

**Managing Menstrual Safety and Hygiene after Fire Disasters: A Qualitative Study of Women and Girls in Korail Slum, Dhaka, Bangladesh**

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**Abstract**

Fire disasters are an ever-present danger in urban slum areas of Dhaka, particularly impacting women, and girls by heightening their pre-existing vulnerabilities in menstrual safety and hygiene management. This study aims to examine the experiences of women and girls between 15-49 years of age in menstrual hygiene management in the aftermath of fire disasters in Korail Slum, Dhaka. A qualitative research study was conducted, based on 22 in-depth interviews of women and adolescent girls, along with 6 key informant interviews of NGO workers, community leaders, health workers, and disaster workers. The thematic findings of this study indicate that fire disasters have a severe impact on the menstrual hygiene management of women and girls in Korail Slum, resulting in considerable discomfort, distress, and dignity loss. Gender issues were also identified as an important factor in the menstrual hygiene management of women in the aftermath of fire disasters in urban slum areas of Dhaka. Although women have employed coping strategies in their menstrual hygiene management in the aftermath of fire disasters in Korail Slum, the findings of this study indicate that the support of institutions in menstrual hygiene management is scarce.

**Keywords:** Fire disaster, Urban Slum, Menstrual Hygiene Management, Women and Girls

**1. Introduction**

Menstrual safety and hygiene management (MSHM) is an important public health and human

rights issue, mainly for women and girls living in resource-constrained environments. For proper hygiene during menstruation, it is essential for women and girls to have access to safe and affordable menstrual materials, water, proper sanitation facilities, privacy, and information. [1]. In the context of Bangladesh, the growing problem of urbanization has resulted in the formation of informal settlements, commonly referred to as slums, where the provision of water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities has remained inadequate [2]. Research has shown that in slum areas of cities, the needs of women and girls in terms of managing their menstruation have remained a challenge, including the lack of sanitary facilities, inadequate provision of sanitary materials, lack of private toilet facilities, and social stigmas attached to the discussion of the topic. [3] Vulnerabilities during and after disasters strike are more pronounced. Bangladesh, being geographically ill-fated as a disaster hotspot with a myriad of flood, fire, and cyclone threats, [4] ranks high in global disaster risk. In the urban slums of Bangladesh, particularly the Korail Slum in Dhaka, fire disasters are frequent as the slum has a high risk of fire due to the absence of adequate housing, the presence of narrow roads, and the risk of fire to the wiring [5] Disasters cause interruptions to the normal functioning of a community, and during this time, the critical services that services the community, such as water, sanitation, and housing, are often damaged and this increases the degree of vulnerability in the MHM [1]. Research from humanitarian and emergency responses indicates

that menstrual needs have often not been integrated into disaster responses and recovery due to the lack of consideration of food, shelter, and medical care [6]. Women and girls have had to resort to unsafe practices, such as the extension of use of menstrual materials or limiting movement to maintain privacy [7]. Korail Slum, which is one of the biggest slums in Dhaka, has witnessed various fire incidents that have a significant impact on women and girls. The destruction of homes, property, and sanitation facilities during such incidents has a substantial impact on the daily practices of women and girls in managing menstruation. It is important to comprehend the experiences, perceptions, and coping strategies of women and girls in managing menstruation during the aftermath of fire disasters to develop effective disaster preparedness and response strategies. In this context, the current study focuses on menstrual safety and hygiene practices of women and girls in Korail Slum, Dhaka, during fire disasters using qualitative research approach. The main objectives of the study are-

To investigate the experiences of women and girls in managing menstruation in the aftermath of fire disasters in Korail Slum.

To identify the meaningful issues of women and girls concerning the menstrual safety and hygiene maintenance in post-disaster fire setting.

To understand the approaches that women and girls use in managing menstruation whenever there is a breach of water, sanitation, privacy, and menstrual supplies.

To evaluate the availability and sufficiency of support systems for disaster response in relation to menstrual needs in the aftermath of fire disaster.

