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Locating agency at the urban grassroots: Resistance and reworking in the everyday politics of informal settlements

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ABSTRACT

Agency of the urban poor living in informal settlements in Southern cities can manifest in numerous ways in their encounters and negotiations with the formal state and various other actors located in the hierarchy of power relations. A certain form of agency rooted in oppositional consciousness can emerge from their everyday experiences of various forms of structural violence and oppression. Drawing on ethnographic case studies carried out in two informal settlements in Dhaka city, this article examines a range of oppositional acts carried out by the settlements' residents against various formal and informal actors to understand how grassroots agency is manifested and negotiated in such acts. It utilises Katz's conceptualisation of resistance and reworking as expressions of agency in interrogating the strategies and practices informal settlement residents use in order to negotiate with and reformulate the conditions and possibilities of their everyday lives. Findings elucidate their capacities and modalities of collective resistance against acts of repression carried out by formal and informal actors as well as against the dominant, vilifying discourses of informal settlements. It further illustrates how they can rework the law to negotiate and claim space within structures of domination. The article concludes by arguing that these acts of resistance and reworking are not just a coping response to constant repression and domination, but a means of claiming a more secure citizenship in the city.

1. Introduction

On the morning of 5 April 2012, thousands of people took to the streets of Dhaka city protesting a sudden eviction drive in their neighbourhood. The protesters were all residents of Korail - a low-income informal settlement that was going to be demolished by the city authorities. They kept the streets occupied for several hours, bringing traffic on some of the busiest parts of the city to a standstill, until the eviction drive was called off by authorities (Parvin, 2012). For many informal settlement residents in Dhaka, and elsewhere, who frequently experience structural violence and systemic exclusion by state apparatuses, eviction drives like this are part of their everyday reality (Fattah, 2021; McNamara et al., 2016). Often, they can do little to prevent such events. However, this incident of protest demonstrates that such violence does not always go uncontested. Informal settlement residents can engage in organized and collective acts of opposition against the formal state in a manner that directly challenges the latter's authority and seek to recalibrate the relations of power.

If agency is defined as an individual's or group's capacity to affect their own life course, influence their social realities, and exert some degree of control over the social relations in which one is located, especially when confronted with challenges (Davies et al., 2015; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Sewell, 1992) then Korail residents' collective protest against the state-led eviction drive may well be described as the expression of a certain form of agency of the urban poor. Such agency emerges from the everyday life experiences of ever-present risk, uncertainty, and ambiguity in the informal settlements of Southern cities (Appadurai, 2001; Bayat, 2007; Chatterjee, 2004). It consists of a 'politics of the governed' where informal settlement residents act as a 'political society' collectively (Chatterjee, 2004) and 'oppositional subjects' as individuals (Ismail, 2014). As a political society the urban poor engages in a politics of 'contrary mobilisations' to deal with the adversities of everyday life in a way that can involve 'the bending or stretching of rules, because existing procedures have historically worked to exclude or marginalize them' (Chatterjee, 2004, p. 66). This is what Refstie and Brun (2016, p. 141) posit as political agency - 'the capacity and ability to reach certain goals, particularly those related to opposing unjust and inegalitarian practices'. Literature on informal settlements in Dhaka,

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however, frequently portrays settlement residents as passive actors with little or no agency – as victims trapped in a system of rampant exploitation, rent seeking, patron-clientelism, and political profiteering (for example, Banks, 2016; S. Hossain, 2013; McNamara et al., 2016; Wood & Salway, 2000). In these works, any discussion of agency is usually limited to instances of coping and negotiations with adversity while any possibility of resistance by the settlement residents against repression and domination is often overlooked. Korail residents' collective protest against the state-led eviction drive stands in sharp contrast to such representations. It demonstrates one of the ways in which informal settlement residents' agency is manifested in direct confrontation against state apparatuses and in the ability to engage in oppositional acts that can challenge oppression and seek to recalibrate the relations of power.

In this article, we examine a range of oppositional acts carried out by the residents of two informal settlements in Dhaka against various formal and informal actors to understand how grassroots agency is manifested and negotiated in such acts. We aim to contribute to the literature on the agency of urban informal settlement residents by critically analysing the acts of resistance and reworking that take place in the everyday life politics of these settlements. In the following sections of the article, we will first present an overview of key literature on resistance and reworking in informal settlements within an analytical framework that allows examining these concepts as expressions of the agency of the urban poor. We will then provide some context on Korail and Town Hall Camp. After a description of the methods used in the study, we will use empirical findings to demonstrate the ways in which residents of these two settlements engage with power through various acts of resistance and reworking. We will conclude by arguing that these acts of resistance and reworking are not just a coping response to constant repression and domination, but a means of claiming a better form of citizenship in the city.

2. Resistance and Reworking as Agency

The agency of the urban poor, particularly of informal settlement residents, can manifest in everyday encounters with powerful actors in manifold ways. For instance, Holston (2008, 2009) sees such agency as insurgent citizenship - a claim to greater recognition as citizens rather than squatters in the city; and Chatterjee (2004) as the politics of the governed. For Huchzermeyer (2011), this agency is expressed through the urban poor's struggle to secure their right to the city, while many others (for example, Hooper & Ortolano, 2012; Mahmud, 2010) interpret it in terms of resistance and social movements. Even the very mode of informal living is considered by some scholars as an expression of agency - a form of occupancy urbanism through which the poor attempt to establish their claims over urban space (Benjamin, 2008; Etzold et al., 2009). The agency of the urban poor is thought to be expressed through their 'flexibility, pragmatism, negotiation, as well as constant struggle for survival and self-development' (Bayat, 2007, p. 579). What is common among all these different conceptualisations is the idea of an oppositional consciousness that shapes the everyday spatial practices of the urban poor. By oppositional consciousness, drawing on Mansbridge and Morris (2001), we refer to the attitudes and disposition of the members of an oppressed group to challenge injustice and domination. It emerges from a historical context of oppression where the oppressed become aware of their shared identity and experiences of subordination and injustice, and consequently demand changes to rectify those injustices while also perceiving other members of the group as also seeking similar changes (Clothey & Koku, 2016; Hounmenou, 2012; Mansbridge & Morris, 2001). Despite the rich and diverse understanding of grassroots agency of the informal settlement residents, as Katz (2004) points out, a wide range of oppositional acts carried out by the urban poor are often labelled simply as 'resistance'. Such framing runs the risk of being unduly generalising and missing out a nuanced account of the many manoeuvres and negotiations that are likely to take place between the formal and the informal, and within the informal, in the everyday life of informal settlement residents.

