Module 3.3 - Women and Urban Resettlement Programs

So, this lecture examines the phenomenon of resettlement of slum dwellers in Indian cities from a gender perspective. The spatial restructuring of our cities is forging a new moment in the history of urban women's working lives, which has caused a large number of women to drop out of the workforce, stay home, work less, or at best, reinvent their working lives—often to their detriment. As I emphasized in a previous lecture here, already low female labor force participation rates in Indian cities reflect the trade-off that women have to make between their household reproductive roles and their opportunity to earn an income— trade-offs that are made more costly because of distance and poor transport options between their homes and workplaces.

Numerous studies of gender and work in globalized economies have found that even as women start entering the workforce in large numbers, often becoming the principal household wage earners, their working conditions are increasingly exploitative. With precarious working conditions, long hours, low wages, abusive working relationships, and tightening surveillance and control over themselves—both in their workplaces and, for young unmarried women, even at home. All these conditions have made job turnover and dropouts among women quite frequent. Now, if we view these conditions of women's work together with the spatial restructuring of our cities, we find an even greater set of challenges for women's labor force participation in urban areas.

So, what do I mean by urban spatial restructuring? Now, over the last two decades, a trend that has emerged and been consolidated across all Indian metros is the mass relocation of slum dwellers to large tenement colonies on the peripheries of cities. This has become the predominant mode of low-income urban housing and slum clearance in Indian cities today. Now, there are numerous other methods of slum clearance that have

been employed over the years across India and globally. For instance, in situ redevelopment involves demolishing the slum and rehousing its residents in the same location in newly constructed tenements.

This is typically a costly option for governments and cannot be adequately scaled up to meet the need. Now, the other option, which has proven much more successful across India and across the world, is known as in-situ slum upgrading. Here, the government provides security of tenure and improved infrastructure like water supplies, sewerage connections, streetlights, and roads to slums, allowing residents to improve their housing themselves in line with their needs and abilities over time. Now, since the government is not building houses here, its costs are much lower, and the benefits to the slum dwellers are much higher, as it does not disrupt their livelihoods and social networks. Such projects were implemented in several cities of India, like Chennai, Pune, and Ahmedabad, in the 1980s and the 1990s and proved very successful in integrating poor families into the urban mainstream.

However, by the late 1990s, following liberalization, as Indian cities aspired to become world-class, land became the most valuable urban commodity, and cities across the country became reluctant to allot land for low-income housing. Waves of slum evictions began to occur to make way for world-class infrastructure projects like metros, expressways, water body restoration, greening and beautification, and to build aesthetic, slum-free facades. Now, with this, the approach to slum rehousing shifted almost exclusively to resettling slum dwellers—in cases where they met eligibility criteria—to sites outside the city. In official documents, these resettlement colonies are then known as integrated townships, offering their residents all amenities, from creches and schools to parks, playgrounds, and markets.

But in reality, they are poorly built, poorly serviced ghettos, which take years—often decades—to achieve even a semblance of decency and dignity. So, there are a few things that I want to note about these projects. First, the scale. These colonies house several thousand families—starting from 5,000 to about 25,000—of the lowest castes and classes, and in some cities, of religious and ethnic minorities and migrants. So, typically, they house the most vulnerable and marginalized residents of our cities.

The tenements are usually provided fully built with fixed sizes and designs, offering very little flexibility to households to build up their homes to make their own homes. They are typically very small in size from about 150 square feet to now at best 350 square feet and

they are located outside or on the edges of the city often in isolated wastelands that are poorly connected to the city and often in the lowest value lands on ecologically fragile marshes that may be prone to flooding or near municipal dump yards or industrial backyards where they face severe pollution. And while most of these colonies so far have been built by the state, they are also increasingly being built by private developers who receive incentives from the state to build low-income housing and they seek out the cheapest lands on the periphery to build them.

These projects now are being built in the name of offering affordable housing and formalizing informal settlements. But numerous studies are finding that they are poverty traps where the cycles of disadvantage that perpetuates urban poverty are reproduced and exacerbated by these new factors of distance and disconnection. So, here I am bringing together findings from various studies that we have conducted across four resettlement sites in Chennai and over more than 10 years and some insights from comparative studies in Ahmedabad and in Mumbai. Now, urban peripheries can actually be very dynamic spaces with a lot of economic activity and in Chennai most of the resettlement colonies are built along the information technology or IT corridor in the south of the city, which has several IT parks and Special Economic Zones and various high-end commercial and residential developments.

But, the resettlement colonies are typically hidden away. They are tucked behind the main road. They are invisible and disconnected in many ways from this dynamism of the periphery. The people here remain out of place for years, because they are fundamentally urban families who have made their lives and livelihoods in the city for so long that they remain rooted in the city and keep travelling back to the city for work, for family and for their networks.

