DOMESTIC SPACES ON THE ROLES OF URBAN DALIT WOMEN AND THEIR SPATIAL-SOCIAL EXCLUSION: AN INVESTIGATION INTO GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN THE SWEEPER COLONIES OF DHAKA.

“everyone is born equal and free in dignity and rights”
ARTICLE 1, UN DECLARATION ON HUMAN RIGHTS, 1948

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Gender and related spatial and social exclusion related to the built environment is gaining significant attention in developing countries. Research works in this context, however lags behind in Bangladesh. Especially, studies on the gender issues of Dalit women in the low-income housing lack in the context of Dhaka.

The purpose of this study is to understand the impact of domestic spaces on spatial and social exclusion of Dalit women of Dhaka and their position in relation to the mainstream so that it establishes a scope to re-define their roles in society.
OBJECTIVES OF THIS RESEARCH

In the Context of Dhaka,

First, study the roles and needs of Dalit Women

Second, investigate domestic spaces and spatial organization of dwelling units in Sweepers’ Colonies

Third, identify how the domestic spaces make an impact on their roles and social-spatial exclusion
The research based on both theoretical understanding and empirical investigation involved two sites in Dhaka; Ganaktuli and Juginagar.

**Findings reveal:**
Inadequate and unfavorable domestic space not addressing the spatial or gender needs of Dalit women in the sweeper colonies.

Social and symbolic dimensions of domestic spaces not addressing needs of the marginalized women residents, who barely realize that.

Negative impact on their lifestyle in the long run.

**Future research may contribute to prepare guidelines for interventions in existing house design and planning for Sweepers ensuring residential satisfaction and addressing their practical and gender needs.**
Bangladesh, crossing over from the List of Least Developing Countries (LDCs) has secured the Status of a Developing Country.
DHAKA

Dhaka megacity, the capital is vibrant with diverse people, happy and in despair, modern flyovers and roads with overflown rainwater, rickshaws and latest model vehicles, heritage and contemporary buildings as well as world famous architectural edifices, festivals and celebrations and what not . . .
….. and Bangladesh has the highest population density!
Like many prime cities of developing countries, there is this social divide manifested in two sectors based on certain economic, social and political indicators:

**FORMAL SECTOR**

**INFORMAL SECTOR**
YET there is another DISCRIMINATION . . . GENDER DISCRIMINATION!
For overall development of the Society and the Nation, issues of Social Divide, Social Exclusions and Gender Discriminations need to be addressed . .
A non-elitist section referred to as the “Urban Poor” is created in the informal sector who are mainly generations of migrants settled in.

Dalits, considered ‘SUB ALTERNS’ are one such migrated people who are not only a economically marginalized group compared to the dominant group, but also are socially excluded because of their caste identity; Dalits are engaged in various occupations.
ABOUT DALITS

They are born impure, they are impure while they live, they die the death of the impure, and they give birth to children who are born with the stigma of Untouchability affixed to them. It is a case of permanent, hereditary stain which nothing can cleanse. (Ambedkar, 1948:21)

Indian social reformer, politician who inspired the Dalit Buddhist Movement and campaigned against social discrimination towards Untouchable Dalits.

Photo Source: internet
TRIPLE MARGINALITY OF DALIT WOMEN
Caste…Class…Gender

Poor women suffer doubly, first from the denial of their human rights due to gender inequality and second, due to poverty leading to ‘FEMINIZATION OF POVERTY.

While Dalits as a group face social and spatial exclusion, Dalit women face triple marginality, first as economically less fortunate, then as being a woman and finally as being a Dalit.
In Bangladesh, these migrated Hindu 'Dalits' also known as ‘Harijans’ are largely identified with their traditional occupations: scavengers, sweepers, leather workers, barber, washer men, blacksmiths, goldsmiths, cobblers, oil-pressers, fishermen, river gypsies, poor farmers and laborers etc.

Despite equal rights and dignity for all citizens in the Constitution, due to various factors including the knowledge and mind set of the society Dalits remain oppressed in all aspects.

This caste-based discrimination and social exclusion, existing since time memorial have made these Dalits and Dalit women suffer different kinds of humiliation and deprivation.
Bangladesh, the then Bengal, was once a part of the Indian Sub-continent, being in the same family as India, Nepal, or Pakistan each having its own resources and features.

https://www.mtholyoke.edu/courses/rschwart/hist151f08/India/maps.htm
Bengal had a favorable climate of six seasons, was a rich fertile land with its exotic green, its crops, flora, fauna, magnificent rivers, lakes, ponds and age-old cultural heritage . . .