Examining resistance, however, remains conceptually challenging since there is no single definition of resistance. Keesing (1992) calls the topic a minefield of conceptual problems due to the difficulty in deciding when and what particular actions and behaviours by individuals or groups can be termed resistance. Hollander and Einwohner's (2004) extensive review of resistance literature shows the breadth of individual, collective and institutional actions and behaviours, ranging from revolutions to hairstyles, that have been conceptualised as resistance. Resistance may be physical and material (e.g., marches and rallies, workplace confrontation) or symbolic (e.g., storytelling, dancing, maintaining silence), individual or collective, widespread or locally confined (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). The most familiar forms of resistance usually involve immediately recognisable, coordinated, and organized acts of protest expressed through movements that question and challenge the structures of domination and control (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). In contexts where direct confrontation can result in dangerous consequences, resistance can also take place through ordinary acts of everyday life that can go unnoticed, which Scott (1985) theorises as everyday resistance. This form of resistance comprises a wide range of acts that are non-organized and non-confrontational (such as false compliance, feigned ignorance, subterfuge, sabotage, and even humour), which take place beyond the visible spectrum of political practices and usually make no headlines (Assaad, 2015; Goldstein, 2003; Scott, 1985).

Informal settlement residents' resistance against the domination and exploitation by state apparatuses, including city authorities and law enforcement agencies, is frequently identified as everyday resistance (Bayat, 2000; Eidse & Turner, 2014). There is, however, criticism of the way these forms of resistance are conceptualised in their tendency to interpret even the very mundane acts carried out by residents to secure basic necessities, or their coping strategies for survival as expressions of resistance (Atia, 2019; Bayat, 2010). Goldstein (2003, p. 9) cautions against such tendencies and emphasises the need to keep in mind that simply because an act 'took place in the context of domination' does not mean it is an act of resistance. Rather than resistance, such acts may be termed as 'quiet encroachments of the ordinary' which involve largely atomised and unorganized, 'noncollective, but prolonged, direct action by individuals and families to acquire the basic necessities of life … in a quiet and unassuming, yet illegal fashion' (Bayat, 2004, p. 81). This is not the same as a social movement or everyday resistance, but instead a non-movement that, despite posing a challenge to the ordered city, control of public space and urban governance, does not aim at any form of political transformation or reconfiguration of power (Bayat, 2000, 2010).

This multiplicity of definitions of resistance and the analytic difficulty it presents, necessitates setting conceptual boundaries to narrow definitional parameters while still retaining a broad enough scope to be applicable to the everyday realities of informal settlements and allow new meanings and insights to emerge. To this end, we turn to Katz's (2004) conceptualisation of resistance as an expression of agency. Katz (2004) categorises the strategies and practices people use in order to negotiate with and reformulate the conditions and possibilities of their everyday lives as resilience, reworking and resistance. This categorisation is particularly instructive in examining the different modes and expressions of agency of the urban poor. All three of them are claimed as expressions of people's agency yet each is different from the other, guided by a different type of consciousness and result in different outcomes.

Resilience, for example, is manifested through recuperation - autonomous initiatives undertaken to sustain in difficult circumstances without any conscious effort to change the conditions or unequal relations of power that create such circumstances in the first place (Katz, 2004). In the informal settlements of Dhaka, for example, resilience might be observed in the ways residents cope with natural hazards such as floods and water logging, and other forms of deprivation. As an incremental or cumulative ability, resilience relies on acceptance of prevailing conditions and knowledge of how to recover from adversity. Acts

of reworking, on the other hand, are more than recuperation – they involve explicit recognition of problematic conditions produced by uneven power relations and attempt to rework such relations through often pragmatic responses (Berntsen, 2016; Katz, 2004). They may 'alter the organisation but not the polarisation of power' (Sparke, 2008, p. 424). This can be seen in the way low skilled, migrant factory workers seek to navigate and negotiate unfair/exploitative workplace conditions, sometimes through trade unions, without questioning the authority of the management. Through reworking, people seek to reconfigure their location within the system without necessarily challenging the system itself (Gotehus, 2021). Finally, resistance involves acts and behaviours that seek to achieve emancipatory change by subverting or disrupting the conditions of exploitation and oppression (Gotehus, 2021; Katz, 2004; Sparke, 2008) as demonstrated in the examples presented earlier in this section.

Thus while 'acts of resilience build on a limited consciousness of the oppressive relations that shape agency, acts of reworking, and especially of resistance, stem from and (re)produce a more critical and oppositional consciousness of power imbalances' (Berntsen, 2016, p. 476). This understanding of resistance and reworking as expressions of grassroots agency of the urban poor will be used in this article to interrogate empirical findings obtained from fieldwork in the two informal settlements in Dhaka city.