Now, in 2011, 10 years after the resettlement colony of Kannagi Nagar in Chennai was established, we conducted a survey of livelihoods covering about 700 households. We found that the impacts of resettlement were much more severe on women workers than on men. Of the 288 people we found who had either lost jobs or abandoned working altogether, 207 were women. Then, in 2017, we conducted another study in two newer resettlement sites called Perumbakkam and Gudapakkam, where we found that, in the 100 households we sampled, 30 workers had dropped out of work after resettlement, of which 23 were women. Many households were now struggling to survive on a single income despite significantly lower housing costs. In Ahmedabad, of the 268 working-age

people in a resettlement colony that we studied, only 183 were working, and of these, only 40 were women.

This is out of 268 households. Women's labor force participation rate there was only 20%, against about 75% for men. Many women who had been working earlier as flower vendors, for example, near the Sabarmati River in the center of the city, had now switched to home-based work such as tailoring or embroidery once they were in the resettlement colony. However, they experienced a sharp drop in earnings as they had to depend on middlemen to supply raw materials or market their products. So, the reasons for this kind of livelihood disruption are many.

The first of them is, of course, distance, travel, and time. Most workers were still traveling to the city for work, as the places they had been relocated to did not offer job opportunities appropriate to their skills, or because they could not break into employment markets in the new areas, especially given the high competition due to the large numbers relocated. So, they continued to travel long distances at high costs—both monetary and in terms of time, energy, and health. Public transport arrangements were inadequate, unreliable, overcrowded, uncomfortable, and costly. Access roads to bus stops were often unpaved, unlit, and unsafe.

People with even minor ailments like blood pressure or weak knees could not negotiate these crowded buses and long journeys. So they dropped out. Those who had small children and therefore had to be home by afternoon when the children returned from school dropped out. So, the second point is poor services and infrastructure. Now, these issues of distance and inadequate transport were compounded by the challenges of running a household in a resettlement context where water supplies were unreliable, where social networks were weak because they had just moved in with a set of new people, and where childcare facilities were inadequate.

And housing design in these resettlement colonies also plays a role. The new units are designed for nuclear families and are so small that they do not allow scope for spillover accommodation, which tends to extend the household unit and offer support to women in informal settlements. And then there is this thing that I call notional class mobility. So, the move to formal housing, along with the low rents and installment payments that make it possible—in cases where men have also been able to retain their livelihoods—makes it possible for women not to work. The new formal housing also represents a notional class

mobility in comparison to informal housing, and this creates a sort of household pressure to keep women out of the workforce.

Many women who were keen to work said that their husbands opposed it. Thus, there was a kind of re-domestication of working women, partly owing to the reassertion of patriarchal nuclear family norms due to this tenement design and the formalization of housing. All of these factors then caused women to drop out of the workforce in significant numbers. One of the biggest effects I think we can expect to see in the coming decades, from this countrywide relegation of working-class people to the urban peripheries, is a large-scale elimination of women from the labor market. And then the next point is quality of work, because even where women continue to work, what we observed was a deterioration in their conditions of work.

Caused by the combination of an oversupply of low-wage female labor with their restricted mobility and limited options in terms of job alternatives because they are trapped in these large and relatively isolated ghettos. So, when we began our research in Kannagi Nagar in 2011—remember this was 10 years after people had been moved here—we found that women were constantly asking us for work. And this surprised us because there had been a lot of economic dynamism in the area in those 10 years. The IT corridor had developed by then, and a range of jobs for low-income women had opened up. So, we were perplexed to find high levels of female unemployment, to see women from Dalits—that is, the low caste and fishing communities, who are traditionally or typically the most economically active women in urban areas—sitting and playing cards in the middle of the day.

Even 10 years after resettlement, why were women still desperately seeking work? What we found was that the issue was not just about a lack of job opportunities but about the quality of work available to them. Women's jobs in Kannagi Nagar were concentrated at the lower-skilled end of the occupational spectrum in domestic work, housekeeping, cleaning, helping, office and sales assistance, and casual factory work. They were almost entirely absent from the skilled or semi-skilled occupations like driving, plumbing, carpentry, and painting, which were organized in self-employed or entrepreneurial modes, were more mobile, and were better paid.

So, we also found that the vast majority of women's jobs were casual, organized through contractors under highly insecure and exploitative terms. They were very poorly paid with physically taxing working conditions, with long hours on their feet, often not

allowed to sit or to take elevators, wages cut for every day of leave, harassment by supervisors, and few opportunities for occupational mobility. So now, while these are not uncommon features of informal labor in general, we find that the context of resettlement exacerbated these conditions because, first, working conditions and wages could be kept low because of the large pool of low-skilled labor available in these mass ghettos, making it a contractor's market, and second, the alternatives like domestic work in the city, which was usually a preferred option for many of these women, was too costly in terms of transport costs and time. And so, the quality of work then available for women from resettlement colonies, even in the high-end new economy establishments of the IT corridor, caused a high turnover of jobs.

