had suffered brain damage. As he was recovering, her grandmother had died, which prompted her to start attending church. The church grew extremely

meaningful for her as she processed these events and she told me that she wanted to minister to other poor children like herself.

Fig. 1.6 Aishwarya's depiction of herself as an agent of change.



Such strong personal motivations and drive has rarely been elicited by researchers working with marginalised children, especially girls from urban slums. Indeed, research on girls and children from marginalised communities tends to document low or compromised aspirations (Tafere, 2010; Pasquier-Doumer et al, 2013). The headmistress and translator/ teacher expressed surprise at the girls' aspirations, informing me privately that they had no idea that the girls possessed such high aspirations. This may represent a deviation from the literature thus far, although the girls' relative youth may protect them from the realities of poverty that tend to compromise high aspirations down the line. Current research has noticed a shift in educational aspirations in girls in poor circumstances, although scholars such as Patricia Ames (2013) argue that these aspirations are not formed individually but are "intertwined with intergenerational agreements, family projects, and shared understandings of the changes needed to improve the life of young women". Time and resource constraints prevented me from interviewing the girls' families to understand their role in their daughters' aspirations but each of the girls provided details of their families' support, whether it was through paying for private tuitions (which the school staff were ideologically opposed to, claiming that private tutors were exploiting these poor families) or through verbal encouragement.

Breadwinners and Agents of Change Each girl expressed a strong bond with family members (three out of five girls mentioned their grandparents as especially beloved) and

positioned themselves as responsible for their family's futures. This taking on of the role of the "breadwinner" is a surprising finding, especially when none of the girls mentioned marriage as a possibility. Given that the girl's family has to pay a dowry to the groom's (a custom still widely practiced despite governmental bans), if a girl marries an adequately well-off man, she will be seen to have married wisely as her husband's family might be able to help out her own should trouble arise. Kabeer's (2003) work indicates that parents use education as a method of driving up their daughter's social capital in order to make her a more eligible "catch" rather than as an investment into her career or intellectual progress.

The surprisingly high aspirations expressed by the girls can be taken as a positive sign for future development in informal settlements. Rather than conforming to stereotyped expectations of children from these areas, each of the girls situated themselves as agents of change in the lives of their families and future role models for girls such as themselves. Their reasoned and detailed explanations suggested a high level of capability. To what extent their education was responsible for developing their capabilities is hard to decipher and not the focus of this study. However, each girl saw education as instrumental in achieving their aspirations, especially for girls such as Sonali who was motivated to provide education to underprivileged girls as a way of offering alternatives to restricted futures.

Conclusion and Recommendations

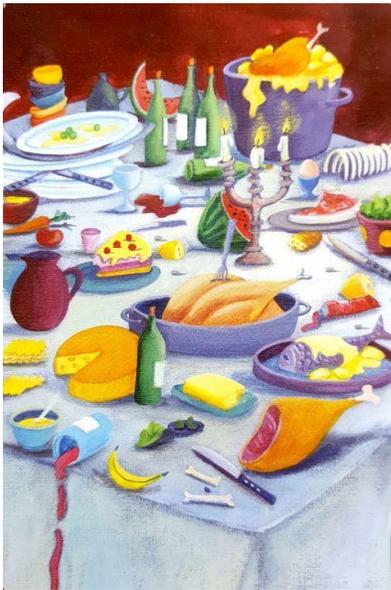
This study has functioned as an exploration rather than a sustained probe into the capabilities of girls in Indian slums. Participatory visual research was found to be the ideal research instrument for this study as it minimised potential harm and focused on the experiences of the girls themselves. The girls stated that they had liked the novelty of research process and had enjoyed talking about their educational ambitions. The headmistress (and later the regional director for the charity in Canada) expressed their desire for the girls' ambitions to be realised and indicated they wanted the school to continue to the upper secondary level as well as plant more schools in India for hard-to-reach children.

The findings indicate that contrary to research conducted amongst underprivileged children, these girls expressed high motivations and positioned themselves as future agents of change, desiring to occupy previously male-dominated spaces and to challenge patriarchal norms in their society. As they were all the first generation in their families to complete primary schooling, it would be interesting to conduct further research on 'first-generation' children to tease out factors contributing to their resilience. A longitudinal study on these girls holds much promise for educational researchers tasked with finding solutions to urban poverty.

“I Want to Help Girls Like Me”

Thus far participatory visual research has mostly been conducted in education settings as ‘one-off’ sessions. Repeated participatory visual research amongst the same research participants over the years as they navigate the national educational system can provide a “visual chronology” of their experiences and capabilities. It may also provide richer data on the experiences of first-generation children as they seek to achieve their aspirations.

Fig.1.7: Anushka’s imagined future: “Wherever I am, I want there to be lots of food.” Policy makers must be prepared to tackle issues such as poverty, hunger and the struggle for survival in order to ensure equitable educational access and outcomes for girls from urban slums.



