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Mental Health, Well-Being, and Work-Life Balance in the Slums of Kolkata: Pathways toward Sustainable Urban Development

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Abstract

This study explores the everyday lives, mental well-being, and work-life balance of slum population who has lived for more than two generations in the slums of Kolkata. The research has used a qualitative phenomenological design. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted. Participants were chosen through purposive sampling so that the sample includes a mix of gender, age, and occupation. Thematic analysis showed that the daily life of these marginalised women is shaped by a mix of structural, community, personal factors. The biggest source of stress for these women was unstable work and financial insecurity. At the same time, supportive relationships with neighbours and their own personal strategies helped them to cope and stay resilient. Spiritual practices, positive thinking, and daily routine maintenance were also tried by the participants as a coping strategy. The study highlights the importance of context-specific resilience, strong social support, and everyday coping strategies practised by these women dwelling in slums of Kolkata. The paper also stresses on the urgent requirement for community-based mental-health programs, policy support, and sustainable urban development.

Keywords: Mental Health, Work-Life Balance, Urban Slums, Sustainable Development, Kolkata

1. Introduction

In sustainable development, mental health and general well-being are important issues. This holds especially true in case of developing countries that are facing rapid urbanization. The slums of Kolkata, one of the India's largest and oldest metro cities, area a good example of this problem. Here, poverty, overcrowding, informal work, and poor public services have been always creating pressure on both physical and mental health of the residents (Banerjee,

2021; Sarkar & Dutta, 2020). Although it is a recognised fact now that mental health is an important part of human development still slum populations are the one to receive the least support. They have very limited and restricted access to mental health services, guidance and research (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022).

In slums, many people work in unstable and informal jobs. They often work long hours and live in stressful conditions. They find it hard to maintain both emotional stability and personal relationships-the key parts of psychological well-being (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2019). So, the link between mental health, well-being, and work-life balance is very important among the slum population. Poverty among this community makes the situation even worse. Urban poverty reduces access to all the things that can help in maintaining work-life balance i.e. mental health care, recreation spaces and social support systems (Gupta et al., 2020).

In the recent years, many scholars and planners have discussed about the need to include mental health in sustainable urban development (Patel et al., 2018). The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set forth for 2030 also clearly indicate the move towards urban environments that are inclusive, healthy, and resilient. To be more specific, SDG 3, for instance, pledges "Good Health and Well-Being," while SDG 11 calls for "Sustainable Cities and Communities" (United Nations, 2015). Therefore, the issue of mental health and work-life balance in underprivileged urban areas like the slums of Kolkata should be dealt with as a public health matter and also as a way of achieving sustainability goals.

Research now being done is focusing on goal of reaching an understanding of the mental, physical and economic connectedness dimensions of the residents in the slum areas of Kolkata through a qualitative approach. The study does not use quantitative measurement but rather, in-depth understanding of the situation and the individuals' mental well-being which are the social and economic circumstances; and giving people the ways to cope with the difficulties imposed by everyday life in less favored areas. The study will use semi-structured interviews with purposively selected participants from slum clusters like Tiljala, Topsis, Chetla and Kalighat to reveal the lived experiences, perceptions, and coping strategies that characterize well-being in these contexts. The insights derived from participants' narratives are anticipated to guide the creation of contextually grounded urban policies that regard mental health as a basic human right and thus, inclusive, community-cantered approaches to sustainable urban development should be promoted.

2. Literature Review

Urban slum population mental health has started being recognized more and more as an important yet still unexplored aspect of public health and urban policy. According to research, the people living in informal settlements are subject to a whole range of social, environmental, and economic stressors which increase their susceptibility to depression, anxiety, and other mental health problems (Patel et al., 2018; Lund et al., 2019). In India, the situation has aggravated with the combination of rapid urbanization and insufficient housing

conditions (Sarkar & Dutta, 2020). Besides, overcrowding, bad sanitation, and lack of privacy are still the major causes of psychological strain in slum areas (Gupta et al., 2020).

