

Aspiration Contained: A Photovoice Account of Urban Marginality in Punjab, Pakistan

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Abstract

This article reports a photovoice study in an informal settlement (katchi abadi) in Punjab, Pakistan. It asks how residents experience aspiration, spatial inequality, and everyday survival under structural exclusion. Ten residents photographed their surroundings and discussed the images individually. Three patterns emerged. First, dwellings built as temporary have become permanent, though residents did not choose this. Second, residents make small, concrete improvements, such as a solar panel or an organized household space, which show that aspiration continues but is scaled to what can be achieved locally. We call this situated aspiration: desire that is grounded in place and actively pursued, not absent or given up. Third, residents live within sight of formal housing and infrastructure they cannot reach. We call this proximity without inclusion and argue that being close to visible development makes exclusion sharper, not softer. Participants repeatedly photographed the boundary between the settlement and the formal area beside it. This shows how they understand their position in the city and that photovoice can produce theory, not only illustration. The findings add to debates on urban informality, marginality, and aspiration in Pakistani and South Asian cities, and to critical urban theory.

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Introduction

Pakistani cities are growing fast and mostly without planning. In Karachi, Lahore, Faisalabad, and smaller cities, population growth has outpaced state provision of housing, infrastructure, and services. An estimated 45 to 60 per cent of urban residents live in informal settlements known locally as katchi abadis, one of the highest rates in South Asia (UN-Habitat, 2020; Bari, 2016). These settlements lack secure tenure, have unreliable or no piped water, irregular electricity, and poor sanitation, and residents have little say in planning (Anwar et al., 2020; Gazdar and Mallah, 2013).

Research on Pakistani cities has mainly looked at governance, land tenure, infrastructure access, and political economy. We know much less about how residents of informal

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settlements experience and describe aspiration while they remain excluded, especially from qualitative and visual work.

This article addresses that gap through a photovoice study in an informal settlement on the peri-urban edge of Faisalabad, Punjab. Photovoice, developed by Wang and Burris (1997), asks community members to photograph their own surroundings and then discuss the images in facilitated conversations. Wang and Burris (1997: 370) give it three goals: helping people record and reflect on their community's strengths and concerns, encouraging critical dialogue through discussion of photographs, and reaching policymakers. The method suits settings of marginality, because what matters most in daily life there is often invisible to outsiders and hard to capture through interviews or surveys (Catalani and Minkler, 2010; Liebenberg, 2018; Pink, 2013).

The research question is: how do residents of an informal peri-urban settlement in Punjab, Pakistan experience aspiration, spatial inequality, and everyday survival, and what do their own visual accounts show that other methods might miss? Three concerns emerged from the analysis, namely, the transformation of temporary dwelling to a structural condition, the life of aspiration within a constraint, which we label as situated aspiration, and proximity without inclusion, that is, life next to visible development but institutionally and materially denied by the latter.

The article makes three contributions. First, it brings Pakistani and South Asian work on informality, urban citizenship, and aspiration into conversation with broader theory, which is often applied to the Global South without local context. Second, it shows that photovoice can bring out structural, and especially spatial, dynamics that are hard to put into words. Third, it offers a new account of situated aspiration, which was generated through a grounded analysis of what participants expressed, rather than from an imported framework.

Informality, Marginality, and Aspiration: Situating the Study

Urban Informality in Pakistan: Located Knowledge

Work on urban informality in Pakistan has not been fully taken up by international urban theory. In her ethnographic study in Faisalabad, Bari (2016: 3) treats informal housing as a lasting form of urban development, not a short-term break from formality or a sign of economic backwardness. Roy (2005: 147) makes a similar general point: informality is a way of governing space, in which the state keeps deliberate ambiguity about what is formally recognized. In Pakistan this ambiguity is systemic, because the state's own planning failures, selective regularization, and land policies produce informal settlements (Gazdar and Mallah, 2013; Moatasim, 2019).

Gazdar and Mallah (2013) show that in Karachi, informal land use is governed through non-state processes that fill the space left by formal governance. The state's dealings with residents are uneven and often predatory, so the informal is a space where political relations are made and claimed. Naqvi (2018) finds the same in electricity supply in an Islamabad slum, where access is negotiated through bribes, brokers, and informal deals between the poor and the less poor. Anwar et al. (2020) show that water insecurity in Karachi's informal settlements creates gendered daily risks, with women carrying most of the burden. Moatasim (2019) shows that wealthy residents of Bani Gala in Islamabad used political connections to legitimize their own informal building, so informality cuts across class. In Hasan's (2006) account of the Orangi Pilot Project, residents built their own sanitation where the state would not, but gained no formal recognition or secure tenure.

