

An Investigation into 'Life-world' of Children and their Forms of Urban Agency in a Transient Neighbourhood in Mutwal

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Abstract

The metropolitan region of Colombo is striving for a world-class city status. The visible changes in Colombo skyline suggest an underlying development trajectory that is typical of cities in the global south. As David Harvey (2008) argues 'Gentrification' processes enabled by Neoliberal market forces create city spaces that marginalize urban needs of local communities. In Sri Lanka, needs of transient migrant populations who are expecting upward social mobility while living in Colombo are overlooked by urban development processes. Furthermore, children in such areas are excluded from all forms of urban planning and design processes. They have no power to influence or contribute to place-making in Colombo which they are impacted by. The paper identifies this as major issue undermining the UNICEF 'Child-Friendly Cities Initiative' and 1989 UN 'Convention on the Rights of the Child' that enforce 'child participation' in urban development processes.

The paper presents empirical research capturing every-day 'life-world' of children who are residents of Mutwal. The paper investigates a broader research question as to how children in transient neighbourhoods perform 'urban agency' as they play in street spaces. Research objectives were three-fold; firstly, to understand the nature of neighbourhood play in Mutwal from the perspective of resident children and their caregivers. Secondly, to understand 'how children in focus group interact with outdoor street spaces?'. Thirdly, to find if children in focus group engaged with 'urban agency' as they play in streets and if so, 'to what extent their actions contributed to building social cohesion?'.

'The Social Audit Cookbook' by Eva Cox (2002) was used as the primary guide to carry out this inquiry. Research methodology consisted of focus group study gathering qualitative data through interviewing parents and children, carrying out child-led city tour, drawing workshop and photo-elicitation exercise involving children aged 5-14 years. Data was analysed in the form of content analysis involving thematic coding using Nvivo software. Findings helped to understand the complexity of how children engaged with 'urban-agency' in Mutwal and how working with resident children has the potential to inform inclusive urban practices from the bottom-up.

Keywords: Child-friendly-city, Street-play, Life-worlds, Child-Participation, Urban Agency.

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Introduction

The experience of childhood is increasingly urban. Globally more than half the world's children live in cities and towns (UNICEF-SOWC, 2018). They must be afforded the amenities and opportunities they need to realize their rights and fullest potential (UNICEF-SOWC, 2023). Currently, urban children are increasingly exposed to violence and war, economic hardship and natural disasters resulting from climate change (UNICEF-SOWC, 2024). Urban areas have inevitably become places where children are given birth to, live, play, learn, work, harmed and exploited.

Despite the limited urban studies on children engaging with cities in global-south, children in developing countries contribute to a multitude of ways in the making of urban places. Cities are significantly shaped by their activities and by the need to reflect their presence in the social organization of life (Horschelmann & Van Blerk, 2012). This research was envisioned as part of the child-friendly city dialogue and hoped to understand the impact of children's street-play in urban neighbourhood of Mutwal, Sri Lanka.

The research aligns with the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the UNICEF Child-Friendly Cities initiative (CFCI) both of which aims to increase children's contribution to matters that affect their lives (UNICEF, 2018). As per principles laid down in CFCI this research investigates the ways in which children can participate, and their voices been heard to inform local planning process and policy interventions. Thus, contributing to making cities more inclusive and respecting the role of children as 'active agents' within their own community (Skelton & Valentine, 1998).

Problem Statement

Exclusion of children and young people from urban spaces continue to grow (Iveson, 2006). With the emergence of the new sociology of 'childhood' and 'youth' in late 1970s and early 1980s recognizing young people's agency led to the development of child-participatory approaches for urban planning and urban design (James et al, 1998; Aitken, 2001). As Karen Malone (2013) argue young people seen in streets and public spaces are frequently viewed with either suspicion or pity and assumed as vulnerable individuals who have no capacity to contribute to any form of place-making in cities.

In Sri Lanka, children are generally excluded from urban planning and design processes. They are expected to occupy age-appropriate spaces that are designed and allocated for their recreation and wellbeing such as playgrounds and parks; while they are not allowed to participate in the decision-making processes that create such spaces. They are neither given the opportunity or the platform to raise their opinions, influence or contribute to place-making in Colombo despite been impacted by its developments. The paper identifies this as a critical social justice issue when considering Colombo's attitude to urban development that continues to undermine the child-participatory policies encouraged by UNICEF's CFCI and 1989 UNCRC. This research attempted to answer broader research question as to 'How local children living in a low-income, transient neighbourhood in Mutwal engage with 'urban-agency' as they play and inhabit their neighbourhood streets?'

Research Objectives

Research objectives were three-fold; (a) to understand the nature of neighbourhood play in Mutwal from the perspective of resident children and their caregivers, (b) to understand how children in focus group interact with outdoor street spaces, (c) to find if children in focus group engaged with 'urban-agency' while playing in the streets, and if so, to what extent their actions contributed to building social cohesion.