In a case study conducted in Kolkata health disparities by Banerjee (2021) that affirmed that people living in slums have their rations of mental stress which they consider as a part of survival and so they underreport their cases and conduct less health-seeking behavior. Then again, the stigma that goes with having a mental health problem is strong, pushing further away those who require psychological help (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). These findings show that we urgently need mental health programs that work within the community. These programs should be culturally sensitive and easily accessible.

Work-life balance (WLB) has mostly been a topic of discussion in the context of formal employment; however, in underdeveloped countries, a considerable amount of the labor force consists of workers in the informal sector. In the slums of Kolkata, people usually receive very low pay or no pay at all, and they work for long hours in very poor conditions; hence, they are left with almost no time for resting, enjoying life, or spending time with their families (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2019). Emotional well-being and family ties suffer directly from such a situation creating a loop of stress and tiredness (Srinivasan & Murthy, 2021).

Moreover, the gender dynamics have a huge influence on WLB outcomes. The women in the slums are those who are doing paid jobs as well as unpaid domestic work, which not only increases their workload but also their emotional burden (Deshpande, 2020). On top of that, lack of childcare facilities and no flexible working hours make the situation even worse for women and add to the mental health problems in the society. Therefore, it can be said that to make work-life balance better in the informal sectors not only labor reforms but the social infrastructure that supports the total well-being of individuals is also necessary.

Well-being is a concept that has different dimensions ranging from individual happiness to social and environmental aspects that are vital for the long run sustainability (United Nations, 2015). Urban development that is sustainable in an ecological way is considered in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as an economic growth that is accompanied by social inclusion and environmental protection. The mental health issue is considered to be very important by some scholars who advocate for its inclusion in urban sustainability frameworks along with the other issues such as productivity, social cohesion and community resilience being undermined by ill mental health (Patel et al., 2018; Singh & Bandyopadhyay, 2021).

Kolkata's slum areas provide a paradoxical picture where the economy marked by high activity is still living under poor conditions. The total public investments covering healthcare, sanitation and housing are so low that they affect people's mental and physical well-being and thus, impede the city moving towards achieving the targets of SDGs 3 and 11 — Good Health and Well-Being, and Sustainable Cities and Communities (United Nations, 2015). Therefore, the integration of psychosocial health programs into urban planning would be a way of reinforcing the sustainability of these communities (Mukherjee & Das, 2022).

3. Research Gaps

Urban slums have been the subject of health and poverty studies, but the overlap of mental health, work-life balance, and sustainable development has been practically not investigated in Indian cities. There is a need for mixed-method research that highlights both statistical patterns and individual stories, especially in major cities like Kolkata, where informal employment and crowded living conditions influence daily life experience of stress and resilience (Banerjee, 2021; Gupta et al., 2020). The research proposes to fill this void by investigating how slum dwellers perceive and cope with their mental health and work-life balance, and how these aspects affect their overall well-being and sustainability outcomes.

4. Objectives of the Study

The main goal of this paper is to study interconnections among mental-health, well-being and work-life balance in context of urban slum population of Kolkata, West Bengal, India. The paper discusses the issues within the idea of sustainable development. The study has few simple objectives. First, it aims to find out the level of mental health and psychological well-being among the said population. Second, it wants to understand the work-life balance of those within the population not having formal jobs. Third, it plans to examine the link among mental health, well-being, work-life balance and their collective impact on sustainable urban living. Finally, the study aims to suggest policies and community-based actions that can be implemented to improve mental health and foster sustainable urban development.