Women quit jobs frequently because they found that their health was suffering. Or they were not able to balance household and work responsibilities. For women, particularly those running a household with children, the most important criterion for being able to take a job is flexibility of timings, which will allow them to work while maintaining their household responsibilities and also being able to send their children to school, properly fed and clothed. Living in a resettlement colony strongly limits this flexibility due to the challenges of distance and transport, and all of this then helps to explain the high levels of unemployment and underemployment among women in resettlement colonies. Women were constantly dropping out of jobs and looking for new ones that would suit their constraints and their needs.

Therefore, being employed in resettlement colonies is a tenuous, shifting, and contingent condition for women. And here, I just want to emphasize the temporal dimension and its significance in working-class lives. Working-class individuals only have their labor and their time to invest toward a better future for themselves and, usually more importantly from their perspective, for their children. Disruptions in these working trajectories thus set them back in their progress toward this better future. You know, a very common practice in resettlement is to move people to these colonies before putting in place all the amenities, assuming that people will manage somehow as these amenities get slowly established over time. But what we have found is that a major disruption, such as a child dropping out of school or a man or a woman losing a job that they have invested their time in for many years because of these sorts of amenities not being available, can seldom be reversed and, in the best-case scenario, may set them back several years.

For this reason, we emphasize that when the state resettles vulnerable people to peripheral areas, a slow, incremental approach to providing facilities can be very

detrimental to their pathways out of poverty. So, the final point here about factors underpinning women falling out of the workforce is safety. Apart from issues of distance and transport, a very important condition that determines women's options and the decision to remain in the workforce was safety. Safety issues emerged as the strongest thread linking the experiences of resettlement in Chennai, Ahmedabad, Mumbai, and Delhi across new and old settlements, across different sizes and different locations of settlements.

Safety concerns surfaced repeatedly and spontaneously in every interview with women and were clearly a crucial constraint to their mobility and their ability to remain in the workforce. Safety concerns played out at different levels in the resettlement colonies. First, at the level of basic infrastructure, for instance, lighting. Across the resettlement sites, especially in the new ones like Perumbakkam and Gudapakkam, which were constructed a few years ago, women complained of inadequate lighting in corridors and compounds, on access roads and in streets, which made them feel very unsafe moving around after dark.

The settlements were entirely engulfed in darkness after sunset, and streetlights were among the residents' main demands when we went there for interviews. Secondly, access roads to the outside were in poor condition. Apart from being unlit, they were unpaved and unsafe to walk on. There were stories of snakes and dogs. There were numerous instances of women and children being accosted by drunken men on these roads.

Third, many of these settlements were located off major ring roads or high-speed highways or corridors on the urban peripheries, which posed hazards for people venturing outside the settlement. For example, Gudapakkam is located close to an intercity highway where long-distance buses and trucks speed through at all hours, putting pedestrians, cyclists, and two-wheelers from these colonies at risk when they are on the road. Residents claimed that several accidents had occurred in the area, and similar conditions were reported in Ahmedabad, where there were no arrangements to protect residents of the resettlement colony when they crossed these main roads to take buses to the city. Third, even within the homes, conditions were unsafe due to poor-quality construction. In Chennai, tenements that were only about a year old revealed large cracks in the walls and ceilings, crumbling plaster, and collapsing windows or bars.

Poor wiring and leaking walls were a major source of fear because women described how, during the rains, leaks in the walls spread to the light switches and the walls emitted

shocks. They were particularly worried about children touching these walls. In Ahmedabad, residents complained of poorly maintained buildings, polluted water, sewage overflows, and stagnation, which really compromised their health. In many cases, these poor housing and infrastructure conditions, combined with commuting difficulties, led many families to abandon these units and return to the city or to not occupy them from the start. So, you see a lot of vacant units, desolate-looking buildings with broken windows where unsafe things happen, and a high turnover of houses from owners to renters, which was common.

In many sites, between a quarter to a half of these allotted units were unoccupied or kept locked by owners. Absence and separation marked life in these settlements. For example, in Gudapakkam, which is very far from the city, many families lived apart for part of the week as male adults and sometimes even college-going young people spent weekdays in the city, leaving women alone in the resettlement colonies all week. Some families had left their children in the city to keep them away from the unsafe conditions in the resettlement colonies. Even in households where both adults were living there but went to work in the city during the day, children were left alone in the resettlement sites for very long hours. These absences and separations made for peculiar patterns of gendered occupation of these sites, where there were large numbers of women-headed households juxtaposed against large numbers of unemployed men alone in the house during the day.

