

9. Not Quite the Death of Distance in Chennai: Challenging the Resettlement Utopia of Perumbakkam

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Abstract

Poor communities facing marginalization can benefit the most from the opportunities digital communication technologies provide. However, the digital divide clouds the realization of these opportunities, especially for women. This chapter sheds light on the issue of resettlement in Chennai city in the context of housing rights of urban poor women with a focus on the role of Mobile Technology for Development (MT4D) in mitigating the negative impact of the entire process of resettlement. Our MT4D experiments in the field with affected women also present the dynamics of the interactions between gender, technology, and poverty in the urban resettlement context. The researchers opine that adoption of a techno-optimism approach using MT4D will not only effectively solve many issues which arise due to lack of information in resettlement sites, but can also serve as a tool to help women in resettlement sites to migrate into digital economies.

Keywords: digital divide, resettlement, housing rights, access to information, MT4D (Mobile Technology for Development)

Introduction

Techno-optimism, with specific reference to Information and Communication Technology for Development (ICT4D), dominates scholarly discourses and development policies globally (Larsson and Stark 2019). Alternatively, critics, mostly scholars from the social sciences, have also presented

pessimistic views on the failures of this techno-optimistic or techno-centric approach in delivering the perceived positive impact due to an array of reasons (Tayoma 2011). Disparities exist, for example, in terms of access to mobile technology with determinants like availability, affordability, awareness, ability, agency, and social norms which contribute to the digital divide (Hernandez and Roberts 2018). The urban poor are often left out of this techno utopia as technologies in the profit-driven market are not designed considering the needs of the poor. The urban poor suffer from “persistent digital and financial exclusion” that prevents them from being integrated into the economic progression of the cities (Kesavan 2015).

The city of Chennai has been witnessing large-scale development-induced resettlement, wherein the poor are evicted from inner city slums and resettled in apartments in large colonies at the outskirts of the city. Resettlement experts have critiqued these very large resettlement projects as problematic as the poor face multiple losses and the most impacted are women. Women in resettlement become even more impoverished as resettlement results in amplified financial, social, and geographical exclusion (Bajpai and Gautam 2018; Coelho, Chandrika and Venkat 2013; Sikka and Mathur 2018; Smyth, Steyn, Esteves et al. 2015; Terminski 2015; Quetulio-Navarra, Znidarsic and Niehof, 2017).

Our chapter sheds light on the issue of resettlement in Chennai city in the context of housing rights of urban poor women with a focus on the role of MT4D in mitigating the impact of the entire process of resettlement and informing those affected about their rights. Two projects were conducted on an experimental basis: a capacity-building programme on smartphones and social media usage, and the development and testing of a mobile application. The main objectives of these experimental studies was to train women in Perumbakkam (Chennai, India) to use mobile technology and social media, to test the reach of customized mobile applications for the specific needs of women in Perumbakkam, and also to understand the factors which play a role in women in resettlement sites adopting or rejecting mobile technology. Our MT4D experiments in the field with affected women present the dynamics of the interactions between gender, technology, and poverty in the urban resettlement context. A participatory documentary film project we embarked upon, *We too Urban*, gave us access to stories the community wanted to tell the world. Interviews with the affected women in informal settlements prone to evictions and those in the Perumbakkam resettlement site focus on the gender dimensions of resettlement.¹

1 All names used in this chapter have been changed or withheld to protect identity.



Figure 9.1 Aerial view of Perumbakkam

Ground Realities of Displacement and Resettlement

The visit to the Perumbakkam resettlement site² in December 2017 was an eye-opener to the problems of the resettled urban poor, especially women. This was part of the Institute for Housing and Urban Development Studies³ (IHS) International Refresher Course on gender dimensions of urban river restoration projects. We went to the Perumbakkam resettlement site during a field visit and as soon as we got out of our vehicle, women in the tenements surrounded us and started sharing their stories. The statements below were made by women who were moved to Perumbakkam from a slum in the city.