An important consideration when analysing resistance is the need to acknowledge that resistance intersects with the plurality of relations of power. The heterogenous and contingent nature of resistance continuously changes with contexts and situations (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2015). Informed by this understanding, and building on Katz (2004) and Goldstein (2003), we have adopted a clearly demarcated and rather strict notion of resistance, remaining cautious to 'resist as much as is possible the seductiveness of seeing resistance everywhere we turn' (Goldstein, 2003, p. 9). In this article, therefore, the scope of resistance is confined to acts and behaviours which emerge out of an oppositional consciousness that purposefully challenge the oppression, structural violence and marginalisation experienced by informal settlement residents. Drawing on Scott (1985), we emphasise on the importance of understanding resistance as intentional, since intent is central to agency. This includes both confrontational and non-confrontational, immediately recognisable and unnoticed, physical and discursive agentive acts that disrupt the status quo of power. We set the boundaries of analysing 'reworking' by focusing on acts that involve certain level of recalibration and reconfiguration of the relations of power without necessarily challenging the structures that maintain such relations. We have deliberately omitted any discussion of resilience, as it does not incorporate the requisite level of intentionality but acknowledge that this too is an important element of the everyday politics in Korail and Town Hall Camp. As the aim of the article is to examine and understand the particular form of agency of the urban poor that is demonstrated in acts emanating from an oppositional consciousness, we keep our focus limited to resistance and reworking.

3. Context and Method: Korail and Town Hall Camp

This article is based on an ethnographic case study carried out in two informal settlements in Dhaka over a period of eight months in 2017 and subsequent short visits in 2018 and 2019. The first study site, Korail, is home to nearly 100,000[1] people living on approximately 90 acres of public land and is the largest informal settlement in Dhaka. It is located on Banani lakeside between two of Dhaka's most affluent suburbs, Banani and Gulshan. Korail residents mostly consist of rural migrants from different parts of Bangladesh. Unable to find affordable housing in the city they started to build makeshift houses on the lakeside during the 1980s, which has since then gradually grown to its current size. Less than 30 % of the residents are house owners while the remaining 70 % are renters (ICDDR, B, 2019). Regardless of house owner or renter status, the residents have no legal claim to this land, so Korail is treated by city authorities as an illegal settlement.

The second study site, Town Hall Camp, is a densely populated neighbourhood with approximately 5,000 people living on barely one acre of land. It is one of the 30 camps in Dhaka set up during 1972–1973 to accommodate stateless Bihari refugees following the Bangladesh war of independence. Biharis are an ethnic minority community consisting of Muslim refugees who originally migrated from Bihar and the surrounding states of India. They have been subject to continued state discrimination and deprivation due to their stance against Bangladesh's independence in 1971. Biharis live in impoverished slum-like camps that are virtually invisible to the urban polity and absent from the nation's socio-political imagination (Fattah, 2020). Town Hall Camp was originally set up inside the Mohammadpur Town Hall building to accommodate around 500 Biharis. Over the years, as the population grew, the residents gradually extended the area of the settlement by occupying surrounding public land. Due to unauthorised occupation and construction, they do not have tenure security. Many of the original occupants of the camp have now moved out and either sold or rented their houses to others. According to the study participants, around 60 % of the residents are renters including an increasing number of non-Bihari rural migrants. Fig. 1 shows the locations of Korail and Town Hall Camp in Dhaka city.

Findings presented here are drawn from field notes from participant observation in Korail and Town Hall Camp and numerous informal conversations with the residents of these neighbourhoods. 46 in-depth interviews (28 in Korail and 18 in Town Hall Camp) and two focus group discussions (one in each study site) were also carried out with residents. Interview participants were selected purposively and included general residents, community-based organisation members, and local social and political leaders (female = 22, male = 24). The semi-structured interviews explored residents' everyday life experiences of living in an informal settlement and their modes of engagement with various formal and informal state and non-state actors. The average duration of interviews was one hour. Additionally, eight in-depth interviews were carried out with non-government organisation (NGO) and local government officials. All interviews were conducted in Bengali by the first author. They were audio recorded except for a few cases where participants did not want to be recorded. An inductive thematic analysis approach was used to make sense of the data and identify the themes of resistance and reworking we present below. The first author is a Bangladeshi researcher whose familiarity with the two study sites and previous experience of working with marginalized communities in Dhaka allowed recognising and acknowledging the researchers' privileged position in relation to the research participants. For us, this meant being cognisant of this power imbalance throughout the various stages of the research and treating the participants in a sensitive and ethical manner not only during fieldwork, but also when interpreting and presenting research findings.

4. Resistance in Korail and Town Hall Camp

Findings from our study reveal that urban informal settlements can frequently become spaces of resistance where residents engage in acts that directly challenge the authority of various formal and informal actors holding positions of power. In this section, we present several examples of resistance from Korail and Town Hall Camp that demonstrate the varied mode of resistance by informal settlement residents

[1] Population estimates of Korail from different sources vary by a wide margin. For example, according to Zaman, Hossain and Matin (2022), Korail has a population of approximately 250,000 while according to BRAC (2017), an NGO that provides various services to Korail residents, around 60,000 people live in the settlement. The number provided in this article is based on what was reported by the local leaders.