It was considered a land of promise and many were provoked to come to this LAND FOR NEW OPPORTUNITIES. . .
During the British Rule of mid 18th century, with the establishment of municipalities in East Bengal (present Bangladesh), a large low-caste labor force from India were hired and employed to give services as health and sanitation workers. They were the Dalits, provoked by British agents for better opportunities of life in this part of Bengal, but in reality giving menial jobs of cleaning as Sweepers.
ORIGIN

Vishakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh (Telugus)
Alahabad, Kanpur (Kanpuri), Bihar (Bihari)
Land-owning Farmer Group, Agricultural Land Laborers
Leather Workers, Fruit Sellers

CLEANERS (during Mughals, Dhaka as capital)

MIGRATION

Municipal health and sanitation workers (during the British)
(Methor, Dome, Sweeper, Harijan)
RECENT SCENARIO OF DALITS IN BANGLADESH

5.5 million people in Bangladesh are Dalits (Chowdhury, 2009).

The Dhaka City Corporation employ about 7,156 scavengers for cleaning the city (Porag & Acherjee, 2013).

Now they live in 27 colonies in Dhaka, Narayangonj, Savar, Ganaktuli, Dayaganj, Dhalpur, Sutrapur, Mohammadpur, Agargaon Gabtoli etc.

Continuing hereditary profession includes Scavenging, removing night-soil, cleaning of latrines, removal of filth, dead cattle, sweeping of houses and roads, clearing clogged sewerage Lines.
Dalit women of varied occupations include some who belong to the Sweeper Community and considered as the lowest in status even among Dalits. They have families, homes; as women, they are the prime users of Domestic Spaces.

They have certain roles to play, have specific needs in the context of their domestic arena. They suffer from gender discrimination and are socially and spatially excluded.

“Nobody respects us because everyone calls us sweepers. But, we are not sweepers, they should call us cleaners.” -- Joshna Rani Das (source: internet)
ROLES AND NEEDS OF DALIT WOMEN VARY WITH AGE

Women in their different phases of the life-cycle face different needs and challenges in their domestic arena, in their social life.

In the process of fulfilling their needs, they have to negotiate with their counterparts, the male members of their families.
As typically observed in the Third World low-income household, women’s role, generally subordinated to their male counterpart encompasses three roles, which are: i. Reproductive role ii. Productive role iii. Community Managing and Community Politics (Moser, 1993, pp.29, 34).

Dalit women (age between 24 to 68 years) play reproductive role comprising of child bearing / rearing, execute domestic tasks needed to guarantee the maintenance and reproduction of the future labor force.

They play productive role too by earning, mainly through jobs in the City Corporation, often by replacing vacancy of their late husbands.
Women as wives and mothers are primary users of space both in their houses and in the local community. Women’s needs are determined not only by specific socio-economic contexts but also by the particular class, ethnic and religious structures of individual societies.

Two types of gender needs have been identified (Moser, 1994)

**PRACTICAL GENDER NEEDS**

**STRATEGIC GENDER NEEDS**

**GENDER NEEDS**
Practical gender needs focus on

- Housing Environment
- Internal and extended Domestic Realm
- Health and Hygiene
- Income-earning activities
- Community-level requirements of housing and basic services
- Accessibility

Practical gender needs are those needs women identify in their socially accepted roles in society. Practical gender needs do not challenge the gender divisions of labor or women’s subordinate position in society, although rising out of them.

Practical gender needs are a response to immediate perceived necessity, identified within a specific context. They are practical in nature and often are concerned with inadequacies in living conditions such as water provision, health care and employment.
How do these Dalit Women live their Lives in Sweeper Colonies?

To understand this, the relationship between designs and uses of domestic spaces needs to be analyzed through (Lawrence, 1990) • spatial interpretation (how spaces function) and • behavioral interpretation (how women act)

The spatial, social and symbolic dimensions of domestic space in houses are important aspects to fulfill the needs of its users.

In Dhaka, low income Sweeper Women live without much satisfaction under severe housing and social stress lacking the fulfillment of their spatial, social and symbolic needs corresponding to these dimensions. Their Gender Needs are not addressed as well . . .
HOUSING CONDITION: Ganaktuli and Juginagar Sweepers’ Colony

- Sweepers live in the city’s designated colonies normally in degraded environment.
- High residential density (often three generations of 8-12 people living in one small room).
- Unhealthy environment and unhygienic sanitation create bad odor of dirt and garbage.
- Pure drinking water unavailable.
- Only four to five water taps in the colony; no separate arrangement for female bathing.
- No support on maintenance.
- Only a primary school with limited scope of entry for sweepers’ children’s education leading to early marriage has become dominant.
Type of Dwelling Units as per Number of Spaces
TYPE 1 : Single Room (dominant)
TYPE 2 : Single Room + Attached Space
TYPE 3 : Two Room + Attached Space + Attached Toilet