## 2. Literature Review

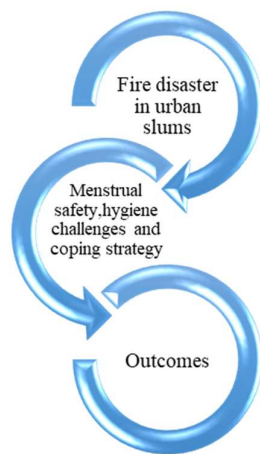
Slums in urban areas have been a major challenge to MSHM, given the high levels of poverty, poor housing, and inadequate water,

sanitation, and hygiene facilities. A study carried out in Bangladesh revealed that women and girls in slum areas do not have access to private sanitation facilities, clean water, and proper facilities for the disposal of menstrual waste [3]. In addition, the poor economic status of the population in the slums means that they cannot afford sanitary materials, with most using cloths that may pose health challenges if they are washed or dried in unhygienic environments. [8] In slum areas of Dhaka, socio-cultural factors also influence menstrual experiences, with menstrual stigma and silence acting as a barrier to discussing issues, hence limiting women from seeking support. [3] Disasters often have the effect of increasing gender inequalities, particularly for women and girls [9]. Research into humanitarian responses has consistently highlighted the lack of consideration for menstrual hygiene needs during disaster preparedness and response, with emergency responses often prioritizing food, shelter, and medical supplies over the specific needs of women and girls [1]. Research conducted during emergency and displacement situations has consistently highlighted the barriers to menstrual hygiene management due to the lack of privacy, inadequate water supplies, and poor sanitation facilities [6]. Women and girls have been observed to employ coping strategies for menstrual hygiene, including the extension of the duration of the menstrual product used, reduced mobility, or staying indoors to ensure privacy, which often compromises their health and dignity. [7],[10] Observes urban slum fires are a common phenomenon in Dhaka because of high population density, flammable materials used in house construction, and dangerous electrical connections.” Although research on fire disasters focuses on the loss of housing and economic resilience, gender-related health requirements, especially menstrual hygiene, are neglected Few

studies focus on women’s experiences, strategies, and perceptions in post-fire situations using a qualitative research paradigm. This study will fill the research gap by exploring menstrual hygiene management among women and girls in Korail Slum, Dhaka, in the context of fire disaster

### 3. Theoretical & Conceptual Framework

This study is informed by Feminist Political Ecology and Social Vulnerability Theory to examine menstrual safety and hygiene management among women and girls in Korail Slum, Dhaka, following fire disasters while Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) focuses on the gendered aspects of resource access, decision-making, and environmental risks, underscoring the ways in which social and political factors shape women’s experiences [11]. FPE, grounded in feminist and political ecology theories, contends that environmental disasters and crises are not experienced equally by all groups; instead, their effects are shaped by gender, class, and social location [12]. Social Vulnerability Theory highlighting disaster aspre-existing inequalities, which make groups more vulnerable, such as women, children, and the poor in urban areas [13].



**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Developed by the Researcher**

### 4. Methodology

#### 4.1 Study Area and population

The study was conducted in Korail Slum, one of the largest informal settlements in Dhaka City. And the area particularly vulnerable to fire disasters and provide a relevant context for examining post-disaster menstrual safety and hygiene management among women and girls. The data was mainly collected by the respondents of bou bazar, Nouka ghat, jamai bazar area.

Sampling Technique	Sample Size	Description
In-Depth Interview (IDI)	22	Girls & females lives in Korail slum (Bou bazar, Noukaghat, Jamai bazar) area.
Key Informative Interview (KII)	6	NGO worker, Community health specialist, Community leader

#### 4.2 Methods and Sampling

The study used the purposive method for the sampling design, which is widely used in IDIs and KIIs. Women or adolescent girls that had experienced the consequence of fire disaster in the study setting in Korail Slum, Dhaka, and who were either menstruating or at menstruating ages, were targeted for the research study. For KIIs, the participants were chosen based on their professional roles in the targeted study setting.