I have a house now, nice and shining new, but what am I supposed to do in it [...]? Sit inside and admire the house all day? I cannot eat the house, can I? I have a stomach to fill [...]. I cannot find a job here, I cannot move back to the city [...]. We were happy we were getting homes but we were not prepared for this reality [...] (Personal interview).

I used to work as a maid in residences in the city, I lost my job because I moved here [...], as a single parent with a girl child ready to join college [...]. I am unable to support her education. Going back to the city for work

2 <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/problems-galore-for-perumbakkam-tnscb-residents/article31526506.ece>

3 <https://www.ihs.nl/en>



Figure 9.2 Women in Perumbakkam

is impossible with erratic bus services [...]. I am struggling to make ends meet, I don't know how I will educate my child [...], resettlement is a bane for me [...]. I was not aware about the consequences of moving out of the city [...] (Personal interview).

These stories went against the dominant discourses and public understanding that resettlement projects are a viable solution to urban housing needs. Finding a home in the city is a distant dream for the many poor who migrate to urban areas in search of livelihoods. Many of the poor end up in slums along rivers or in other vacant spots that they can find. Official estimates indicate that the slum population in Chennai doubled from 0.7 million in the 1970s to 1.3 million in 2011 (Saharan et al. 2018, 458).

Resettlement in Chennai

Chennai is currently facing mass eviction and resettlement. A river restoration project will eventually lead to displacement and resettlement. Sixty thousand families or roughly 200,000 people living in slums along the riverbanks in so-called objectionable areas—low-lying flood-prone areas of the city—were earmarked for eviction, many of whom have already been relocated (Whitcomb 2020).

The Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board (TNSCB)⁴ is responsible for the implementation of housing projects for the urban poor, and they are the implementing agency with regard to resettlement of the urban poor. The current resettlement sites are often located twenty-five to thirty kilometres from the city centre, with weak or no access to public transport, employment, education, or healthcare (Diwakar and Peter 2016; van Eerd 2018).

Widely known in the resettlement literature are the impoverishment risks listed by Cernea (2000, 1569) which are “landlessness, joblessness, homelessness, marginalization, increased morbidity and mortality, food insecurity, loss of access to common property and resources and community disarticulation.” These are identified as the key risks, and people are vulnerable to impoverishment in a forced development-induced displacement and resettlement. Resettlement research has also overwhelmingly shown the negative impact of the change of location on livelihoods, particularly of women, who are often worse affected (Terminski 2015; Sikka and Mathur 2018).

The Perumbakkam Resettlement Site

Perumbakkam is a very large resettlement site in Chennai with a population of 14,000 families, or around 60,000 people, but it will, when finalized, rehouse a total of 100,000 people. It is located more than thirty kilometres away from the Chennai city centre, which is situated outside the Greater Chennai Corporation limit. The project came under heavy criticism⁵ for its failure to involve the impacted communities, especially women, in the design, development, and implementation (IRCDUC 2015). The lack of comprehensive mechanisms for resettlement compromises the rights of displaced communities in Tamil Nadu and in this specific resettlement project (Peter 2017). Research⁶ has shown that those resettled there face a multitude of problems such as the lack of economic opportunities in the vicinity of Perumbakkam, and that those continuing with their previous jobs must travel long distances, which is problematic, particularly for women (Diwaker and Peter 2016; HLRN and IRCDUC 2017).

We embarked on the documentary film project, *We too Urban*, to digitally record the stories of resettled poor communities in Perumbakkam,

4 Since 2021, officially renamed as the Tamil Nadu Urban Habitat Development Board (TNUHDB)

5 <https://www.cag.org.in/blogs/tn-slum-clearance-board-through-lens-cags-audit-report-part-ii>

6 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/345320945_Housing_aspiration_of_resettled_communities_through_a_gender_lens

particularly from a gender perspective. The documentary, with participation of women from Perumbakkam, will be used as teaching material for students in universities, and to inform various stakeholders across the globe. These include those who are involved in resettlement, but also to inform the public about the gender dimension of resettlement so that the same mistakes are not repeated. The project gave us access to stories the community wanted to tell the world. During filming, we met Girija, who narrated her story, a strong testimonial which tells us of the impact of physical distance on urban poor women caused by resettlement.