5. Research Methodology

Research Design

The researchers used a qualitative, phenomenological method. The researcher studied the real-life experiences of working adults and residents for more than two generations of the following informal settlements of Kolkata—Tiljala, Topsia, Chetla, and Kalighat. The researcher focused on the participants' mental health, well-being, and work-life balance. This method helped the researcher to understand the views of the participants and explore how they cope with complex socio-economic conditions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Sample Size and Participant Selection

The purposive sampling method will be used to select the most ideal participants from whom detailed and relevant information can be obtained. The criteria include: adults aged between 18 and 60 years who are still living in the mentioned slums for two years, having equal representation across all gender, age, and occupation categories. The sample size is determined by data saturation, so it is expected that about 20-25 participants will be able to give enough depth (Guest, Namey, & Chen, 2020).

Data Collection

The researchers will use semi-structured interviews to collect the data and the interviews will be audio-recorded with the agreement of the participants and word-for-word transcribed. They will also ask the participants about their experiences, coping methods, and the value of well-being.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) will be used along with a phenomenological approach. The researcher started with getting acquainted with the transcripts. The researcher then highlighted the important segments and grouped the similar points into themes to show patterns in people's experiences. The researcher then interpreted the findings in relation to social and economic constraints. The analysis was done both manually and using MS Word. The reliability of the results was ensured through researcher's reflexivity and maintaining audit trail. This approach helps provide a context- based understanding of how slum dwellers experience and manage their mental health and daily well-being.

6. Findings

The study found five connected themes that explain the experiences of slum-dwellers.

i. Structural Constraints and Economic Stress

The participants' mostly said that it was monetary problems that are irregular pay which was the main cause of their mental struggles. To illustrate one such case: "Today, I might make 200 rupees, but I will sleep without any stress if I think about tomorrow, no work at all. It's killing me." Lack of decent housing and basic services added to the already existing stress thus revealing the extent of urban poverty in terms of the poor's unequal access to basic services.

ii. Community Relationships and Social Support

Living in good neighbourhood and having informal support networks helped to reduce stress and increased the feeling of belongingness. Children were exchanged among the participants, and in case of an emergency one could count on the help of the other, besides, emotional support was always there. "When my son was not feeling well, my neighbour gave me medicine, and he was treated while I was at work. We are each other's support."

iii. Personal Coping Mechanisms and Resilience

People of the community used their daily routines, spiritual practices, and positive cognitive strategies to overcome hard times. These themes show that people have personal resilience, a mental strength that helps them to cope with difficult circumstances.

iv. Challenges to Work-Life Balance

Mental health was negatively impacted by the overlapping work and home responsibilities, long working hours, and pressures of informal jobs. Only a few people could choose flexibility at work or to share household chores to keep a better balance in life.

v. *Factors Interconnectedness*

The research shows the importance of structural challenges, social networks, and personal resilience. People who had stronger connections in the community and were better at adapting to change handled economic and mental stress more effectively. These multi-level perspectives fit with ideas from resilience theory, social capital, and structural inequality frameworks.

Table 1: Themes, Subthemes, and Illustrative Quotes Source: Author

THEME	SUBTHEMES	ILLUSTRATIVE QUOTES
1. Structural Constraints and Economic Stress	Financial instability, Insecure employment, Housing inadequacy	“Even if I earn 200 rupees today, tomorrow I don’t know if there will be work. I can’t sleep thinking about it.”
2. Community Relationships and Social Support	Neighbourly help, Emotional support, Shared responsibilities	“When my son was sick, my neighbour helped me get medicine and took care of him while I worked. We rely on each other.”
3. Personal Coping Mechanisms and Resilience	Routines, Spiritual practices, Positive reframing	“I pray every morning and tell myself that things will get better. It helps me face the day.”
4. Work-Life Balance Challenges	Long working hours, Blurred boundaries, Flexible strategies	“Sometimes I work late and cannot help my children with homework, but we take turns in the family to manage.”
5. Interconnectedness of Factors	Interaction of structural, social, and personal factors	“Even when money is tight, my neighbours’ support and my morning routine help me cope.”