#### 4.3 In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) guidelines

The interviews lasted for approximately 30 to 45 minutes and took place in a safe and private environment.



**Figure 2: Guidelines for In-depth Interviews (IDIs)**

#### 4.4 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) guidelines

Key Informant are those people who have in-depth knowledge about the selected area. Here the researcher selected 6 key informant who have vast knowledge about the selected area. 6 KIIs are selected including community health worker, NGO worker, community leader etc. Here are the guidelines for key informant interviews-

- Informant profile consisting institutional affiliation
- Fire disaster and community vulnerability
- Menstrual hygiene management in disaster response
- Gender and policy gaps
- Coordination and resources

#### 4.5 Data Analysis Techniques

For analysing data, the researcher follows Braun & Clarke’s thematic analysis diagram which includes familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming themes and producing the report. As the researcher used qualitative data, so it’s regarded the best techniques for data analysis.

### 5. Data Findings

The study is based on qualitative findings collected through 22 in-depth interviews (IDI) with women and adolescent girls in the 15-49 years’ age group, along with 6 key informant interviews (KII) with NGO workers, community members, health workers, and disaster response workers in the Korail Slum, Dhaka city. The findings reveal the nexus of the fire disaster with the existing vulnerabilities or structural inequalities in the experiences of the women and girls in menstrual hygiene management. The discussion is further supported with existing literature and interventions based on theoretical perspectives.

**Table-1: Demographic Profile of the Respondents**

ID	Method	Age	Description
P01	IDI	15	Student
P02	IDI	38	Female shop keeper
P03	IDI	21	Housewife
P04	IDI	24	Housewife
P05	IDI	27	Garments worker
P06	IDI	24	A single mother
P07	IDI	35	Store keeper
P08	IDI	17	Student
P09	IDI	29	Housewife
P10	IDI	30	Kitchen assistant
P11	IDI	18	Student
P12	IDI	33	Small entrepreneur
P13	IDI	45	Housewife
P14	IDI	48	Housewife
P15	IDI	16	Student
P16	IDI	21	Garments worker
P17	IDI	18	Students (drop out)
P18	IDI	19	College drops out
P19	IDI	32	House maid
P20	IDI	40	Cleaner
P22	IDI	38	Domestic worker
P23	KII	33	NGO worker
P24	KII	42	Community health specialist
P25	KII	28	NGO worker
P26	KII	48	Community leader
P27	KII	39	Disaster response personnel
P28	KII	42	Disaster management official

Thematic analysis from the data collected through in-depth interviews with 22 females and adolescent girls aged between 15-49 years and 6 key informant interviews revealed some salient, interconnected themes related to managing menstrual safety and hygiene after fire disasters. This is in order to give credibility to these assertions, quotes from the participants are provided.

#### Theme 1: Pre-Disaster Menstrual Practices and Baseline Conditions

Before the fire disaster, women and girls managed menstruation within already constrained

environments characterized by shared sanitation facilities, limited water supply, and restricted privacy. An adolescent student shares her experience before fire disaster-

*"Life was not easy before the fire, either, but I had a routine. I knew where I could wash up, and where I could change."* (IDI, P01, Age 15).

Before the fire disaster, at least there existed toilets that an individual would share with other family members.

*"Before the fire, at least there was one toilet where I felt safe. There was a selected washroom to do the activities of washing before going to school."* (IDI, P15, Age 16).

A health worker of the renowned NGO "Joyeeta" shared his bitter experience to work in slum before fire disaster stated that-

*"Menstrual hygiene was already fragile here, even before any disaster."* (IDI, P25, Age 28).