Urban Agency, Gentrification & Child-friendly Streets

'Urban agency' is a term used in geography, social sciences and political economy to describe the character of 'urbanism' that engage with how power is exerted by citizens, government, institutions and other stakeholders including global-neoliberal forces (Giddens, 1979). Through the lens of 'urban agency' the city is also viewed as a potent entity shaped by cultural negotiations and hold discursive power; hence, city is not passive setting of material agglomeration and resource accumulation (Lewis, 2017). The city produces a reaction on citizens, causing people to undertake certain actions and to behave in certain ways. Within this premise a person or non-human entity has 'agency'; the capacity to act independently and to make free choices to act and exerting power (Purkharthofer & Stead, 2023). Giddens (1984) show 'Active agency' dynamically interacts with constraining 'urban structuring' (enduring sets of rules and resources in environment). He explains how society works through 'consensus-seeking processes' with shared understanding of mutual trust leading to community 'identity creation' which becomes new 'cultural resources' or 'cultural capital'. Healey (1999) developing on Giddens's ideas conclusively suggest the importance of 'bottom-up' processes of development leading to faith in 'local knowledge'.

Furthermore, there are three contemporary theoretical positions on 'Urban agency' directly relating to the built-environment. These are firstly, 'humanist-spatial model' based on works of Henri Lefebvre (1974) and Michel Foucault (1986) emphasizes the complicated relationships between space and society. Garb (2014) further argues that space is a tool deployed in social struggles and that urban societies produce, and are produced by space. Secondly, the 'Actor-Network-Theory' developed by Bruno Latour (2005) show how material objects in built-environment transform human-life emphasizing the effects of non-human entities. Thirdly, 'urban political ecology' argues that non-human elements have a defining role in shaping the human-world and that 'urbanization' is a metabolic process by which new and more complex relationships between society and nature are created (Keil, 2003). Urban space is viewed as the 'socio-natural metabolism' of the city and is the form through which the nature of both humans and non-human entities are transformed. These three urban modalities are constantly assaulted by global extraction agenda and imprinted onto cities of Global-south through processes of urban-regeneration resulting in 'gentrification' (Harvey, 2009).

'Gentrification' involves the renovation of housing in older, centrally located, lower-income neighbourhoods through an influx of more affluent households seeking the character and convenience of less-expensive, but well-located residences (Bridge, 2006). As an outcome of gentrification processes young middle-class professionals involved in 'new economy' has moved into older neighbourhoods, where planned residential housing mixes with trendy consumer establishments, supplying lifestyle services and commodities (Hall, 2007; Knox, 2011). Hedin et al.

(2012) further argues that gentrification has led to the 'out-filtration' of large families that cannot afford to live in same locations resulting in the removal of children from inner-city (Hall, 2007).

Despite seen gradual surface changes in gentrifying neighbourhood, scholars have identified underlying conditions linking gentrification to globalisation, referred to as 'worlding' process (Harvey, 2009). 'Worlding' is phenomena of how governing elites and everyday citizens shape urban space in emerging nations with aspiring cities (Simone, 2001; McCann et al., 2013; Roy & Ong, 2011). 'Worlding' practices can incorporate the intentions of government, transnational elites and urban practitioners to create a 'world-class' city with aspiring amenities, while modelling euro-centric forms of public leisure spaces (Roy & Ong, 2011). How public leisure spaces are primary used as tool for 'worlding' of cities is further discussed by Roy and Ong (2011).

Waves of city migration and global interactions through trade and media allow for what Simone (2001) calls 'worlding from below'. This is when post-colonial citizens usually holding little power and influence, adapt and adopt ideas imposed from western-world or global capital structures while locally dreaming 'worldly' aspirations (McCann et al., 2013; Ghertner, 2015; Simone, 2001). The concept of 'worlding' captures imposed global visions as well as mass dreaming by local middle-class that has little to do with children's vision for their future (Smith, 2002; McCann et al., 2013). In such scenario it is important to reclaim the 'child' as 'social agent' if Child-Friendly Cities Initiative launched in 1996 by UNICEF is to be realized amidst gentrification (Bartlett, et al., 1999).

UNICEF's urban design principles for child-friendly city consist of streets in which children can walk alone safely. Implicit in the principle is that children despite their lack of democratic power have right to inhabit streets and the public realm. There are numerous accounts of young people's presence in public spaces being discouraged by-design and concern for their safety (Woolley, 2006). The decline in children's spatial freedom reported in many countries has been attributed largely to parental fears of strangers and the increasing intensity of vehicular traffic (Valentine and McKendrick, 1997; Carver et al., 2008; Fyhri et al., 2011; Foster et al., 2014).