My husband has been sick, and bed-ridden for twelve years now. We were moved from Otteri [Chennai city] to Perumbakkam. When I was in Otteri, I was able to take care of him [*pointing at her husband who lies in the cot*] despite going to work, as my son and neighbours offered support in taking care of my husband. Here in Perumbakkam, I have no one to help, everyone is new here, I cannot go to work or take care of my husband. [...] I can't even leave him alone to go search for jobs. [...] I did apply for his pension, but haven't received it yet, whenever I go to the office with the request for pension, they are asking me to bring him [the husband] to the office to prove his disability. If I had to take him it would cost me Rs. 500 (approx. \$6.58). For that Rs. 500 I have to beg. I have no money. Even to get medicine from the hospital they ask me to bring him in person. Back in the city, the hospital was nearby, I could go. Here, to travel three km I have to spend Rs. 200 (approximately \$2.63) both ways. Where will I go for that money? (Personal interview).

Slums have been part and parcel of the landscape in Chennai. Many slums have been there for generations and some even have purchased "their" land from local politicians in the false understanding they would be safe (source: interview in Radha Krishna Nagar, December 2017). As this land is owned by the Public Works Department (PWD), it was not supposed to have been sold. Although the overall living conditions of these slums are problematic as they lack many services and living is tough, the biggest advantage of these inner-city slums for their communities is the location; they are located close to the workplaces, hospitals, and schools. This locational benefit is particularly important for women who are therefore able to combine a domestic job with their own household responsibilities.

We were born and brought up here and we haven't caused any problems, people just mind their business. We pleaded with them not to demolish



Figure 9.3 A woman and her child watching the demolition of their home in an inner city slum

the houses. We requested for resettlement in the city. No one heard us. We have petitioned many government officials in this regard. There are no job opportunities there (Perumbakkam). Our kids are studying here. Our source of livelihood is here. There are no job opportunities there (Personal interview).

I work as a cook in nearby homes, I earn around Rs. 10,000 per month (approx. \$131). I never went hungry here, what will I do there in Perumbakkam? Will I get a job there? You are going to set up a park here, you call this beautification of the city? Removing the poor is not beautification, can your development be inclusive of the poor? They have been talking about evictions for some years, I never realised it is for real [...]. We were promised by our local leaders that evictions won't happen and now I am amidst the rubble [...] (Personal interview).

Our interviews make clear that people living in the inner-city slums in Chennai targeted for resettlement are either uninformed or not sufficiently informed about the resettlement plans and processes. The information on what is happening, when people will be moved, and where, is very fragmented. Although in some cases, a selected group is informed; in general, there is a lot of uncertainty and anxiety amongst the community. Sometimes plans had been announced a long time ago but since nothing happened, people forgot about them. In other cases, people were only informed a few hours prior to a forced eviction, while in other cases, these forced evictions start totally unannounced.

Resettlement from a Housing Rights Perspective

From a housing rights perspective, governments are obligated to demonstrate that the measures they take are sufficient to realize the right to adequate housing for every individual in the shortest time possible, in accordance with maximum available resources. Adequacy includes security of tenure, availability of services, materials, facilities and infrastructure, affordability, habitability, accessibility, location, and cultural adequacy. The right to housing implies that the state has a duty to facilitate access to housing for all (CESCR 1991; 1997). To that extent, human rights make housing a right and a public good.

Therefore, governments clearly should not evict people from their homes and lands without any due process. The protection against forced evictions is guaranteed in several international frameworks. The Basic Principles and Guidelines on Development-based Evictions and Displacement which were formally acknowledged by the United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC) in 2007 define the practice of forced evictions and lay down stringent criteria, outlining when they are allowed to occur, under which circumstances, and how the impact should be monitored. They establish the “right to be resettled,” and they also call upon states to guarantee the right to adequate housing for displaced communities living in adverse conditions (United Nations 2007). Meaning that resettlement sites must fulfil the criteria for adequate housing.