Activity Pattern
Main Room/s (Multi-Purpose Space) :
Sleeping, Eating, Guest Entertainment,
Leisure, Studying and other Children Activity,
Child Birth, Cooking, Washing Clothes,
Storing, Circulation)

Attached Space: Sleeping,
Washing, Cooking, Storing
and Guest Entertainment,
Circulation
Typical Domestic Space Use shown in Plan

- Sleeping area/ Child Birth
- Store (TV, shelf etc)
- Store (household daily needs)
- Store (utensils & cooking facilities)
- Circulation / Child Birth
- Miscellaneous such as Cooking preparation, cooking during rainy Season and guest bed sometimes
Average Floor Area 185 sft /per D.U
Standard Floor Area is 500 sft/ DU
Average Household Members: 5.5 persons
Dominant Feature is Multi-use Space
Absence of Personal Space

Different Activity Areas in Typical Single Room Dwelling Unit

- Insufficient area bed / floor used for child-birth
- No storage space for clothes beddings
- Utensils stored in only bedroom
- Children use bed to study, play and eat
Entertaining male guests often limit the access of women members who may need to work or rest inside.

Different Activity Areas in Single Room Dwelling Unit

The only shared bed for this woman to rest

Studying and Storing

Leisure / indoor entertainment
Outdoor and Indoor Space for Cultural and Religious Activities

Meager space to set the worship idol

Outdoor altar for worship and rituals by women members

A small wooden shelf to keep ritual objects

Top part of wall to hang images of god-goddesses
UN-ADDRESSSED GENDER NEEDS /PROBLEMS FOR FEMALE MEMBERS OF A FAMILY

EASY MOVEMENT is often a big problem, both in meagre indoor and outdoor activity spaces.

Single flight narrow stairway create problem for old and pregnant women.

Narrow, slippery corridors are often dangerous for fatal falls with women carrying heavy buckets etc.

Dark narrow walkways to go to toilets at night are not at all safe or secured, specially for women and younger girls.
Lack of Proper Drinking Water and Kitchen Spaces is a threat to health and hygiene especially when in outdoor activity areas.

Unhygienic source and surroundings for collecting drinking water from a distance and cooking in inconvenient roadside spaces due to lack of kitchen space inside, even during monsoon.
Open and always wet bathing space, unsafe for women, no privacy from surroundings. Men can be seen standing around this place. Also same access to common toilets for women is a safety and privacy concern.
Clothes are dried over burning ovens, due to lack of space for drying clothes. It is a threat to fire hazards. Clothes are also dried above the streets making it difficult for movements.
Clay ovens in front of doors of dwellings and on narrow corridors, broken electric metres above the only door, electric wires above open and wet bath zone of females are prone to accidents like fire hazards, electric shocks etc.
SOCIAL ISSUES: 
Lack of Open Outdoor Space / Relaxation

Young boys playing by the road side. They can easily and spend time in road side places or elsewhere.

Young girls either help in household chores or take care of younger siblings. They don’t have a place to play.

Adolescent girl remain indoors to help in domestic chores, while her male counterpart is busy playing outside. No social space for women also except common bath or water collection spaces.
SOCIAL NEEDS

• Household status
  Older Dalit widows at times become Household head to take part in decision making, however, sole duty of women are childcare and housework

• Employment status
  Traditional job as cleaner, but full time home maker as unpaid family labor etc.

• Social Status
  They do not have any Social standing, rank, level of respect but treated by their ascribed status of being a lower caste Dalit suffering all kinds of discrimination

• Familial and Social Threats
  Bigamy, desertion, dowry pressures, male alcoholism, physical abuse and violence make these Dalit women very distressed and vulnerable
Social exclusion is “a multi-dimensional process, in which various forms of exclusion are combined:

- participation in decision making and political processes,
- access to employment and material resources,
- integration into the common cultural process.

When combined, they create an acute form of exclusion that find a spatial manifestation in particular neighborhoods.
CONCLUDING REMARK

On the basis of the above findings it can be concluded that:

Dalit women are spatially excluded not only from the mainstream population as they live in a designated place but also due to their triple responsibility they remain occupied within their domestic realm which does not address their practical gender needs. Their spatial exclusion, lack of life-enhancing facilities provokes their social exclusion too.

They do not have any time or scope to have access to education or skill development being fully tied up with their traditional occupation for which their social status remains the same.

Their gender discrimination within and beyond their own group makes them vulnerable and with a fate that seems to revolve in a viscous cycle….

YET THE GIRL CHILD DREAMS FOR A NEW FUTURE
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https://archive.thedailystar.net/forum/2008/august/ffeature.htm

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