This work shows that Pakistani informal settlements cannot be read as simple deprivation. They are produced by governance, kept in place by the political economy of land and infrastructure, and lived in by people who manage rules the state has not replaced with proper provision. This pushes back against sweeping accounts of slum life such as Davis's (2006) *Planet of Slums*. It follows Roy's (2011: 223) call to see such places as 'terrain[s] of habitation, livelihood, self-organization and politics', and Rao's (2006) argument that the South Asian city can produce theory of its own.

Urban Marginality: Structural Production and Spatial Experience

Wacquant (2008) argues that advanced urban marginality is produced through spatial concentration and institutional abandonment. Marginalized groups are held in certain parts of the city, visible to the rest of society but denied the recognition and resources that come with formal urban citizenship. His comparison of the French banlieues and the American ghetto does not transfer directly, but his core point, that marginality is actively produced, applies in modified form to Pakistani peri-urban settlements (Gazdar and Mallah, 2013; Naqvi, 2018).

Simone (2004), writing on African cities, describes people as infrastructure: where formal systems are missing or weak, residents themselves become the relations that make urban life possible. Bayat (2010) describes the quiet encroachment of the ordinary, the mostly individual and often technically illegal actions through which the urban poor get by. The solar panel and organized household spaces in our findings are this kind of quiet encroachment: practical, gradual, and significant when added up.

McFarlane (2012) proposes that settlements are not areas of deprivation awaiting improvement but rather political and spatial formations in crisis and in the process of contestation. As auto construction is a gradual process in which residents are building and improving their houses, Holston (2008) suggests that it is a method of insurgent citizenship: citizenship that is asserted through space, not formal politics. Bhan (2009) shows how evictions in Delhi treat the presence of the urban poor as illegitimate no matter how long they have lived there. Here, no residents have been evicted, but everyone has a feeling that their right to the city is provisional. Lefebvre (1991) further observes that space is socially constructed and is embedded in power relations, and thus the arrangement of informal and formal space within peri-urban Punjab is a manifestation of who receives a secure tenure, infrastructure, and protection from planning.

Aspiration Under Structural Constraint: Towards a Located Account

Appadurai (2004) defines the ability to aspire as a "socially supported" one to imagine and strive for possible futures. This capacity is unevenly disposed: those who have more social resources and institutional recognition have more maps of the future and more ways to get there. Ray (2006) also introduces the notion of the aspiration gap: The difference between what people desire and what they can achieve. If the gap is too wide, aspiration stops motivating; if it sits just beyond the present position, it keeps its pull. Copestake and Camfield (2010) show that aspiration gaps differ across areas of life, such as income, health, and family. For us, participants fill in the smaller gaps in light and income but not the bigger gap of secure housing.

According to Hirschman and Rothschild (1973) tunnel effect is a phenomenon where the proximity of others moving forward causes people to feel joy at the possibility that theirs will be next but when it does not happen, it becomes frustration. Jansen (2022) shows how residents of a post-war Sarajevo housing complex kept up hopes for normal lives, so that aspiration itself kept the future open.

Little of this literature looks at how aspiration is expressed in Pakistani cities. Anwar et al. (2020) and Bari (2016) both find that residents of informal settlements describe their needs in terms of practical security, reliable services, and protection from displacement rather than economic mobility. Zipin et al. (2015) warn against treating aspiration as a free-floating personal trait instead of something that comes from, and only makes sense within, the social and material conditions of a place. This study treats the aspirations participants described and photographed in this way.

Photovoice in Urban Research: Method as Epistemology

Photovoice grew out of Wang's (1999) participatory health research, which showed that giving cameras to marginalized women could produce both personal testimony and material for policy advocacy. The method has been used to document housing, health inequality, spatial exclusion, and climate vulnerability where people's knowledge is ignored by formal institutions (Catalani and Minkler, 2010; Liebenberg, 2018). Yet only 60 per cent of the projects in Catalani and

Minkler's (2010) review included an action component, a gap between the method's empowerment aims and its practice. Liebenberg (2018) claims empowerment is contingent on who interprets the photographs, how, and for which purpose.

Pink (2013) and Rose (2022) remind us that photographs are not self-explanatory. Its sense is derived from the relationship between researcher, participant, image and analytical frame. In this investigation the image and the participant's account of it are seen as one piece of evidence and neither of them alone is sufficient.