There is emerging acceptance and pride in children becoming street-smart. Neighbourhood streets are important sites for children's play and exploration (Chawla, 2002; Witten et al., 2015). Traditionally, they have been everyday settings in which children expend energy, relate to peers and learn a range of social, physical and cognitive skills fundamental to healthy development (Day and Wager, 2010; Freeman and Tranter, 2011). Neighbourhood play shape children's sense of place and enable experiences of social inclusion, belonging that are so crucial to child's identity development and wellbeing (Gleeson and Sipe, 2006; Tranter and Pawson, 2001).

As children negotiate the relational terrain of local streets and public spaces, they learn behaviours that are appropriate to different places and integrate their personal experiences with 'boundaries set by parents, neighbourhood folklore and kids' 'collective wisdom' as they acquire 'street-literacy' (Cahill, 2000). Limited independent mobility not only impacts children's physical health but also deprives them of opportunities to improvise social life and learn social skills (Cahill, 2000). Evidence also suggests that sense of place, inclusion and personal identity are nurtured by being out and about without constant adult-supervision (Proshansky and Gottlieb, 1989).

Research on children's independent mobility in Sri Lanka is very limited. According to Rudner and Wickramaarachchi (2013) children in Sri Lanka have mid to high levels of independent mobility in comparison with other nations. In both urban and suburban areas children used high level of motorised transportation and primary school children had high-level of adult accompaniment,

while many children are still allowed to go places by themselves. Majority of children indicated they feel safe when they are alone in their local neighbourhoods. This may be due to children knowing their neighbours and familiarity of their neighbourhoods. Rural to sub-urban children were more familiar with people in their neighbourhoods than children living in gated communities in more urbanised areas (Rudner, Munasinghe & Wickramaarachchi, 2012).

Life-world & Child-agency

Adult perspective of 'childhood' is dominantly represented through media, political discourse, literature and academic debate (Horschelmann & Van Blerk, 2012). Notions of 'childhood' is defined and represented by adults in society and is legally protected throughout the world (Griffin, 2001). The 'rights of child' established in UNCRC ensure universal character of 'childhood' and Articles 24, 27 and 31 are most relevant to urban-planning and community development policy ensuring children's wellbeing. The UNCRC and Section 14 of 'SAARC Convention Act' defined 'child' as human being below the age of 18 years. The Age of Majority Ordinance in Sri Lanka also define 'child' as below the age of 18 years regardless of the age of sexual consent being 16 years. These definitions of 'child' place legal implications to viewing child-agency on terms based on what children are supposed to do and what they are not allowed to do in society.

Scholarship investigating the concept of 'child-agency' identifies two overlapping layers. Firstly, in childhood studies, 'Actor-oriented approach' is defined as children's ability to construct and determine their own social lives, the lives of those around them and societies in which they live (James & Prout, 1997). Secondly, the internationally recognized universality of 'childhood' is protected by legal and moral framework presented in the UNCRC (1989) and discusses child-agency within universal policy. UNCRC views 'child' as human beings with rights to participation, autonomy, and self-determination. Article 12 gives children right to participate in decisions that concern them. Articles 13 and 5 focus on, respectively, the right of children to be heard and their right to proper guidance, in accordance with their evolving capacity.

In sociology 'life-world' describes and analyses the lived-world of everyday life. Habermas (1987) states that 'life-world' consists of 'communicative action'. Schutz and Luckmann (1973) suggest 'life-world' consists of physical and social worlds experienced by an individual and is both personal and intersubjective reality which people modify through their acts, which on the other hand modifies their actions (Husserl, 1936).

According to Bronfenbrenner (1979) one of the ways of analysing children's life-world is to consider ecological model of child-development that distinguish private-sphere (home and family) from public-sphere which include school, public services, relationship with institutions or political power (Cockburn, 2005; Sinclair, 2004). Bronfenbrenner (1979) articulate that children's development can be delineated by four-types of nested life-world systems; (1) microsystem: child's immediate surroundings such as family, home and friends; (2) mesosystem: interrelations between microsystems, for example between home and school; (3) exosystem: external settings that do not directly influence the child, such as parent's place of work or activities of local school board and (4) macrosystem: larger sociocultural context.

The contemporary expanding of children's 'life-world' has increased expectations of children's abilities to participate, contesting children's legal position as 'citizens in-waiting'. Buckingham (2000) show media and consumption are permanent parts of children's lives today, to the extent that childhood is believed to have become shorter or disappearing (Andrews & Wickett, 2014).

Children not only adopt adult-like ways of behaving and dressing but also are very aware of many social themes such as the threat to environment, war and human-conflict (Jans, 2004). Howe and Covell (2005) suggest child-citizens having the right but also the responsibility to participate in the discussion of global problems related to environment, poverty and effects of war. Such paradigm shift in contemporary 'childhood' view 'child' as an 'active agent' partaking in global issues and societal decision making.