## **Theme 2: Disruption of Menstrual Safety after Fire Disasters**

The sudden loss of menstrual materials and safe spaces intensified women's vulnerability, particularly for those menstruating during or immediately after the fire. 21-year women who is professionally a garments worker shared the horrible experience of the fire disaster. The researcher saw tears in his eyes when he shared-my small savings burned. I have no money to buy pad and I must keep one dusty clothes whole day long" (IDI, P16)

After the fire disaster maximum peoples of this slum area must live under a plastic shed or outside. All the family member must share a single plastic shed. An adolescents girls stated that-

*"We slept outside after the fire and there was no place to change. My brother and my father also live in the same place. Sometimes my private area is started to itching and I must manage place to change that was very difficult to find."* (IDI, P17, Age 18).

A disaster response personnel shared his real experience that-

*"In the emergency phase, menstrual needs are often overlooked. Although a limited number of NGOs address menstrual needs, their capacity and resources remain insufficient to meet the demands of women and girls in slum settings."* (KII, P27, Age 39).

## **Theme 3: Structural Vulnerabilities and Living Conditions**

Post-fire menstrual challenges were deeply embedded in broader structural vulnerabilities, including overcrowding, poverty, and the informal status of the settlement. Temporary shelters lacked gender-segregated spaces, making safe menstrual management nearly impossible for many women.

*"So many people in one place—how can a woman manage her period with dignity?"* (IDI, Woman, P20, 42 years)

A community leader of this area gives his statement and make clear that-

*"It's not like that we don't understand women's issue but this is an informal settlement, proper sanitation is never permanent."* (KII, P26, Age 48).

## **Theme 4: Coping Strategies and Women's Agency**

Despite severe constraints, women demonstrated resilience through adaptive coping strategies.

*"Others women in the slum helps me due this time and some NGO supply Pads sometimes"* (IDI, P06, Age 24).

A 19-year College dropout girls states- *"I stayed inside to solve the problem at that time and stop continuing college for that"* (IDI, P18)

## **Theme 5: Institutional Response and Persistent Gap**

Although some humanitarian assistance was provided, menstrual hygiene support remained

inconsistent and insufficient. Relief efforts largely prioritized food and shelter, with limited attention to menstrual needs.

*“We find relief but no Pads while pad is also essential like food but maximum institution have no concern regarding this.” (IDI, P12, Age 33)*

## 6. Discussion

This study examined menstrual safety and hygiene management among women and girls aged 15–49 years in Korail Slum, Dhaka, following fire disasters. Drawing on 22 in-depth interviews and 6 key informant interviews, the findings reveal that fire disasters intensify pre-existing structural and gendered vulnerabilities, resulting in compromised menstrual health, dignity, and safety. In line with the disaster sociology literature, the results show that fire disasters do not give rise to new problems, instead, they worsen the situation of poverty, congestion, and poor infrastructure in terms of WASH. Already before the fire events women had limited privacy and shared sanitation which limited their menstrual practices. When shelters and toilets were destroyed, routine activities were disrupted making menstruation a severe crisis.

Women applied all kinds of coping strategies including the use of improvised material and informal networks of support. Although the practices are a sign of resilience and agency, systemic gaps in preparedness and response to disasters are also manifested. Institutional responsibility should not be replaced by such strategies. Lastly, the results show that there are still institutional and policy loopholes. Even though some few NGOs tried to cater the menstrual needs, their ability was low to accommodate the demand. Lack of harmonized practices that would incorporate menstrual hygiene management into the emergency response on the fire disaster supports the need to have gender-responsive disaster management planning. To promote equity, health, and dignity of

women and girls during disasters in disaster prone slums, it is necessary to integrate menstrual hygiene into governance of disasters in cities.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper has indicated that fire crises have a massive impact on the pre-existing structural and gendered insecurities of menstrual safety and hygiene among women and girls in urban slums. The results indicate that the lack of proper WASH facilities, menstrual stigma, and institutional ill preparedness affect the wellbeing, dignity, and health of women in the post-disaster stages. Although women adopt coping strategies and rely on informal support networks, these measures cannot substitute for gender-responsive disaster management. Integrating menstrual hygiene management into urban fire disaster preparedness, relief responses, and policy frameworks is essential to ensure equitable, dignified, and inclusive disaster response for women and girls.

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