Theoretical Framework

The study draws on critical urban theory and reads the findings through three linked ideas. First, informality is not an exception, but it is structurally produced (Roy, 2005, McFarlane, 2012). Poor housing, insecure tenure, and missing infrastructure are not random bad luck; they result from governance choices, planning practices, and the way resources are allocated. This resonates with the Pakistani urban research (Bari, 2016; Gazdar and Mallah, 2013; Naqvi, 2018) and Holston's (2008) conception of informal settlements as sites of exclusion and political claim making.

Second, we use the term situated aspiration for aspiration that is rooted in place, adjusted to what seems achievable from a given structural position, and actively pursued rather than given up. It builds on the work of Appadurai (2004) on the capacity to aspire, Ray (2006) on setting aspirations, Hirschman and Rothschild (1973) on the influence of visible progress nearby on hopes, and in the context of Pakistani urban studies (Anwar et al., 2020; Bari, 2016). Such dreams are for goals that are locally feasible, that may require group effort, and that have a political resonance in the absence of explicit political action (Bayat, 2010).

Thirdly, space is our concern. With Lefebvre (1991), space is socially produced and impregnated with power relations; with Wacquant (2008), the concentration of space further reinforces the institutional marginalization of the marginalized. The idea of proximity without inclusion came from the data, not from theory. It refers to both informal and formal spaces that are physically linked, but institutionally separated. It builds upon Wacquant (2008), who called out a particular mechanism, and connects to Lefebvre's (1991) idea of power inscribed into the built environment.

Methodology

Research Design and Setting

The study was qualitative because methods that involve participants as the primary interpreters of their own lives generate different knowledge from researcher-led accounts (Pink, 2013; Wang and Burris, 1997). The field site is an informal settlement on the peri-urban edge of Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan. Most homes are built from tarpaulin, recycled materials, and salvaged brick. The settlement is located near formal residential areas, including concrete houses, electricity, piped water, and paved roads. Has no fixed term of office, no regular tap water, irregular and mostly informal electricity and has no voice in municipal planning. Most residents are daily wage workers, domestic workers, and small traders, and many have lived there for years or decades. Data were collected between February and June 2026. The settlement was selected as being representative of peri-urban informal settlements in Faisalabad and because of its location adjacent to formal housing, proximity without inclusion was clearly visible in everyday life. Its exact location is not named, to protect participants.

Participants and Sampling

Ten participants were recruited through purposive sampling. They had to be 18 or older, have lived in the settlement for at least six months, and be willing to take part in several sessions. The sample included five women and five men aged 27-45, who worked in daily wage construction, domestic work in the nearby formal area, street vending and household management. Gender was incorporated in the study as it influences vulnerability in Pakistani informal settlements (Anwar et al., 2020). Ten is not a large number, but it is appropriate for the practice of photovoice, which typically allows for samples of 5 to 30 (Catalani and Minkler, 2010). The aim was depth, not statistical representation.

Data Generation: The Photovoice Process

We used a three-stage photovoice process, adapted to the setting in line with Liebenberg's (2018) critical reflections. In the first stage, participants were told about the purpose of the study and the use of their own mobile phones for photography. Rules of ethics were explained, such as not taking pictures of identifiable persons without their permission, and participants-maintained control over what they shared. They were prompted to take photos of what is important in everyday life (home, work, shared spaces, hopes or fears for the future). Each participant took eight to ten photographs over one week.

In the second stage, participants chose three to five photographs they saw as most meaningful. These were discussed in individual semi-structured conversations of 45 to 60 minutes, guided by four questions adapted from Wang and Burris's (1997) SHOWeD framework: what does this image show; why did you choose it; what does it say about your daily life; and how does it relate to your hopes or challenges. Participants led the interpretation. Researchers asked clarifying questions but did not suggest meanings. In the third phase, approximately 30 of the photographs were selected as core material from all the participants. Seven were selected for this article based on how central they were to a theme, what they showed about spatial dynamics, and whether they met the study's anonymization requirements.

Data Analysis

Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis, adapted for combined visual and text data. Each image and its narrative were treated as one unit. Codes

were developed inductively (housing, aspiration and constraint, relation to nearby areas, daily routines) and grouped into themes through constant comparison with participants' own interpretations. Following Pink (2013) and Rose (2022), a participant's account of an image was treated as necessary to the analysis, not as an add-on. Where an image seemed to point in a different direction from what the participant said, this was treated as worth examining rather than settled by favouring one kind of data. Three such cases came up. None changed the main themes, but they informed our discussion of the method.