'Agency' is understood as individual's own capacities, competencies and activities through which they navigate the contexts and positions of their 'life-world'; fulfilling many economic, social and cultural expectations while simultaneously plotting individual or collective choices and possibilities for their daily and future lives (Robson et al., 2007). Conceptualizing children as 'agents' and competent social beings means to view them as 'doers' and 'thinkers' rather than 'human-becoming' (Robson et al., 2007; Iveson, 2006). Thinking and doing are important components of any definition of agency coinciding with more general sociological stance; that agency cannot be isolated from social structure (Giddens, 1979).

Klocker et al., (2007) discuss two typologies of 'child-agency' to exemplify how different contexts shape child-agency and the ways in which children navigate these contexts. Klocker et al., (2007) distinguish between 'thick-agency' and 'thin-agency.' Thin-agency represents children's everyday decisions and actions that are carried out within highly restrictive contexts with few or limited opportunities. Thick-agency implies choices and possibilities in the realms of material wealth, social network or support systems that facilitate better living conditions for children. Thick-agency can be opportunity for girls and boys to choose which school or activities to attend and include the freedom to choose future marriage partner.

Poverty research suggests children in poverty may be powerless for being both poor and children (Schweiger & Cabezas, 2017). Relatively few studies have explored agency among children and young people experiencing poverty. Current scholarship show children may actively try to mediate the effects of poverty hinting that children may well exert agency (Middleton et al, 1994). Education is widely viewed as means of escaping intergenerational poverty through social mobility (Zhu & Chang, 2019; Ponzini, 2020). As children are generally perceived as 'adults in-waiting' their forms of agency are not much acknowledged in traditional and current parenting practices (Zhou & Jia, 2022; Huang, 2023).

Many researchers have focused on resilience of children experiencing poverty and has revealed survival strategies that children employ (Middleton et al, 1994; Knight et al, 2019). These include sophisticated negotiation strategies with parents and other adults to acquire extra resources, attempts to penetrate friendship groups despite being stigmatised by poverty and mental games played to cope with social rejection suggestive of intense child-agency (Muschamp et al, 2009).

Methodology

The overall approach to research was based on feminist theory and embodies several hidden assumptions that influenced way in which data was collected. The underlying assumptions can be declared as; (a) children having the right to play and can make claims to different forms of playing as per UNCRC, (b) that children have embodied knowledge that is worth unravelling and empowering during research, (c) that children are 'experts' of their own playing, (d) that children as 'active agents' can contribute to building community.

Following a feminist approach, participant children were considered as co-researchers that took part in fine tuning the research methodology. Children were also considered as co-creators capable of participating in production of knowledge under postmodern perspective. The research was primarily a focus group study gathering qualitative data through replicating well-established methods used in child-participation literature. Methods such as (i) initial field observation with mapping, on-site sketching & photography of study area (Cox, 2002), (ii) door-to-door knocking informal interviews with community (Cox, 2002), (iii) parents and children's questionnaires (Boyden & Ennew, 1997) in Sinhala, Tamil, and English languages, (iv) focus group study interviewing parents/guardians and children (Barker & Weller, 2003), (v) child-led neighbourhood tour to locate street-play areas (Driskell, 2002), (vi) two-hour drawing workshop (figure 1) focusing on children's outdoor play experiences (Punch, 2001; Young & Barrett, 2001), (vii) week long child-led photo-elicitation exercise (figure 2) where children recorded their own 'life-world' using disposable cameras (Dodman, 2003; Young & Barrett, 2001) were conducted.



Fig. 1: Photographs of children-led drawing workshop
Source: author (2019)



Fig. 2: Children trying out their disposable cameras in preparation for child-led photo elicitation
Source: author (2019)

The forms of qualitative data collected allowed author to understand deeper truths in the lives of participants and helped understand the phenomenology of 'place' (Farthing, 2016) and how different means of child-agency function within it. Eva Cox's (2002) 'The Social Audit Cookbook: recipes for auditing the way we connect' was used as primary guide for developing the survey question segments and structure of both parent's and children's questionnaires. Eva Cox social Audit (2002) render detailed systematic way of assessing a community's social interactions and capture criteria such as sharing of food, caring for pets, helping neighbours during emergency, carrying out childcare and maintaining neighbourhood surveillance.

Scope & Limitations

The research responded to Roger Hart's (1992) 'Ladder of children participation' where child-participation ideally move beyond tokenism and child-consultation allowed participant children to be in-charge of making their own decisions. The research adopted 'adult-initiated shared decision-making by children' approach (Hart, 1997). For example, participant children brainstormed where we could conduct the drawing workshop. Shared decision-making led to the idea that they would like to conduct it at a semi-constructed house nearest to their play area (figure 3). They dismissed both suggestions made by author to conduct the workshop at nearby church or community centre. Children felt those spaces were adult-places that view them as 'trouble-makers' and would limit their freedom to express themselves.