To what extent those criteria are met is highly questionable, as lots of research, including ours, continues to show (amongst others Beier, Spire and Bridonneau 2022; Price and Singer 2019; Satiroglu and Choi 2015; Zaman, Nair and Guoqing 2021). Compromised factors in resettlement varied from safety and security, loss of social assets, social stigma, children’s education, unemployment, crime, alcohol, and drug addiction and child abuse. But one main component to many of the factors which causes distress is the lack of information and communication between various stakeholders. The perversity of this resettlement is that Perumbakkam is situated just a stone’s throw away from the information technology (IT) corridor of Chennai.

Death of Distance

Advances in digital media and mobile telecommunications have revolutionized the world and re-popularized the notion of the “global village,” a proposition by the media philosopher McLuhan (1967) who argued that the

ubiquity of communicative technologies would vanish the issues of time and space. Cairncross, an economist and journalist, promoted this notion, making the case that technology has created a “death of distance” (1997; 2001) diminishing physical spatial distances. On the contrary, in spite of the recent rise in digital connectivity in India⁷ through cheap data plans and mobile phones, the divides of space continue to exclude the urban poor. Death of distance is not real for women in resettlement; it determines their access to healthcare, employment, and social networks. The reality of the distance, living in the outskirts of the city, is life-changing for many resettled women. The techno utopia visions of smart cities are yet to reach urban poor women in resettlement sites, who face geographical, economic, social, as well as digital exclusion.

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on gender equality advocates the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to promote the empowerment of women.⁸ The OECD report (2018) acknowledges that digital technology adoption, i.e., internet, digital platforms, mobile phones, and digital financial services can provide increased employment opportunities and access to information and knowledge, which can result in economic empowerment of women, resulting in solutions for existing gender disparities. Though communities in poverty facing marginalization and vulnerabilities can benefit the most from the connectivity and opportunities digital technology provides, however, the digital divide clouds the realization of these opportunities, especially for women. Research from around the globe has proved that urban poor women are less likely to be digitally active. Barriers that prevent women from fully benefiting from the use of mobile technology and internet range from issues in access to technology, deficient technical skills, curtailment of autonomy, inadequate infrastructure, and high costs of connectivity.⁹ Today, some 327 million fewer women than men have a smartphone and can access the mobile internet worldwide (OECD 2018). Women in India are fifteen per cent less likely to own a mobile phone and thirty-three per cent less likely to use mobile internet services than men, and thirty-six per cent of Indian

7 https://techcrunch.com/2020/06/19/how-reliance-jio-platforms-became-indias-biggest-telecom-network/?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHRocHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAFBpcI5yGQIMi7veyg1gNs6EFoGIp32YZBa8hj5STsBTCFNhcv7n9kxLC4qL8NyUHWzzV7dCQv2vpi2XvWt7wQJZjcWITmRgK2h_RYR3xBYudk9Q5kLu6WEKjgxo-FPjVW3TaVkjqsI8WO6q-J5zUH_v5_8H_gDDooYxEsAcqb2h

8 <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/women-and-the-sdgs/sdg-5-gender-equality>

9 <https://www.w4.org/en/icts-and-mobile-technologies-empowering-women/>



Figures 9.4 & 9.5 Mobile application study in Perumbakkam

males have mobile internet access compared to only sixteen per cent of females (Cornelissen 2021).

There are hardly any studies on the role of ICT4D projects in an urban poor resettlement context. As governments across the developing world push forward the agenda of development of smart cities, it is imperative that we study and understand the barriers in the creation of an enabling development environment for digital inclusion of urban poor communities.

Can MT4D in an urban resettlement context help in mitigating the issues women face? Can technological interventions also inform them about their rights and entitlements and connect them with support agencies and non-governmental organizations? Will “death of distance” be a reality as these women become more digitally literate? Our experiments in the field provided us an insight into the much-needed information and knowledge on the interactions of urban poor women in the digital space.