Ethical Considerations and Reflexivity

All participants gave informed consent and were reminded at each session that they could withdraw without penalty. They decided which photographs to share and how their words and images would be used. No identifiable images were used without permission from those shown. Participants are referred to by code, not name or pseudonym, to reduce the risk of identification within the community. The researchers kept a journal recording their positionality and possible blind spots. Claims were checked against the record of participants' interpretations, and where ambiguity remained, it is stated in the findings.

Findings

The findings are organized thematically into three connected themes. They are not distinct categories, but overlapping segments of a single argument over the nature of living at the edge of a Pakistani city.

Permanent Impermanence: When Temporary Becomes Structural

The photographs in this group depict houses constructed using flexible, salvaged and/or recycled materials primarily tarpaulin, plastic sheeting and recycled brick. Participants reported that these are temporary, but have become permanent homes.



Figure 1. Informal settlement at the urban margin

Figure 1 is a wide view of the settlement, with temporary structures in front and more permanent infrastructure at the edges of the frame. P-8, who took it, said she chose it because it shows where we are, not where we want to be.



Figure 2. Layered material repairs on an informal dwelling structure

This is a close up of the outside corner of his house on P-3 in figure 2. Patching and strips added at different times over the years, after damage, show the age of the dwelling, and its continued insecurity. P-3 said:

"We built this thinking it was only for a short time, just until we could find a better place. We thought we would move somewhere more permanent, but seven years have passed and we are still here. We keep repairing and changing it whenever we can, but the tent is still the tent." (P-3, male, aged 32)

Home was constructed in a short period of time, but is maintained and repaired and enhanced seven years later. It is impermanence as a condition that is part of the city's structure, that is consistent with Bari's (2016) point in Faisalabad regarding informal housing being something other than a transition point in urban development.

"Every time it rains hard, we wait to see what has been damaged and what needs to be fixed. We have learned how to repair the roof, the walls, and whatever else gets damaged because we have been doing it for years. We know how to fix these things, but we should not have to keep living this way and repairing the same problems again and again." (P-7, female, aged 41)

P-7 introduces distinction where P-3 doesn't mention it. She takes the skill that her family has accumulated in maintaining the home but will not accept the notion that it is necessary. This need is related to insecure tenure and also the risk of displacement, which her household cannot change by itself. This is a distinction I share with Holston (2008) between a spatial claim of auto construction and the conditions that compel it. Auyero (2012) and Jeffrey (2010) demonstrate that the future is negotiated in a state of uncertainty, and that the consequences of this future are felt by the marginalized in terms of their relationship to the future. Seven years of the temporary place has done the same for P-3 and P-7.

Situated Aspiration: Desire Scaled to the Possible

Photographs in this group show small but deliberate improvements: a solar panel on a roof, neatly arranged household items, and a small goods display near a doorway. Each participant who took such photographs chose them to talk about aspiration and said they meant more than their practical use.



Figure 3. Solar panel installed on an informal dwelling roof

In Figure 3, P-1 has a tiny solar panel on the roof of his house. It's supposed for use at home, not for electricity. However, P-1's expectation of taking the photograph suggests that it is not primarily a technical matter:

"The solar panel means we are not completely in the dark when the power cuts come. It is not something big or expensive compared with what other people have, but it gives us some light and makes things easier at night. For other people it may look like a small thing, but for us it means something because we bought it to make our daily life a little better." (P-1, male, aged 27)

P-1 divides the panel (not much) from its meaning to him (something). The significance of lighting up a home during a power outage is both functional and emotional (Naqvi, 2018). A measure of a closing of the aspiration gap as described by Ray (2006): unmet need, met to some degree through work and cost.



Figure 4. Organized household space and informal goods display near a dwelling entrance

P-6 captured Figure 4, with an organized interior of the home, and a small goods display outside by the entrance. P-6 referred to the display as a little shop from which to earn a bit of extra money, and in the photo, we can see that it has been set up very carefully. She selected it to discuss about aspiration as to her "one can see we're not waiting. We are making a difference. This is in line with Bayat's (2010) notion of the quiet encroachment of the ordinary,

in which the urban poor assert themselves in space and resources through real-world means rather than overt political organization

"We do not dream the way people in those houses might dream because our lives and our circumstances are different. We dream about having a proper place where the walls are strong and we do not have to worry about what will happen to the house. We want water that comes when you turn the tap, and a place where we can live without constantly feeling that everything is temporary." (P-5, female, aged 36)