Fig. 3: Location Children decided for drawing workshop
Source: author (2019)

In terms of limitations the focus group study involved only 8 guardians and 14 children between the ages of 5-14 years. Out of the 14 children, 11 were girls while remaining 3 were boys. The participants involved in the study were limited to women and their children in specific residential area of Mutwal. Study may have issues when expanded and generalized to reflect life-worlds of larger populations living in Colombo. Certainly, the research outcome cannot be generalized to the whole of Sri Lanka, as the concept of 'life-world' mainly focuses on individual's lived-experiences; while within the island there are also drastic sociocultural differences between city dwellers and rural dwellers.

The community in Mutwal is generally considered to be multicultural. However, many of the participants in the research were Sinhalese-Christians. Therefore, the sample of participants as indicated in Table 1 and Table 2 did not reflect the ethnic and religious diversity of the area as initially expected. Study outcome may be layered by cross-cultural misinterpretations. The research methodology modelled around western concepts and techniques may not have accurately represented the extent to which local children enact agency during street-play. Data collected may also not have done justice to capturing the urban complexity typical of South-Asian cities.

Table 1: Demography of child participants

	Name	Age	Sex	Ethnicity	Religion
1	Child 1	06	Female	Tamil	Hindu
2	Child 2	14	Male	Sinhalese	Christian
3	Child 3	11	Female	Sinhalese	Christian
4	Child 4	10	Female	Sinhalese	Christian
5	Child 5	11	Female	Sinhalese	Buddhist
6	Child 6	13	Female	Sinhalese	Christian
7	Child 7	09	Female	Burgher	Christian
8	Child 8	08	Female	Tamil	Hindu
9	Child 9	05	Female	Burgher	Christian
10	Child 10	07	Male	Sinhalese	Christian
11	Child 11	10	Male	Sinhalese	Christian
12	Child 12	07	Female	Sinhalese	Christian
13	Child 13	08	Female	Sinhalese	Christian
14	Child 14	11	Female	Sinhalese	Christian

Table 2: Demography of adult participants

	Name	Age	Ethnicity	Religion	Employment
1	Participant Mother 1	42	Sinhalese	Christian	Housewife
2	Participant Mother 2	38	Sinhalese	Christian	Works at a cleaning service
3	Participant Mother 3	30	Burgher	Christian	Zumba fitness instructor
4	Participant Guardian 1	53	Sinhalese	Christian	Stay home Grandmother
5	Participant Mother 4	39	Tamil	Hindu	Housewife
6	Participant Mother 5	36	Sinhalese	Buddhist	Housewife
7	Participant Guardian 2	63	Sinhalese	Christian	Grandmother working at NGO
8	Participant Mother 6	38	Tamil	Hindu	Owner of a Nursery /head teacher

Study Area

Due to rural poverty whole families migrate into cities. In Sri Lanka, rural poverty has driven families to migrate to outskirts of Colombo (Anulawathie, H.R., 2015). They are leaving poverty-stricken towns and villages where economic globalization is disintegrating rural livelihoods and making their comparative poverty more acutely noticed (Swanson, 2010). They have swapped agricultural work for informal labour as method of improving their livelihoods (Anulawathie, H.R., 2015). Most migrant families enter the informal housing market renting small rooms in low-income neighbourhoods. Access to education, healthcare and urban services are seen better than in their rural home, despite the poor-quality accommodation available to them (Andreasen, 1996). Migrants who are unable to connect quickly with other migrants or landlords may experience social and economic discrimination including lack of security and insults related to their tenure and social status (Watson & McCarthy, 1998). The study area is a manifestation of similar social trend shaping the neighbourhood morphology of Mutwal.

Self-organising informal settlements (Dovey & King, 2011) can be seen located on the periphery of older, well-established neighbourhoods and often on lands that are least desirable for housing, either near waterbodies prone to flooding or reservation land with poor sanitary facilities (D' Souza, 1997). The study area comprises of neighbourhoods characterised by overcrowded placement of residential units with poor ventilation and natural light; with poor sanitary facilities resulting in high incidence of communicable diseases among children under five years (D' Souza, 1997).

The key concerns for children growing up in the area are related to 'physical infrastructure' such as access to clean water, watertight shelter, secure electricity access and sanitation practices (Horschelmann & Van Blerk, 2012). Children in study area have greater access to outdoor spaces including streets and edges of urban boundaries, as daily life often spill-out on to streets for cooking, eating, socialising, leisure and play (Horschelmann & Van Blerk, 2012). These spatial spillovers enhance the social well-being of residents and enrich children's experiences growing-up in their neighbourhood. However, Bartlett (1999) claim that children living in such neighbourhoods can be more seriously affected by the poor environmental conditions which expose them to greater vulnerability making them more susceptible to diseases.