7. Discussion

The research shows that many structural, social, personal factors affect mental health and well-being of Kolkata’s slum population. One major factor is financial instability. This often comes from insecure jobs and creates serious challenges among marginalised communities already adversely affected by urban poverty (UN-Habitat, 2020; Patel et al., 2018). Community support networks also play a big role (Putnam, 2000). People use their own ways of coping with problems, and these are sometimes seen as personal strengths. These personal strengths also support the findings of one of the theories studied about peoples’ adaptability to their environment (Masten, 2014).

Table 2: Conceptual Model of Mental Health and Well-Being in Kolkata's Slums

COMPONENT	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLES / SUBCOMPONENTS	RELATIONSHIP TO MENTAL HEALTH & WELL-BEING
Structural Constraints	Economic and infrastructural challenges that limit opportunities and resources	Poverty, Insecure employment, Poor housing	Directly affects mental health, well-being, and work-life balance
Community Relationships	Social support networks within the slum community	Neighbourly help, Shared responsibilities, Emotional support	Supports mental health and personal coping; moderates the effect of structural constraints
Personal Coping Mechanisms	Individual strategies and resilience practices	Spirituality, Daily routines, Positive reframing	Enhances mental health, well-being, and work-life balance; interacts with social and structural factors
Central Outcome	Overall state of psychological and functional well-being	Mental health, Well-being, Work-life balance	Result of interaction between structural, social, and personal factors

Source: Author

Working in informal jobs makes it difficult for people to balance their work and life. This shows the critical impact of unstable work on mental health (ILO, 2021). The study found that mental health programs all alone are not enough. Economic, Social, and personal issues must be addressed at the same time.

The research is useful not only for developing countries but also globally. Cities like Mumbai, Nairobi, and Dhaka have similar living and working conditions. So, it implies that these findings can be applied to informal settlements all over the world.

8. Conclusion

The study looks at the complicated reality of mental health and work-life balance in poor urban areas.

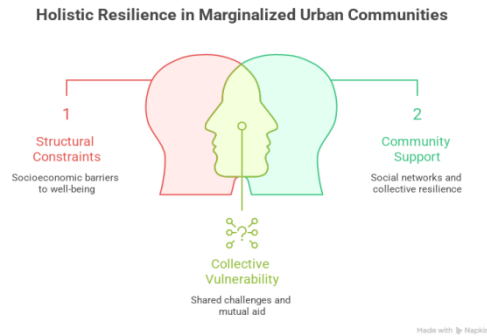


Figure 1. Holistic Resilience in Marginalised Urban Communities Source: Author

The main findings are as follows: Structural problems like poverty and unstable jobs have a big effect on mental health; the support networks in the community act like a shield. They help people cope with stress and stay strong; self-care methods that one use on his own also helps to maintain stability of mental health. These factors though different are connected. They need a holistic approach that looks at the whole situation, not just one isolated part. Besides noting the lived experiences of slum-dwellers the research also adds to our understanding of urban mental health. The study in a nutshell, provides ideas for policies and programs that match reality of the community.

9. Recommendations

i. Policy Interventions:

- To alleviate financial pressures, social protection programs and employment security measures should be introduced.
- Affordability of housing, sanitation and basic amenities must be raised.

ii. Community-Based Programs:

- Community mental health initiatives should be developed by building on the existing networks of the neighbourhoods.
- Peer support groups and community-led well-being activities should be encouraged.

iii. Individual-Focused Interventions:

- Organize stress management, resilience-building workshops and provide culturally sensitive counselling as well as other services.
- Raise the awareness of coping strategies which are in accordance with community values and practices.

iv. *Research Directions:*

- Longitudinal studies should be conducted to track the changes in mental health and work-life balance over time.
- Look into the variations in coping strategies and resilience with respect to gender, age, and profession.
- Community-based mental health interventions in informal settlements need to be assessed for their effectiveness.

Through the application of the structural, social, and personal approaches, this set of recommendations aims to improve mental health, foster well-being, and at the same time, support the sustainable development of urban areas in slum communities.

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