In this, P-5 performs two tasks. She admits the structural limit on her hopes by comparing her dreams with those of people in those houses, the formal area next to the settlement. But she says her aspirations are good: a proper place, strong walls, reliable water. Her aspirations are about what is possible in the near to medium future, and they also include a tacit criticism of the circumstances forcing this setting (Appadurai, 2004; Ray, 2006). The issues of water, durable shelters, stable income and protection from displacement are similar issues raised by Anwar et al. (2020) and Bari (2016) regarding the residents of informal settlements in Pakistani cities. This is a shift from the personal psychological nature of the aspiration to a social formation, one that is enacted without being organized (Bayat, 2010).

Proximity Without Inclusion: Seeing Development, Not Reaching It

The third group is the most distinctive in terms of theories; it will be the relationship between the settlement and the formal housing and infrastructure around it. A few participants selected the boundary for their photograph individually. One of the most crucial aspects of the data is its uniformity in visual aspects among participants.



Figure 5. Contrast between informal shelters and adjacent permanent housing

The layout of Figures 5, 6 and 7 is the same, with informal structures or spaces in the foreground and the formal infrastructure (concrete houses, paved roads, street lights) behind. This is a photo of nearness, not farness. The formal area can be seen, heard, and in some instances, walked. What separates the two is not physical distance but institutional exclusion.

"Those houses are right there, and you can see them clearly from where we live every day. We see the roads, the lights, and the permanent houses, and we know that people there have things that we do not have. They are not for people like us, but we see them every day, so we are always reminded of what is close to us but still outside our reach." (P-4, male, aged 29)

P-4 made this statement about Figure 5. He's not just saying that those houses aren't for folks like us. It refers to a city in which housing, infrastructure and recognition is distributed on a class basis and a tenure basis. A social and spatial category that reflects the location and status of settlement residents in the city's planning and service delivery, people like us is not self-blame (Wacquant, 2008; Gazdar and Mallah, 2013).



Figure 6. Shared communal space with formal urban infrastructure visible beyond the settlement boundary

Figure 6 is a shared seating area from P-2 with the unpaved ground and seats to the front and the paved road and buildings of the formal area to the rear. When asked about the angle, she said that she wanted to share with you, where we sit and what we see when we sit here. This daily exposure is consistent with Hirschman and Rothschild's (1973) tunnel effect: When others are advancing, one is encouraged to expect that one's own may be next, but when it is not, that "facing the tunnel" is frustrating. There, we see a daily progression from hope to frustration in this common space.

"We watch the construction happening around us all the time, with new buildings going up and new roads being made. Sometimes we look at it and think, when will these improvements come here, and will our settlement also get something like this? But after watching the city develop around us again and again, we already know that it will probably not come here." (P-9, female, aged 45)

So, the photographs are complemented by P-9, with a sense of time. The development she speaks of is not an abiding backdrop but a continuous process in the immediate environment. Exclusion is not one isolated event, but an ongoing process: the improvement of the formal area with each new project that is put in place extends the exclusion of the settlement that is adjacent.



Figure 7. Daily activity space adjacent to the paved road serving the formal residential area

P-4 captured the image of a common outdoor space for daily use adjacent to the paved road in the formal residential area, as displayed in Figure 7. The unpaved ground that the residents are sitting on is visible on the left side of the frame, with the paving visible at the right side of the frame, a few metres from the unpaved ground. In this instance, proximity without inclusion is literally visible: two surfaces, two material contexts and two conceptions of urban citizenship, divided by a few metres and by a solid institutional boundary. Spatial concentration and institutional abandonment in Wacquant's (2008) advanced marginality take a clear spatial shape.

Discussion

Situated Aspiration: Analytical Contribution and Conceptual Boundaries

The results also bear out a claim of Appadurai (2004), Ray (2006), and Hirschman and Rothschild (1973), that long-term deprivation does not eradicate aspiration. They provide a local description of the aspirations that are attached to it, what helps it, and what hinders it in a Pakistani urban context.

Situated aspiration has distinct characteristics from Appadurai's (2004) general cultural capacity, in that it is an expression of aspiration in a particular structural position. Unlike the aspiration gap defined by Ray (2006) which concerns a lack of aspiration to set levels, it is a problem of keeping desired items in mind. It is also different from "aspiration as adaptation", in which desire is regulated to suit constraints, as it maintains an upward trajectory.