The study area is located proximity to Crow-Island Beach Park, which is a recreational landmark in Mutwal (figure 4). Crow-island Beach Park consists of public gathering spaces, children's play areas, hawker-stalls, restaurants and police station. It remains a popular destination for people living in Colombo metropolitan area (figure 5). As shown in figure 4, St. John place (green) directly links to Modara Street (brown) and connects to Crow-Island Beach Park via rear-entrance. The neighbourhood-street built along the canal (yellow) connecting Park's rear-entrance up to Modara Street was the primary study area (red oval). The street shown in purple contained the closest kindergarten.



Fig. 4: Location map of research area (red circled zone) in Mutwal
Source: author adapted Google-earth image (2019)



Fig. 5: Crow-Island Beach Park in Mutwal
Source: author (2019)



Fig. 6: Character of the study area in Mutwal
Source: author adapted Google-earth image (2019)

The surrounding urban context is depicted through images in figure 6. The households of participant families are marked in red spots. A narrow bridge placed over the canal creates park's rear-entrance, connecting Crow-Island Beach Park to study area. The canal borders around the community's sitting-area, where most men from the neighbourhood sit and chat as they surveil the street. St. Johns church is visible from St. Johns place and series of small shop-houses ensure 'eyes-on-the-street', establishing thresholds for policing the neighbourhood.

Analysis

Some common, 'place' specific, 'life-world' characteristics of the 'macrosystem' realm (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) were identified following the thematic analysing of qualitative data. Firstly, the interviews with older women indicated that neighbourhood was home to elite Christian and Sinhalese families and many Sinhalese have moved out as land plots subdivided overtime with demand for small rooms for rent by migrants. The corresponding 1981 to 2001 census revealed that considerable percentage decreased for Sinhalese by 8.1 % while substantial increase was seen for Sri Lanka Tamils migrating into Mutwal (Department of Census & Statistics, 2001). Tamil population increased by 6.6% from 24.2% to 30.8%. A 2.5% increase was also

observed for Sri Lanka Moors moving into Mutwal during same period (Department of Census & Statistics, 2001).

Secondly, participant mother, Sunila explained that during her residency, 'wattas' emerged at peripheries of established old neighbourhoods. 'watta' was essentially a low-income garden housing cluster that had shared community identity, provided familiarity and security to its residents within its tight boundaries. Sunila explained 'watta' as a secure socio-cultural space that is bound by shared social norms that drive the behaviour of its members. She explains that one is compelled to help another during an emergency whether you like it or not when one belongs to a 'watta'. Despite some tension experienced by new migrant families such as Shanthi's, majority belonging to Sinhalese-Christian community gave accounts of how ethnic groups are currently living in harmony. Krisma's impression was that there is generally mutual respect towards every ethnic group and community is living peacefully because of the nature of social arrangements in the 'watta' community. Such localized social-spatial norms have implications towards children expressing agency in Mutwal.

Thirdly, the 'macrosystem' was also impacted by 'gentrification' phenomena. As literature suggest 'gentrification' processes use public recreational spaces as instruments to enable urban-regeneration that appeal to middle-income aspirations of 'worlding'. The Crow-Island Beach Park had undergone similar transformation and yet, remained alien to participant's 'life-worlds'. Parents confessed that they cannot afford the space and spend time there. They also ensure their children do not make a habit of visiting the park. Participant children expressed they were aware of their families' financial burdens and would not demand to be taken to the beach-park other than for the occasional round of ice-cream once a month.

Analysis on the 'exosystem' realm (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) showed that the most impactful parameter affecting the enabling or limiting of children's agency was the level of education of caregivers. The education level of mothers had strong influence to shape parental perception and awareness on matters related to child-development, value of street-play, concerns for child-safety and having faith in 'child-agency/autonomy'. For example, Kokila being a teacher believed that social encounters are important for children to be street-smart and develop a sense for what is safe and unsafe on their own accord. She perceived being street-smart to be an essential skill that children need to learn; thus, consciously demonstrated more faith when granting independence to her older children who walked to nearby grocery stores on their own.

As depicted in figure 03, the drawing workshop took place at semi-constructed household located closest to children's preferred street-play area. The workshop activities were conducted in a systematic manner to discover children's views and qualitative interpretations of their 'life-worlds' specifically related to the realms of mesosystem and microsystem as defined by Bronfenbrenner (1979). 11 girls and 3 boys were invited to (a) draw their favourite play area in their neighbourhood (microsystem related), (b) draw any area they like to play at home (microsystem related), (c) draw any area they like to play in school (mesosystem related), (d) followed by a group discussion on safe, fun and interesting play areas they encounter on daily basis to understand the spatial relationship between microsystem & mesosystem experiences.

In terms of understanding the 'mesosystem' character (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), the workshop drawings showed that all children were restricted from street-play due to parents' perceived inconvenience to surveillance of the street. Children discussed how they constantly negotiate access to street-play by pointing out on safety gained through group-play with familiar neighbours. Drawings further suggested the restricted nature of physical activity within school

premises due to teachers' notion of disciplining. Children revealed that they frequently opted for imaginary pretend-play in classrooms to compensate for the lack of freedom for physical play during school. Such 'mesosystem' information uncovered during the drawing workshop directed the focus group study to deeply investigate the underlying social-economic circumstances of the caregivers, in relation to their neighbourhood dynamics.