Acknowledgements: The author wishes to thank Julia Park and Kelsey Inouye for their feedback and critical commentary on earlier drafts of this paper.

About the Author: Rebecca Ipe received a Master's degree in Comparative and International Education at the University of Oxford. Her research interests lie in educational inequalities, poverty, and gender.

References

- Abuya, B. A., Admassu, K., Ngware, M., Onsomu, E. O., & Oketch, M. (2015). Free Primary Education and Implementation in Kenya. *SAGE Open*, 5(1). Retrieved from <http://sgo.sagepub.com/content/5/1/2158244015571488.abstract>
- Allan, A. (2012). Power, Participation and Privilege - Methodological Lessons from Using Visual Methods in Research with Young People. *Sociol. Res. Online*, 17(3). JOUR. <http://doi.org/10.5153/sro.2662>
- Appadurai, Arjun. (2004). The Capacity to Aspire: Culture and the Terms of Recognition" IN Rao, V., & Walton, M. (Eds.), *Culture and public action* (pp.59-84). Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Social Sciences.
- Ames, P. (2013). Constructing new identities? The role of gender and education in rural girls' life aspirations in Peru. *Gender and Education*, 25(3), 267–283. JOUR. <http://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2012.740448>
- Auerbach, A. M. (2015). India's urban constituencies revisited. *Contemporary South Asia*, 23(2), 136–150. JOUR. <http://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2015.1028026>
- Boo, K. (2012). *Behind the Beautiful Forevers [electronic resource]: life, death, and hope in a Mumbai undercity*. BOOK, Brunswick: Scribe Publications.
- Boyle, D., Beaufoy, S., Colson, C., Mantle, A. D., Digby, M., Dickens, C. W. S. (Christopher W. S., ... (Firm), F. (Eds.). (2009). *Slumdog millionaire* [videorecording]. VIDEO, S.I.]: [S.I.] : Pathé Productions.
- Buckingham, D. (2009). 'Creative' visual methods in media research: possibilities, problems and proposals. *Media, Culture & Society*, 31(4), 633–652. JOUR. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0163443709335280>
- Cameron, S. (2011). Whether and where to Enrol? Choosing a Primary School in the Slums of Urban Dhaka, Bangladesh. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 31(4), 357–366. JOUR. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2011.01.004>

- Carr-Hill, R. (2010). The poor may always be with us but we don't know how many or where they are. *Journal of Health Services Research & Policy*. GEN. <http://doi.org/10.1258/jhsrp.2010.009155>
- Chakraborty, K. (2009). "The good Muslim girl": conducting qualitative participatory research to understand the lives of young Muslim women in the bustees of Kolkata. *Children's Geographies*, 7(4), 421–434. JOUR. <http://doi.org/10.1080/14733280903234485>
- Chambers, R. (1997). *Whose reality counts?: putting the first last*. BOOK, London: London : ITDG.
- Cities and climate change : global report on human settlements 2011*. (2011). BOOK, London: London : Earthscan.
- Chaudhuri, S. (2015) Urban poor, economic opportunities and sustainable development through traditional knowledge and practices, *Global Bioethics*, 26:2, 86-93, DOI: 10.1080/11287462.2015.1037141
- Coronel, J. M., & Pascual, I. R. (2013). Let Me Put It Another Way: Methodological Considerations on the Use of Participatory Photography Based on an Experiment with Teenagers in Secondary Schools. *Qualitative Research in Education*, 2(2), 98–129. JOUR. <http://doi.org/10.4471/qre.2013.20>
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). *Handbook of qualitative research*. BOOK, Thousand Oaks, Calif. : Sage.
- Einarsdottir, J., Dockett, S., & Perry, B. (2009). Making Meaning: Children's Perspectives Expressed through Drawings. *Early Child Development and Care*, 179(2), 217–232. JOUR. <http://doi.org/10.1080/03004430802666999>
- Elden, S. (2013). Inviting the Messy: Drawing Methods and "Children's Voices." *Childhood: A Global Journal of Child Research*, 20(1), 66–81. JOUR. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0907568212447243>
- Ernst, K. C., Phillips, B. S., & Duncan, B. "duke." (2013). Slums Are Not Places for Children to Live: Vulnerabilities, Health Outcomes, and Possible Interventions: Vulnerabilities, Health Outcomes, and Possible Interventions. *Advances in Pediatrics*, 60(1), 53–87. JOUR. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.yapd.2013.04.005>
- Gallo, M. L. Immigrant workers' journey through a new culture: Exploring the transformative learning possibilities of photography. *Studies in the Education of Adults* (2001). 33 (2), 109-117