A woman in Gudapakkam described this as one reason why she felt afraid to leave her daughters alone in the neighborhood and go to work. Residents also talked about frequent conflicts between slum leaders from different slums vying for control in the new area. In Perumbakkam, a taxi driver described how the windshield of his taxi and six auto-rickshaws parked nearby were smashed one night in a drunken quarrel. He claimed that there was a street brawl every night in which buildings and vehicles often got damaged. Residents also spoke of daily incidents of theft and of what they called unsavory activities, such as prostitution, occurring in the tenements.

With high male unemployment and school dropout rates, alcohol and drug abuse were rampant. There were gangs that hung out on street corners. Many women were afraid to let their children out of the house for these reasons. In both Perumbakkam and Gudapakkam, child safety was an acute concern, and there were many accounts of both attempted and actual kidnappings of children.

In some cases, girls were withdrawn from school due to unsafe travel conditions. Numerous child marriages have been reported in resettlement colonies, as families feel this is the only way to keep their girl children safe. So, women in Gudapakkam, which is located 50 kilometers from Chennai in the middle of farmlands, described feeling ruralized and dependent. They had lost their urban independence.

They missed the ease of movement in their urban neighborhoods, where they could simply step out of their houses, sometimes even in their nighties, to pick up something from the market. Here, they hardly left the neighborhood, as it involved too much planning: whom to go with, what transport to take, what time they would come home, etc. One woman described feeling lost somewhere in the forest. Even young men and women sorely missed urban amenities like cinemas, internet centers, and markets. An older man commented that the place was suitable for retired people like him, who could just sit and contemplate their remaining life.

But clearly, this is not appropriate for working people from the city. Some said that the distance and disconnection from their relatives had broken their social networks. So, overall, in all of the sites we studied, respondents described their current conditions as a setback in their trajectories of urban advancement and socioeconomic mobility. Their stories were all about losses of jobs and income, of mobility, of opportunities and freedom, which significantly offset the benefits of an affordable dwelling unit.

So, what efforts have been made to support and strengthen these livelihoods? State agencies, like in Chennai, the Slum Clearance Board, which governs these resettlement sites, have recognized the severe disruption of jobs and livelihoods caused by resettlement and have initiated programs like skill workshops, job training programs, job fairs, and so on. But all of these have proved to be resounding failures in restoring livelihoods for several reasons. First, they impart very conventional skill packages like tailoring, jewelry-making, soap-making, etc. which are not followed up by robust marketing assistance,

so they do not translate into a livelihood pathway. These job fairs yield a very limited number of jobs for these residents, and recruiters tend to favor young people and offer very little for older women. Recently, there have been more efforts made by, for example, the police department to organize non-traditional and potentially more remunerative and mobile occupations for women, like training them to be Uber drivers. But again, to take these programs to the point where women are actually driving for a living needs a lot

more coordination and support than a single agency can provide. And I think, at a more fundamental level,

My talk has tried to emphasize how housing conditions can seriously impact the ability of women to participate in the workforce. It has tried to underline the connections between physical mobility—that is, the ability of women to travel safely, cheaply, and conveniently— and their socioeconomic mobility in the long term. So, how physical mobility and socioeconomic mobility are connected. So much of the conditions of women's work can be enhanced, actually, by very simple infrastructure and amenities, such as enhanced pedestrian safety and more and cheaper bus routes,

but also better childcare facilities, decent primary healthcare centers, and reliable water supplies. And finally, I just want to say a few words about the pandemic—to actually argue that the pandemic, like all other disasters we have seen here, like cyclones and floods, has highlighted the unique vulnerability of these resettlement colonies owing to their distance from the city and their dependence on public transport. While large numbers of workers in the city did lose work for several months, many were able to attempt a slow recovery through various informal means as the economy slowly opened up. But residents of these colonies were entirely cut off from the city until public transport was restored, except for those with private transport modes like two-wheelers, who were almost exclusively male. So, these women survived without income

and were reliant on charitable contributions from various sources for several months. And things look even more serious in the long term. We see that IT firms have seen the money in work-from-home arrangements and are unlikely to return fully to the large workspaces of the past. While this is good news for the city in general—in terms of reducing road traffic congestion and pollution—it also raises significant implications for the large numbers of informal service-sector workers that depend on employment in these IT offices, like housekeeping staff, caterers, tea and restaurant workers, and drivers. Large proportions of these workers come from these resettlement colonies and will face a decimation of their livelihoods.

So the huge cost savings that tech companies are enjoying will translate into losses for this large and vulnerable cohort of urban workers. And this is something that the government needs to take into account and balance out in some ways. And I'm going to end this lecture here. Thank you.