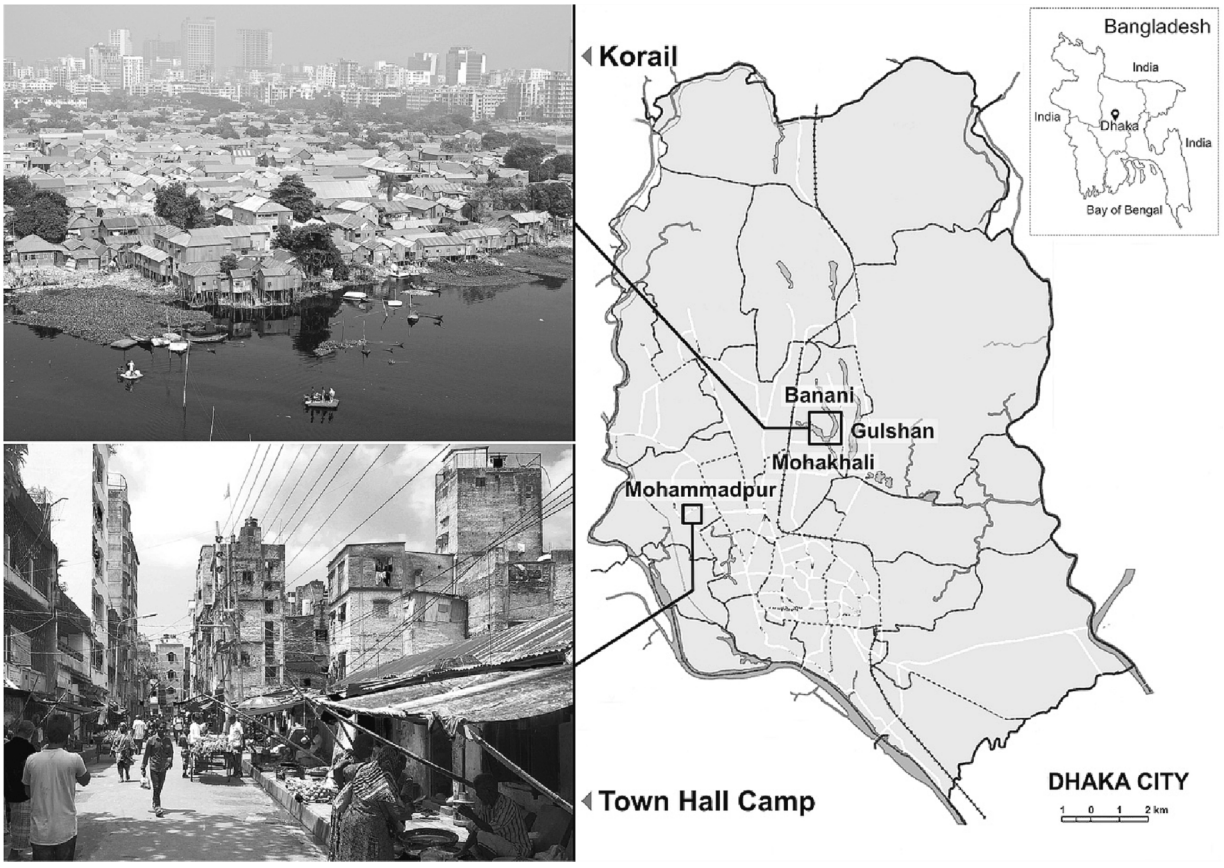

Fig. 1. Location of the study sites in Dhaka.

which range from direct confrontation to more subtle forms of everyday resistance.

4.1. Resisting settlement demolition and eviction

The street protest by Korail residents against a state-led eviction drive, as discussed at the beginning of this article, is one of the most visible instances of collectively organized resistance by informal settlement residents in Dhaka city in recent times. The eviction drive caught Korail residents unprepared and initially they could do little but try to save their belongings from getting crushed under bulldozers (Shiree & Dushtha Shasthya Kendra, 2012). However, when they realized that the eviction drive would continue the next day they organized overnight and decided to stand up against it. On the morning of 5 April 2012, several thousand Korail residents were out on the streets protesting the eviction drive. The protest was organized and led by local political and community-based organization (CBO) leaders. Many of the protesters were house owners who felt that the eviction drive has left them with their backs against the wall. One of them, Shabana, described her state of mind at the time of the protest, 'Everyone was out on the street – everyone was sitting in the middle of the street […] We would give our lives, but we would not leave Korail. We would not leave Korail because where else can we go?'

The five thousand residents of Korail who took to the streets that day were successful, and the government had to call off the eviction drive. One of the strategies they used for organising the massive protest was to leverage the CBOs formed by various NGOs in Korail. Several CBOs served as platforms to mobilise the residents. This made possible quick dissemination of information to residents and ensured participation of a large number of people in the protest the next day. Many of the research participants highlighted the role CBOs had played in organising the residents for collective action. According to Sadeka, treasurer of a city level federation of CBOs, 'Previously they [city corporation] demolished slums but no one would do anything about it […] CBOs have now created such unity among the people that if the government comes to demolish the slum, everyone will come together [against it]'.

Another strategy was to ensure that the protest remained peaceful. In Bangladesh, and elsewhere in South Asia, street protests can easily turn violent leading to destruction of property and even fatalities. Local leaders in Korail took care to ensure that the protesters remained on the streets without resorting to any form of violence. According to them the protest was successful because it was disciplined and 'civilised'. As Bilkis, leader of a federation of CBOs operating in several informal settlements, said -

> We remained on the street peacefully […] for us it was a matter of our survival, we were about to lose the roof over our heads – imagine how violent people could have become for that. But we didn't do that. The home minister was forced to withdraw the bulldozers because of our peaceful stance'.

The way in which participants emphasised discipline and civilised behaviour in their protest is important. Several of the organizers of the protest were in fact directly or indirectly affiliated with the ruling political party. This means that ensuring a 'civilised' protest might also have had an ulterior motive—one that was strategically aimed at avoiding possible future disadvantage in party politics.

It is also important to note that the key organisers of the protest were all house owners who had more to lose in the eviction drive than the renters. Though study participants in general talked about the proactive participation of Korail residents in the protest, not everyone took part with an equal level of enthusiasm. When describing how they organised the protest, local leader Dilara said, 'We locked down all the gates early at dawn so that no one could leave [Korail]'. Another organiser, Hasina informed, 'We didn't let anyone leave for work that day. No one could

go'. Thus, it is possible that the participation of a large number of people in the protest was ensured by preventing many from going to work which for informal workers could mean loss of daily wages and even their job.