When investigating into the nature of 'microsystem' (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) of all participants (adults & children), analysis adopted social scientist Michael Woolcock notion of 'social capital' based on three-types of interrelationships related to interpersonal familiarity (Szreter & Woolcock, 2004). 'Bonding social capital' is built on the strong familiar links between people who are often belonging to the same geographically based community. These communities have well established trust-networks, often very supportive and nurturing towards each other's families resulting in high-level of health, lower crime rates and greater economic benefits (Cox, 2002). 'Bridging social capital' is less intense relationships we have with people, who are not part of our intimate social circles and therefore, less trustworthy group in comparison to bonding type. This involves relationships with groups who are not like us, or maybe just not known to us (Cox, 2002). Thirdly, 'linking social capital' involves groups of people interacting for reasons of institutional cooperation such as with government agencies and other service providers in the city where interactions are mediated by social formalities (Cox, 2002).

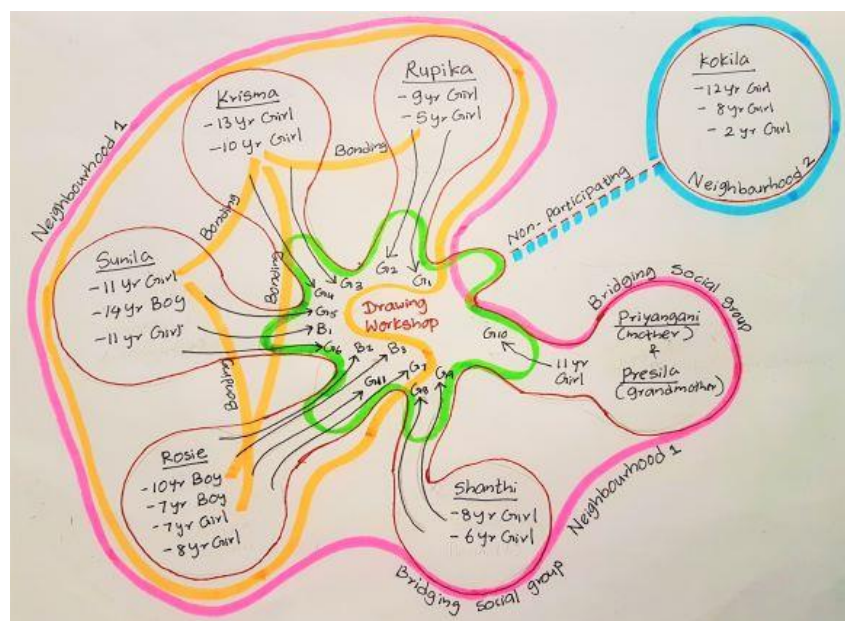


Fig. 7: Types of social capital groups observed during drawing workshop
Source: Field sketch by author (2019)

The social dynamics of focus group participants can be visualized in figure 7 in relation to the quality of interpersonal interactions within their neighbourhood. Rupika's, Krisma's, Sunila's and Rosie's families and their children appeared to form bonding group with strong friendships. They showed strong connections due to family ties and are related to each other. Shanthi & Priyangani and their children were behaving as a bridging group. They were less interactive with rest of the neighbourhood. The children from the bridging group naturally kept their distance from the

children belonging to bonding group, as they were not allowed to play outdoors with rest of the neighbourhood children. This may be because Shanthi was a new migrant from Hatton and was worried of letting her children out to play due to unfamiliarity of place and not trusting her new neighbours. Priyangani had recently moved-in to her mother-in-law's household in Mutwal, due to a marital issue and did not engage with the neighbours at all. Out of the participant children, 11 children behaved as the bonding group while 3 children were behaving as outsiders. The dynamics were such that children who played together regularly in the streets had built stronger friendships than children who were not allowed to play outdoors.

The analysis finally looked at determining factors influencing the expanding or constricting of 'child-agency' in the focus-group. Five out of seven participant women allowed their children to play in the street but did not trust them to go explore all parts of the neighbourhood on their own due to concerns of child safety. All mothers revealed being afraid of stranger-danger when letting children explore outdoors. These adult perceptions have confined children's street-play to be limited to surveillance areas that adults perceive as being safe. Children are well-aware and obey playing in the confines of surveillance areas as their parents have instructed them. Children are prohibited to go beyond the canal to the park or the beach as adult accompaniment is necessary to explore such spaces. All seven participant women felt that the beach was unsafe area for children to walk around on their own or even as groups of children due to fear of encountering strangers.