Some statements from women who participated in our field experiments were as follows:

The workshop was an unforgettable event, as it was a good opportunity to spend time with my friends after a long time and also learning something new. Every session is in my memory, and I can outline what I learnt from each session. From this workshop, I have learnt to record videos, use

selfie stick and take photographs using my mobile. I have also learnt the benefits of social media usage. I still have the photographs of the workshop; I retrieve these photographs and relive those golden memories of the two-day workshop even today (Personal interview).

Post workshop, I am active on social media. I hold accounts on Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram. I am a secretary to the block association, and I use social media to connect with the residents. I have taught other women to open and use Facebook accounts. I have also taught them about privacy setting in their social media account to safeguard their personal information (Personal interview).

My husband did not allow me to open a social media account. After attending the workshop, I have explained to him the pros and cons of using social media and then he permitted me. Even now, I need to get prior permission from my husband for posting family pictures in my social media account (Personal interview).

Smartphone technology has helped me to apply online for obtaining government certificates like community, income, etc. This technology helped me for safety reasons as a woman to reach helpline numbers for immediate action (Personal interview).

Though women acknowledged the enabling power of mobile technology in improving their capacities under the informational, associative, and communicative framework (Gurumurthy and Chami 2014), women are yet to realize that access to communication technology, in this case, mobile phones, falls under the rights framework, the right of women to communicate, express, and raise their voices to find solidarity. The digital divide is evident from our interactions with the women in the resettlement site. Digital exclusion of women is facilitated by factors like ownership, affordability, technological illiteracy, and gendered social norms. Women in resettlement sites are yet to capitalize on the mobile technology revolution.

Though technology alone cannot result in development, it is the skills and capacities of an individual which is necessitated for the effective use of technology for development. "The greater one's skills and capacities, the more value technology has" (Toyama 2011, 3–4). Our interactions and experiments with women in the resettlement site at Perumbakkam provide an insight for the need to accelerate digital literacy among resettled women.

Conclusion

The resettlement of urban poor from an inner city slum to Perumbakkam situated on the IT corridor of Chennai involves the shift from an informal economic hub to a formalized digital economy hub. The community in an inner city informal settlement relied on traditional modes of communication with word-of-mouth as the primary form of communication, complemented by well-knit social networks, and access to resources. On the contrary, in the technopolises of Chennai, where the resettlement sites are situated, the mode of communication primarily is on digital platforms. All transactions, including social networking, employment opportunities, and healthcare have transitioned to digital platforms in the technopolis region of Chennai. With digital illiteracy high among urban poor women in resettlement, it is almost impossible for them to transition and adapt to the newer digitally rich economic region. The theory of information poverty by Chatman (1996) puts forth the concept of digital poverty, where marginalized social groups suffer from an inability to satisfy information needs, that being the case in Perumbakkam and other resettlement sites in Chennai.

Digital poverty can be combated with capacity-building programmes on digital literacy. It can help women to migrate to the digital world and reap the benefits of techno utopia. As visions for smart cities are being implemented, there is an urgent need to rethink and reframe urban housing policies to incorporate an informed, participatory, and inclusive framework for resettlement projects to effectively mitigate the impact on the urban poor. Adoption of a techno-optimism approach using MT4D will not only effectively solve many issues which arise due to lack of information, but can also serve as a tool to help women in resettlement sites to migrate into the newer digital economy of the region. Leave no one behind (LNOB), the transformative promise of the UN-Habitat's New Urban Agenda, implicates the importance of inclusive development visions (UN-SDG 2022; United Nations Human Settlements Programme 2022).

Will digital inclusiveness help in solving some of the problems women face in resettlement? Will women be able to access and appreciate the transformative power of technology, and use it as a tool to further build their networks, and raise their voices to assert their rights through digital platforms? Our project with women from Perumbakkam will continue to ask these questions, and together, we will search for possible answers.

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