4.2. Against shontraashis and drug dealers: The organized resistance of the oppressed

Organised resistance by informal settlement residents takes place not only against state apparatuses or formal institutions. In Korail and Town Hall Camp, residents have engaged in collective resistance against thugs and drug dealers who are powerful informal actors in the political economy of informal settlements. These thugs are locally known as *shontraashi* which came from the word *shontraash* meaning terror. Participants used this word to refer to organized crime figures, local enforcers and extortionists affiliated with political parties which tend to operate as centres of power beyond their formal representational roles. In Korail, participants spoke about the way armed *shontraashis* terrorised their neighbourhood during the 2000′s through extortion of money, random assaults on the residents and sexual violence against women. As one elderly participant, Ataur said, 'They tortured people […] extorted money from the shops and house owners […] They carried guns, machetes'.

Though everyone was afraid of the *shontraashis*, at one point the residents decided to fight back. In around 2004, with approval from the local police station and elected ward councillor, local leaders and businessowners in Korail formed a neighbourhood watch group called *Laathi Banshi Bahini* (stick and whistle squad) to deal with the *shontraashis*. Everyone in the group was given a stick and a whistle. Whenever anyone got in trouble with a *shontraashi* they only needed to blow the whistle to raise an alarm and inform the other members of the group. Then everyone would fight them off together using the sticks. As Dilara who used to be a member of the watch group, explained, 'If a *shontraashi* came inside [Korail] and someone blew the whistle then people from all around seized them, beat them half-dead and maybe then handed them over to the police'. Another local leader, Aziz shared a similar account saying, 'When anyone came to extort money if someone blew the whistle then at once hundreds, thousands [of people] chased them with their sticks. The *shontraashis* got scared and backed off'. This tactic proved successful in resisting the domination of *shontraashis* in Korail. 'This is how the condition in the neighbourhood improved after forming the *Banshi Bahini*', said Dilara. At the time of fieldwork for this research, there was no visible presence of *shontraashis* in Korail.

Participants in Town Hall Camp shared similar accounts of collective resistance against drug dealers. In Town Hall Camp, similar to many other camps in Dhaka, well-connected drug lords from outside the camp used the settlement to run their business. Under their protection, a number of petty dealers openly sold drugs, mainly ya ba,[2] from various locations inside the camp. There was growing concern among camp residents about this drug business. During interviews many spoke about the humiliation they felt when acquaintances came to visit them and were offered drugs on the way. Many were worried about young people in the camp becoming addicted. In 2016, a small group of young men decided to confront the drug dealers and put an end to the business. Many other residents, including the camp leaders, supported them. At first, they asked the dealers to stop selling drugs inside the camp. When the dealers refused, they attacked them with sticks and drove them out of the camp. As Rahim, a local leader closely involved with the movement against the drug dealers, said, 'We made it clear to them, "you can come here if you want but you cannot sell baba[3] inside the camp"'. They also became vigilant about outsiders coming to the camp to purchase drugs. Any outsider who looked like a potential buyer was searched for drugs. One of the participants, Foyez, described the consequences for anyone selling, buying or even carrying ya ba, 'Maybe we found someone carrying two pieces [of ya ba] […] Gave him a good beating first. Then we would lock him up and inform the police'. Eventually they were able to put an end to drug peddling inside the camp.

Confronting the drug dealers, nevertheless, was a difficult and risky affair. Those who controlled the business were powerful and the situation quickly became heated. 'There was a huge brawl because of this', informed Jamal, a local resident. One of the most influential leaders in the camp, Haaris, was forced to lie low for a period after confrontation with the drug dealers. Hamid, a young man closely involved with the movement described how every day he received threatening calls from the drug dealers telling him to back off. Rahim recalled the time when one of the drug dealers put a gun to his head and threatened to kill him, 'After we drove them out of the camp, one day they took me to that side of the neighbourhood. They put a gun to my head and said, "Motherf****r, we will put you down right here! You dare to speak against us!" So, I said, "Alright, I won't speak anymore" […] There wasn't anything else I could do or say'.

Several participants involved in the movement believed that they were able to resist these threats not only because of their unity but also because the local ward councillor and officials from the local police station supported them. This is despite the police and city authorities allowing the drug trade to continue for years by turning a blind eye to it. Similarly, participants from Korail also acknowledged the support from formal authorities in their movement against the *shontraashis*. When the residents of Korail and Town Hall Camp reflect back on these events, the state's recognition of their stand against *shontraashis* and drug dealers becomes an important element of their narrative. In the following section we discuss how narratives like these serve to resist elite-produced dominant and stigmatising narratives of informal settlements.

4.3. Counternarratives as resistance

Similar to many Southern cities, urban planners and policymakers, city authorities, law enforcement agencies, elites and the media in Dhaka frequently produce deeply stigmatising narratives that present informal settlements as spaces of illegality, crime and violence, poverty and underdevelopment (Fattah & Walters, 2020). Such representations of informal settlements serve to rationalise various forms of structural violence, exclusion and oppression that state apparatuses frequently use against the settlement residents (Wacquant, 2007). In Korail and Town Hall Camp, many residents constantly resist the stigmatising narratives of informal settlements by producing various counternarratives about the place where they live. This resistance takes place through the production and circulation of alternative imaginings of place in the ordinary conversations and interactions of everyday life of the settlement residents. Through their reflexive understanding of everyday life experiences, interactions and various exchanges they produce new meanings and narratives about these neighbourhoods.

Many of these counternarratives are based on a 'before and now' comparison according to which conditions in the neighbourhood were indeed bad in the past but now things have changed for the better. During interviews and informal conversations, participants recounted how their neighbourhood was different from what outsiders assume it to be and at times reflected while talking among themselves on how the place has developed over the years. When talking about Town Hall Camp, Foyez commented with an air of assurance, 'Things are a lot better now […] It used to be really bad. But that was before'. In Korail, Aziz said in a similar tone, 'Many of the things that you hear about Korail were there in the past. But things have changed now. You will not find those things here anymore'. These narratives first acknowledge the stigmatising depictions of informal settlements but then denounce them as outdated and turn them around by projecting a contrasting and positive image of the neighbourhood. Several residents reinforced this

[2] A combination of methamphetamine and caffeine sold in a tablet form. Ya ba is a Thai word which means 'mad drug'.