- Gauntlett, D. (2007). *Creative explorations : new approaches to identities and audiences*. BOOK, London: London : Routledge.
- Groundwater-Smith, S., Dockett, S., & Bottrell, D. (2015). *Participatory research with children and young people*. BOOK, London: SAGE Publications.
- Kabeer, N. (2003). *Gender mainstreaming in poverty eradication and the millennium development goals [electronic resource] : a handbook for policy-makers and other stakeholders*. BOOK, London : Ottawa: Commonwealth Secretariat : International Development research Centre.
- Kabiru, C. W. (2013). Growing Up at the “Margins”: Concerns, Aspirations, and Expectations of Young People Living in Nairobi’s Slums. *JOURNAL OF RESEARCH ON ADOLESCENCE*, 23(1), 81. JOUR.
- Kelly, G. P., & Elliott, C. M. (1982). *Women’s education in the Third World [electronic resource] : comparative perspectives*. BOOK, Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Kundu, N. "The Case of Kolkata, India" in University College, London., & United Nations Human Settlements Programme. (2003). *Understanding slums: Case studies for the Global Report on Human Settlements 2003*. New York: UN-HABITAT.
- Lobo, L. (1995). *Encounter with urbanism : coping mechanisms in a slum*. BOOK, Surat: Centre for Social Studies.
- Lomax, H. J. (2012). Shifting the focus: children’s image-making practices and their implications for analysis. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 35(3), 227–234. JOUR. <http://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2012.713932>
- Lykes, M. B. (2010). Silence(ing), voice(s) and gross violations of human rights: constituting and performing subjectivities through PhotoPAR. *Visual Studies*, 25(3), 238–254. JOUR. <http://doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2010.523276>
- Mannay, D. (2015). *Visual, narrative and creative research methods : application, reflection and ethics*. BOOK, London: Routledge.
- Mizen, P., & Ofosu-Kusi, Y. (2010). Unofficial truths and everyday insights: understanding voice in visual research with the children of Accra’s urban poor 1. *Visual Studies*, 25(3), 255–267. JOUR. <http://doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2010.523278>

"I Want to Help Girls Like Me"

- Niyogi, S. (2012, September 12). Kolkata's Poor Poorer Than the Rest. *The Times of India*. Retrieved from www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com
- Nossiter, V. and Biberman, G. (1990) 'Projective Drawings and Metaphor: Analysis of Organizational Culture', *Journal of Managerial Psychology* 5(3): 13–16 .
- Nussbaum, M. C. (2006). *Frontiers of justice : disability, nationality, species membership*. BOOK, Cambridge, Mass. : The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Ohba, A. (2013). Do low-cost private school leavers in the informal settlement have a good chance of admission to a government secondary school? A study from Kibera in Kenya. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 43(6), 763–782. JOUR. <http://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2012.733536>
- Packard, J. (2008). "I'm gonna show you what it's really like out here": the power and limitation of participatory visual methods. *Visual Studies*, 23(1), 63–77. JOUR. <http://doi.org/10.1080/14725860801908544>
- Pasquier-Doumer, L., & Risso Brandon, F. (2015). Aspiration Failure: A Poverty Trap for Indigenous Children in Peru? *World Development*, 72, 208–223. JOUR. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2015.03.001>
- Rose, G. (2014). On the relation between "visual research methods" and contemporary visual culture. *Sociological Review*, 62(1), 24–46. JOUR. <http://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.12109>
- Sen, A. (1992). *Inequality reexamined*. BOOK, New York : Oxford: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Sewell, K. (2011). Researching sensitive issues: a critical appraisal of "draw-and-write" as a data collection technique in eliciting children's perceptions. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 34(2), 175–191. JOUR. <http://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2011.578820>
- Shah, P. (2015). Spaces to Speak: Photovoice and the Reimagination of Girls' Education in India. *Comparative Education Review*, 59(1), 50–74. JOUR. <http://doi.org/10.1086/678699>
- Tafere, Y. (2010). Changing educational aspirations of children living in poverty in Ethiopia. GEN.
- The challenge of slums : global report on human settlements, 2003*. (2003). *Global report on human settlements, 2003*. BOOK, London: London : Earthscan.

- Thorbek, S. (1994). *Gender and slum culture in urban Asia*. (B. Fredsfod, Ed.). BOOK, London: London : Zed.
- Tooley, J., & Dixon, P. (2007). Private Schooling for Low-Income Families: A Census and Comparative Survey in East Delhi, India. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 27(2), 205–219. JOUR. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2006.08.002>
- Tsujita, Y. (2013). Factors that Prevent Children from Gaining Access to Schooling: A Study of Delhi Slum Households. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 33(4), 348–357. JOUR. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2012.08.001>
- Walker, M., & Unterhalter, E. (Eds.). (2007). *Amartya Sen's capability approach and social justice in education*. BOOK, Basingstoke: Basingstoke : Palgrave Macmillan.