During their playtime children in the streets were mostly under the surveillance of adults. Adult engagement shaped the way in which children played and formed friendships with other children. As mother of two girls, Rupika gave accounts of the way in which she influenced the play activities of her children by carrying out surveillance from time to time; suggesting children's independent play was compromised. Overall, children's street-play and independent mobility within the neighbourhood appeared to be highly restricted. During drawing workshop many children drew playing inside their house or playing near their house or playing inside school. Many revealed that they disliked playing in the house alone but due to mother's fear of danger they are confined to playing indoors. Some child participants elaborated that playing at home is not even possible as they attended tuition classes after school on daily basis.

Discussion

Community participation has shifted from stakeholders toward including children and youth at the local level (Hart, 1997; Masri, 2017; Levy, 2010). It is based on the beliefs that development must first and foremost be in the interest of young residents and that young people who live in the city have the most intimate knowledge of the area been planned. Children relate to matters different from those of adults and young people who will be most affected by decisions have most at stake and therefore have the right to participate in making those decisions (Masri, 2017; Malone, 2006). The research outcome indicated that children performed agency through the mode of 'thin-agency', while their 'thick-agency' was determined by their caregivers and the embed characters of family's socio-economic status (Klocker et al., 2007).

Findings suggested that street-play was heavily dependent on adult perception on child-safety and fear of social danger. Children still devised creative ways of accessing outdoors and street-play by taking up various means of household chores such as going to the corner shop for groceries, watering of plants/vegetable patch or carrying out the garbage. Some participant children took care of their neighbours' pets such as cats, dogs and parrots and would raise their

pocket money feeding pets owned by garment factory workers, who had no time to attend to their animals during daytime (figure 8).

Children who engaged in street-play were not discriminative of gender, age, ethnicity or religion and was freely open to forming play-interactions immediately with other children in neighbourhood. When asked about the way they made friendships during street-play, a girl aged 13 mentioned that children would randomly engage in playing and only later that formal acquaintance is made. Children had positive attitude towards prospective playmates. They were open to having anyone join them if playing could become more interesting and prolonged.



Fig. 8: Children looking after neighbourhood pets after-school
Source: author (2019)

While playing, children shared food amongst each other. Six out of the seven participant mothers stated that exchange of food was not done amongst adults due to financial difficulty. For children however, sharing of food and toys was evident and was an indicator of them enacting their 'thin-agency' (Klocker et al., 2007). Two out of the seven participant women considered themselves disconnected from their neighbourhood in contrast to their children having established closeness with community during the drawing workshop. Five out of seven women believed that due to the street-play activities, children were behaving as 'social actors' more connected to the neighbourhood than adults and saw it to be promoting social cohesion and cultural capital as theory of 'structuration' by Giddens (1984) demonstrated.

Children's attitude to determining their own social life was quite evident in the way they operated in the brief absences of their caregivers. All participant children had used photo-elicitation exercise as means to explore beach area that was restricted to them by parents. Photographs taken by children suggest that they used their cameras to explore places beyond street-play area, such as Crow-Island beach, beach-park and observation towers located at either ends of the park.

Children had climbed the three-storey observation tower allocated for police surveillance. The photographs recorded the park's spatial structure with its designed public spaces and connecting access pathways linking participant children's neighbourhood. The pictures indicated that children used the photo-elicitation exercise as an opportunity to expand their 'life-worlds'. They further educated their parents regarding spatial-organization of the beach-park based on familiarity gained during this research. Children negotiated arrangements with their parents to regularly access park facilities in safe manner.

During the research period children were able to bond with each other and strengthen their existing friendships; resulting in establishing new relationships with unknown children in the area. Evidence of this happening was observed when children, initiated collage-making in park playground out of their own interest following the research period. They were given special permission by parents to access and use the playground as venue for the event. Child-led interest in initiating public gathering for an evening of artful collage-making at Crow-Island Park suggest 'active agency' at play by neighbourhood children. Children demonstrated 'thinking' and 'doing' aspects which are essential for enacting 'active agency' (Robson et al., 2007). It was important for the children to have more engagement within their community and allow for increased capacity to participate in urban exploration.

Parents conveyed that children's independent mobility had increased during data collection period and their connections with guardians and place-based agency had also increased. This goes to show that when given the opportunity children can become 'active social agents' or environmental stewards that contribute to understating the implications of urban development on local communities. It is recommended that more children's participation is needed in Sri Lanka to get their perspective on complex phenomena such as 'gentrification', 'urban-agency' and 'social cohesion' which are dynamic and multi-dimensional in nature.

Children took the research as an intervention tool, enabling their agency outdoors and build capacity to explore their surroundings; further contributing to notion of 'child-friendly city'. Similar research can inform social policy, urban planning and urban design interventions that will benefit increased child autonomy and children's independent mobility in Sri Lanka. Further research of this nature should be conducted so that children's views can be empowered, and their voices been heard to inform processes influencing urbanism. Children should be allowed to influence the physicality of their neighbourhoods and contribute to child-friendly development policy in the global south.

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