[3] Street name for ya ba.

positive image by offering their understanding of the motives behind the criminalising narratives of informal settlements. As Faruk, a political leader in Korail, explained, 'They say all those things so that they can evict us from here'.

In both settlements, a sense of community, belonging and place attachment played important role in constructing the counternarratives of a good neighbourhood. Several participants claimed that while in the city's affluent neighbourhoods no one knows anyone and everyone lives like strangers, people in Korail or Town Hall Camp actually knew and even looked after each other. A common sentiment in the accounts from both these settlements was that despite having numerous problems, they were all part of a community of decent and hardworking people and neighbours were always around to help when someone was in trouble. Many of the participants continue to live in these neighbourhoods even after obtaining the economic means to move out and live in the city's formal neighbourhoods. This was because of the attachment they have developed to their neighbourhood and the neighbours. As Hasina who came to live in Korail some 20 years ago, remarked, 'Living here for so long, I feel a closeness to it […] Here I have my neighbours, I have everyone!'

Participants from both sites frequently said there were no illegal activities, especially no drug running, inside their neighbourhood. Their history of successful resistance against *shontraashis* and drug dealers, as described earlier, shaped these narratives to a large extent. These claims serve to decriminalise their neighbourhoods in response to the popular perception of these places as hotspots of crime and violence. In Korail, participants often argued that law enforcement agencies had never found militants or religious extremists in any of the slums in Dhaka, despite popular narratives of radical politics emanating from slums. The fact that a deadly terrorist attack in the neighbouring affluent suburb of Gulshan in 2016 involved young men from wealthy families gave further grounds for Korail residents to claim that they are unfairly blamed for crimes committed by others. As Bilkis said -

> There was a time when the very word slum made one think of a place where criminals live, where drugs are sold […] They used to say all the violence is in the slums. But now you can see it happening in well-off neighbourhoods like Gulshan, Banani, Baridhara.

The way Bilkis compares Korail with Banani, Gulshan and similar affluent neighbourhoods in Dhaka is important because it gives them a voice against the criminalisation of informal settlements. It talks back to the dominant narratives of the urban elites. Dilara responded in a similar manner to the dominant narrative of informal settlements residents' illegal occupation of public land by pointing out at the unauthorised construction of buildings by the city's elites -

> They look at us here in Korail – lowly, slum! They call it a slum and despise it. And the hundred and fifty buildings on the other side of the lake – what are those? […] Aren't those also built on public land? We live on public land, so it's a slum! Aren't they also living on public land?

Claims such as this are not unfounded. In a study on public space in Dhaka, Hackenbroch (2013) notes the way city authorities have accepted the encroachment of land adjacent to Korail by real estate developers and allowed construction of multi-storied apartment blocks there, violating planning regulations and building codes. While informal settlement residents are criminalised for illegal occupation of public land, the illegal constructions by the city's elites have been, in Yiftachel's (2009) terms, whitened—endorsed through a discriminatory system of civil stratification that accepts violation of urban planning by developmental projects such as construction of apartment blocks, shopping malls and such. Awareness of these discriminatory practices by the city authorities gave Korail residents moral grounds to resist the dominant narratives of crime and illegality of informal settlements.

5. The Politics of Reworking

Unlike resistance, reworking as an expression of agency in the context of the everyday experiences of urban informal settlements has not received sufficient attention in the existing literature. Drawing on fieldwork from Korail and Town Hall Camp, in this section we will examine various tactics and practices of reworking used by the residents of these settlements.

Korail and Town Hall Camp residents are keenly aware of the limitations of confrontational resistance against state led eviction drives. In 2012, when faced with the threat of imminent eviction, organising a street protest was not the only course of action that Korail residents took to prevent it from happening. They also sought a solution using the state's own mechanism—the law. Many people in Korail are aware of an order issued by the High Court of Bangladesh in 2003 that stipulates that no informal settlement can be evicted without first making provisions for resettlement of the residents. When city authorities initiated the eviction drive in Korail, a number of residents, consisting mostly of local CBO and political leaders, immediately sought support from two human rights organisations, Ain O Shalish Kendra (ASK) and Bangladesh Legal Aid Services Trust (BLAST) to mobilise legal actions against the eviction drive. The next morning while several thousand Korail residents gathered on the streets to protest the eviction, this small group went to the High Court of Bangladesh with officials from ASK and BLAST to get a court order issued against the eviction. The two organisations jointly filed a petition at the court on behalf of Korail residents requesting the eviction be immediately halted. The petition was drafted using several articles from the Constitution of Bangladesh which bar the state from taking any measures detrimental to the life, body and property of any citizen.

The confrontational street protest by the residents resulted in a temporary solution when the eviction drive was called off by the authorities for the time being. Making use of the law, however, had a longer-term effect. In response to the petition filed by ASK and BLAST, the High Court issued an order that prohibited any kind of eviction drives in Korail unless there was evidence of encroachment on clearly demarcated areas on the lakeside. This incident of a population deemed illegal by state apparatuses using the state's own laws against it is an example of informal settlement residents as political subjects using their agency through a reworking of the law. Such mode of reworking is neither an isolated phenomenon nor unique to Korail residents only. As Joynal, an NGO official working in Korail and several other informal settlements across Dhaka, said –

> Notice for the eviction of Korail slum came many times. But they remain here by obtaining writs from the court […] Many other slums endure by obtaining writs in a similar manner. Where do they get the courage to obtain a writ from the court? That right is given in our constitution which is the main law of a country. The slums continue to be there using that law.