The concept has limits. It comes from a single study in a single settlement and should not be used to make any strong claims elsewhere. We are not saying that the good thing about small aspirations is that they are good enough, but that they have a political dimension that deficit-based analysis does not capture. Development policy should begin with people's knowledge and desire.

The Structural Production of Impermanence

The finding that temporary homes have become effectively permanent matches and extends Bari's (2016) work in Faisalabad and Gazdar and Mallah's (2013) work in Karachi. Informality in Pakistan is not a step on the way to formality. It is a structural condition produced and kept in place by regulatory ambiguity, selective regularization, and institutional inaction. Roy's (2005) point that informality comes from planning's own exclusions, not from residents' choices or failings, is supported here by evidence that participants produced themselves.

When P-7 says she knows how to fix her home but should not have to, this is a structural critique of the state's failure to provide secure tenure, decent housing, and basic infrastructure. Holston's (2008) idea of autoconstruction as insurgent citizenship applies, since building one's own home is also an implicit claim to the right to live in the city. But unlike Holston's Brazilian cases, which were part of wider moves towards formalization, the Pakistani case suggests that autoconstruction can go on indefinitely without political recognition.

Proximity Without Inclusion: Spatial Mechanism and Theoretical Extension

Proximity without inclusion describes a spatial arrangement that existing frameworks do not fully cover. Wacquant (2008) names spatial concentration and institutional abandonment as the two mechanisms of advanced marginality. This study adds a third: the way direct physical closeness to visible formal development intensifies the experience of exclusion. Unlike spatial segregation, where distance limits what excluded groups see, here excluded and included people share the same physical space and see each other's living conditions, but are divided by institutional boundaries that physical closeness does not cross.

This has consequences for aspiration that Hirschman and Rothschild (1973) begin to describe but do not work out for long-term proximity. The tunnel effect is the belief that the waiting for improvement will come to an end. This is the result of an ongoing settlement and the adjacent formal area that continues to be enhanced. From hope to frustration comes a constant and close-at-hand journey. In Figure 6, the seating area is a place for social support, whereas the formal area can be seen every time residents are looking up. The photographs also support this concept through evidence because participants themselves selected to photograph and frame this same arrangement in similar ways (Figures 5, 6, and 7).

Photovoice as Theoretical Method: What Visual Data Can and Cannot Do

The method produced data that would be hard to get in other ways. The photographs do not represent what the researchers felt was important, but rather what the participants felt was important. Agreement in interview data may reflect shared social knowledge or the effect of the questions, but when several participants independently point their cameras at the same boundary and choose those images as most meaningful, the result is harder to dismiss as a product of the research process.

The approach also has limits. Ten people are not going to represent informal settlements in the whole of Punjab or Pakistan. The process is designed to prioritize participant meaning, but researcher judgements are still involved with codes, themes, images and quotations. These judgements were manifested in the research journal, and the three ambiguous cases are presented in the findings. The three patterns may be specific to this site, or they are general to peri-urban informal life in Pakistan, but this can only be examined by multi-site photovoice research inside and outside Punjab, as Catalani and Minkler (2010) write are rare, but important, so as to compare visual evidence of spatial inequality across settings.

Conclusion

In an informal settlement in Punjab, it shows three interrelated dynamics: temporary shelters become long-term homes when there are no other structural options; situated aspirations, localized and adapted but maintained; and proximity without inclusion, where residents live adjacent to formal development yet are excluded from its advantages. The article engages with other works, such as those of Roy (2005), Wacquant (2008), Appadurai (2004), and Lefebvre (1991), that were central to the discussion of urban research in Pakistan (Bari, 2016; Gazdar and Mallah, 2013; Naqvi, 2018; Anwar et al., 2020; Moatasim, 2019). Wacquant's framework of spatial concentration and institutional abandonment needs to include proximity without inclusion; Appadurai's capacity to aspire needs grounding in specific places; and Roy's view of informality is confirmed and extended. Situated aspiration is offered as a starting point for further theory. The central argument is that aspiration within informal settlements is not a diluted form of the aspirations of other, better situation groups, but is rather a different configuration, substantive, social, and political.

Methodologically, photovoice used as a theoretical method can produce evidence about spatial and structural dynamics that other qualitative methods struggle to capture, as participants' repeated focus on the informal and formal boundary shows. The photographs are not illustrations; they have their own argument. Deficit approaches that see informal settlements as places of deprivation waiting for outside help are not adequate for urban scholarship or development policy in Pakistani and South Asian cities. Development thinking that ignores what residents already know, want, and have built under institutional neglect will keep failing the communities it says it serves.

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