Instances of reworking the law were found among the Bihari community as well. Hasib, a Bihari human rights activist working with an NGO that operates in Town Hall Camp and several other camps, described how the stateless Biharis were able to obtain recognition as rightful citizens of Bangladesh by making use of the state law. In 2001, the Government of Bangladesh initiated a country-wide census to update the voter list. The surveyors did not go to any of the Bihari camps as the camp residents were viewed as refugees and non-citizens. Realising that the Biharis were not going to be included in the voter list, Hasib and nine other Bihari men went directly to the Election Commission and explained to the officials there that since they fulfilled all legal requirements for being considered as voters their names should be included in the voter list. The request was immediately rejected. Determined to get their voting rights, they then consulted a lawyer who suggested that they could seek support from the law and file a lawsuit against the government. Accordingly, they filed a writ petition at the

High Court against the Government of Bangladesh. Their case was solely built on the laws of the very state they were opposing. They framed their arguments drawing on state laws on citizenship and election procedures. Notably, while the state was yet to recognise them as citizens, they did not ask the court to grant them citizenship, instead they demanded as rightful residents of the country to be included in the voter list. As Hasib said –

> In that petition we did not for once ask to grant us citizenship. We said, "[…] We are Bangladeshi by birth, our names are missing on the voter list" […] This is what we claimed for. And the court clearly said that since the camp is within the territory of Bangladesh so those born there are Bangladeshi citizens.

Two years later in 2003, the High Court declared all ten petitioners as Bangladeshi citizens and ordered the Election Commission to include their names in the electoral roll. Though this decision regarding citizenship status and voting rights was applicable only to the ten petitioners, many Biharis considered this a landmark victory against a state that has been constantly refusing to acknowledge them as rightful residents. This also created grounds for further claims of citizenship. Inspired by this victory, four years later in 2007, a group of people from two Bihari camps in Dhaka filed a similar petition at the High Court against the country's Chief Election Commissioner. This time they demanded the inclusion of all adult Biharis in the voter list. The following year, the court passed a judgement that concluded that all Biharis living in the camps are to be considered as Bangladeshi citizens and their names must be included in the electoral roll. This officially changed the legal status of Biharis from stateless refugees to rightful citizens of Bangladesh. Like Korail residents, instead of challenging the laws that marginalised them in the first place, the Biharis too resorted to laws to claim their citizenship rights and their rights in the city.

6. Discussion

According to Bayat (2000, p. 547) the multitude of people living in the informal settlements of Southern cities seldom become resistant or engage in collective action unless they are 'confronted by those who threaten their gains'. Ismail (2014) argues that such framing of resistance by the urban poor as merely reactive greatly downplays their political agency. Findings from this research, however, do seem to indicate that in the instances when informal settlement residents organise and collectively resist oppression, they do so mostly when their existence or modes of daily life become threatened. Such threats originate, on one hand, from various state agencies' intention to rid the city of slums, camps or squatter settlements. On the other hand, these threats are produced by powerful local actors that seek to maintain coercive control over the settlements and use those as a source of profit. This means that rather than being limited to a conflictual relationship between the formal state versus an informal population, the scope of resistance can be located in residents' relationship with a broader range of actors including gangsters and drug dealers. This sharply contradicts previous research which suggests that collective resistance by the grassroots urban poor is not possible in Dhaka due to prevailing social and political arrangements in the country (for example, by Etzold, 2013; Jackman, 2017; Lata et al., 2019).

Korail residents' protest against the eviction drive is an archetypal example of a formal state versus an informal population engaged in confrontation for claims over urban space. Yet this is more than a simple binary of formal versus informal. The way in which participants stressed being disciplined and civilised in their protest carries certain meanings. On one hand they oppose the state but on the other they seek to conform to its norms and use that to their own advantage. Such entangled relationships between domination and resistance are what Sharp et al., (2000) emphasise for developing a nuanced understanding of power that considers a mutually constitutive relationship between the two. Also, looking at resistance movements by informal settlement residents in Southern cities, Bautès et al., (2014) raise an important question about the extent to which such movements are led by grassroots urban poor or local elites. Similar concerns may be raised about the Korail residents' protest, as the organisers were all house owners and local leaders, who used their authority to ensure participation of the renters. Routledge (2003, p. 265) points out that, 'No movement has complete internal unity, despite public attempts to speak with one voice […] within resistance practices, various "minor dominations" may occur, including the creation of internal hierarchies, the silencing of dissent, peer pressure and even violence'. Participant accounts reflect such minor dominations and silencing of dissent when Korail residents protested the eviction drive.

It is important to note that the timeline of Korail residents' movement against *shontraashis* coincides with the formation of the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB)—an elite paramilitary force notorious for extra-judicial killings. Since its establishment in 2004, RAB's crackdown on criminals, including known *shontraashis* and drug lords, saw hundreds of extra-judicial killings many of which were carried out at the urban peripheries and in informal settlements (M. S. Hossain, 2017). Korail residents' mob justice against the *shontraashis* took place within this broader socio-juridical context where the ward councillor and law enforcement officials may have provided encouragement as the findings show. Similarly, during their street protest against the eviction drive, Korail residents successfully utilised NGO-created platforms—community-based organisations—to organise and mobilise settlement residents. As noted by Waliuzzaman and Alam (2022), this shows how external entities can provide support to enhance the agency of informal settlement residents. It also demonstrates how acts of resistance frequently involve informal settlement residents co-opting the state/formal institutions either passively or actively to strengthen their movements.

Alongside the instances of organised, confrontational resistance, Korail and Town Hall Camp residents engage in forms of everyday resistance by producing the various grassroots narratives about their settlements. These counternarratives respond to the dominant narratives with a sharply contrasting image highlighting certain aspects of everyday life in informal settlements that construct them as liveable or even desirable for the urban poor. These serve as resistance against 'an oppressive identity and attempts to replace it with one that commands respect' (Nelson, 2001, p. 6). Unlike the resistance against eviction drives, *shontraashis* or drug dealers, this form of resistance is non-organized, non-confrontational and can often go unnoticed. Though these counternarratives 'make no headlines' (Scott, 1985, p. xvii) and do not exist outside the spatial boundaries of Korail and Town Hall Camp, they nevertheless subvert the demonization of these places and their residents. The grassroots narratives that the residents construct about their neighbourhoods are rooted in community cohesion and associational life, place-attachment, and the shared experiences of everyday informality in a city where they are unwanted but are nevertheless needed (Fattah & Walters, 2020). Practices of 'commoning' in the informal settlements allow forging such community cohesion and associational life that is sustained by an ethos of care, solidarity, interdependency, and mutuality (Alam et al., 2020; Waliuzzaman & Alam, 2022). These narratives suggest an underlying 'care collective' where various relations of care and mutuality develop through residents exercising agency in their collective practices and tactics of coping with the adversity of urban life (Alam & Houston, 2020). They play a pivotal role in producing place-based identities and solidarities and create grounds for making claims for more overt forms of resistance (Fattah, 2022), for example, Korail residents' organized resistance against eviction drive as discussed earlier.

Different from resistance, reworking consists of strategies and practices that can alter the conditions of people's existence through pragmatic responses to structural constraints (Hauge & Fold, 2016). Such processes, however, remain 'within the confines of existing social and power relations and without attempting to change underlying power imbalances' (Berntsen, 2016, p. 476). As the findings demonstrate,

while the residents seek to rework the relations of power they are embedded into, their 'interests are not so much in challenging hegemonic power as in attempting to undermine its inequities on the very grounds on which they are cast' (Katz, 2004, p. 247). Focusing on such practices of reworking is instructive for understanding how the agency of the urban poor is manifest in everyday life. Interpreting various practices and tactics deployed by Korail and Town Hall Camp residents as reworking allows for an understanding that rather than challenge the structures of domination, the urban poor can be more interested in negotiating and making space within such structures to improve their material conditions. Tactics of reworking the law allow informal settlement residents to renegotiate their relationship with state apparatuses. These examples contradict Chatterjee's (2004) often cited argument that informal settlement residents are unable to claim rights due to being informal and therefore unrecognised by the formal state. Our findings indicate that they can and do make strategic use of the state's laws when opportunities arise to claim their rights and seek recognition from the formal state.

The heterogeneous nature of urban informal settlements implies that one settlement can be very different from the next one, even within the same city, depending on various social, political, spatial dimensions. However, if we shift our gaze beyond the demographic characteristics and the physical and spatial dimensions of the settlements to the everyday life experiences of the residents, the collective discourses and the forms of spatial control and differential deployment of power they experience, then numerous similarities can be observed even among very diverse settlements. Thus, rather unsurprisingly, findings from the two very different types of informal settlements in this study—a large slum surrounded by some of the most upscale suburbs in the city and a former refugee camp occupied by an often-vilified ethnic minority community—reveal remarkable similarity in the way their residents engage in acts of resistance and reworking. This shows the relevance of the findings presented here for informal settlements located in places beyond the geographical boundaries of any one city or country.

7. Conclusion

Analysing the terms of engagement between informal settlement residents, the formal state and non-state actors requires examining the agency of the residents as manifest in their everyday interactions with various state and non-state institutions. In this article we critically examined how grassroots agency is expressed through varied and numerous acts of resistance and reworking by the residents of two informal settlements in a Southern megacity. We have presented several accounts of resistance carried out by the residents of these neighbourhoods which show that the scope of their resistance is not limited to merely formal versus informal. Instead, it takes place against a wider array of actors ranging from state apparatuses to drug dealers. The modes of resistance are non-static, highly context-dependent and vary depending on the actors involved. Resistance is also discursive as displayed in the counternarratives that undermine dominant elite narratives about the moral orientation of 'slum' life, providing the opportunity for the residents to reframe their value and status as citizens of the city. The examples of reworking presented in this article show the ways Korail and Town Hall Camp residents, despite their non-recognition as rightful residents of the city, can still make strategic use of the law to obtain security from threat of eviction or gain formal recognition as citizens through the courts.

It is through such acts of resistance and reworking that the politics of the governed (Chatterjee, 2004) become a 'politics of possibility' (Koster & de Vries, 2012, p. 86) that affords the informal settlement residents the tremendous emancipatory potential of reimagining that 'things could be otherwise' (Gibson-Graham, 2016, p. 297). The strategies and tactics they use constitute the negotiations of citizenship that enable them to challenge their marginalisation and create grounds for claiming their right to the city. These negotiations and manoeuvres enable them to inhabit the city on slightly better terms than those historically imposed upon by state apparatuses and powerful urban elites.

Findings presented in this article help to unsettle the stereotypical framings of informal settlement residents as victims of clientelist, populist politics. As Waliuzzaman and Alam (2022) note, the unsettling of such (mis)conceptions of informal settlements opens prospects for engaging with urban theory from a Southern perspective in ways that can shift the focus from the stereotypical narratives of victimhood and impoverishment to the strengths and potentials of grassroots urban communities. Through such engagement, informal settlements can be reframed as terrains of hope, transformation, and possibility (Koster & de Vries, 2012). This however requires further research to be carried out in diverse types of informal settlements across diverse Southern cities. In this article we have focused primarily on locating agency at the urban grassroots as expressed through acts of resistance and reworking. Future research needs to also focus on examining resilience as another expression of grassroots agency.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Kazi Nazrul Fattah: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft. **Peter Walters:** Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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