

Female Adolescents and Their Sexuality: Notions of Honour, Shame, Purity and Pollution during the Floods

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This paper explores the experiences of female adolescents during the 1998 floods in Bangladesh, focusing on the implications of socio-cultural norms related to notions of honour, shame, purity and pollution. These cultural notions are reinforced with greater emphasis as girls enter their adolescence, regulating their sexuality and gender relationships. In Bangladeshi society, adolescent girls are expected to maintain their virginity until marriage. Contact is limited to one's families and extended relations. Particularly among poorer families, adolescent girls tend to have limited mobility to safeguard their 'purity'. This is to ensure that the girl's reputation does not suffer, thus making it difficult for the girl to get married. For female adolescents in Bangladesh, a disaster situation is a uniquely vulnerable time. Exposure to the unfamiliar environment of flood shelters and relief camps, and unable to maintain their 'space' and privacy from male strangers, a number of the girls were vulnerable to sexual and mental harassment. With the floods, it became difficult for most of the girls to be appropriately 'secluded'. Many were unable to sleep, bathe or get access to latrines in privacy because so many houses and latrines were underwater. Some of the girls who had begun menstruation were distressed at not being able to keep themselves clean. Strong social taboos associated with menstruation and the dirty water that surrounded them made it difficult for the girls to wash their menstrual cloths or change them frequently enough. Many of them became separated from their social network of relations, which caused them a great deal of anxiety and stress. Their difficulty in trying to follow social norms have had far-reaching implications on their health, identity, family and community relations.

Keywords: Bangladesh, 1998 floods, adolescent behaviour, sexual mores.

Background

In 1998, Bangladesh faced devastating floods as almost two-thirds of the country went under water for nearly nine weeks. Crops, property and infrastructure all suffered massive damage, while 30 million people were affected and had to cope with the loss of employment, a drastic reduction in their income, harassment, various health problems, and uncertainty about their futures (BRAC, 1988; Helen Keller International, 1988).

Poor women and children have been repeatedly recognised to be the most vulnerable groups during such natural disasters (Bari, 1992; Hena, 1992). Yet very little is known about the particular experiences and coping of adolescent girls. Adolescence itself, as a group different from adults and children, is a fairly new concept to Bangladesh and most developing countries, although it is a particularly significant stage in human development with profound influence on a person's future. As such, it marks the transition period during which young people are gradually socialised to assume their adult roles and, as such, are in great need of guidance and support (Amin et al., 1998). This is particularly so in times of crisis, since young people still have not fully developed the psychological, social and economic coping skills of adults.

In Bangladesh, many but not all adolescents are married soon after the onset of puberty. However, with changes in the past decade, the 'concept' of adolescence now exists in the sense that girls often remain unmarried for as long as half a dozen years after puberty in rural and urban Bangladesh. This is because of the influence of the market economy. The rural population has doubled, with rural families suffering from steep declines in their land holdings. Families can no longer rely on land to support themselves and their families. The government has increased the provision of schooling, resulting in an increasing demand for education. The number of boys and girls now attending school has trebled. Many rural parents are keen to send their daughters to school, despite the pressures of *purdah*¹ (Caldwell et al., 1998). Partly, they hope that their daughters will attract suitable husbands, but also any schooling or training may make the girls more employable.

All but one of the female adolescents in the study were unmarried. This is significant as huge differences exist between the single and married states of women in Bangladesh. This responsibility weighs heavily on the family (Amin et al., 1998). Most unmarried adolescent girls are closely watched and tend to be confined to limited surroundings. Preserving female virginity until marriage is still emphasised by society, and pre-marital sexual activity or pregnancies are greatly feared. Thus contact is limited to one's families and extended relations. Particularly among poorer families, adolescent girls tend to have limited mobility, to safeguard their 'purity'. If a girl is known to have had pre-marital sex, the social status of the whole family is affected. As a result, marriage will become difficult for the girl and she may become unmarriageable, or will be married to a widower or very much older man. Further, this will also affect the marriage chances of the adolescent girl's sisters, if there are any (Caldwell et al., 1998).

Marriage remains the only socially acceptable option for women. Getting married is equated with achieving social adulthood and brings with it recognition and security. Unmarried girls and women are vulnerable to verbal and physical abuse and face various forms of discrimination (Salway et al., 1998). Girls who conform to these norms bring honour to themselves and their family, which in turn serves to improve their socio-economic status in their community and increases their chances of making a good marriage (Blanchet, 1996; Rozario, 1992). The importance of maintaining one's reputation therefore leads to considerable social pressure, for both their families and themselves, and significantly influences their behaviour and attitudes. The links between adolescence and sexuality are not simple or similar everywhere. Social understanding of these notions vary with context and have economic implications, but they are central family and community life and are particularly significant for adolescent girls (Rozario, 1992).

Family efforts to ensure virginity at marriage defines the nature of female adolescence to a large extent.² For instance, one of the respondents went to school until recently, when her parents decided that she was to remain at home to help with household chores until she was married off to a suitable boy, as she had come of age (had started menstruating). Two of our respondents were working as garment factory workers, living and renting a room in Dhaka city, away from their families. Although they had were not behaving in a 'traditional' way, earning incomes and living independently, they were conscious of being viewed as 'unconventional' and thus were quick to point out that they lived their lives as 'good and moral' girls. Studies have noted that there is considerable social stigma attached to garment work in Bangladesh, and awareness of this stigma is apparent in the girls' narratives of their experiences during the floods (Amin et al., 1998). They are seen to be at risk of sexual advances, as they have greater mobility and autonomy, and live beyond the supervision of their families. As material conditions alter, so do forms of articulating *purdah* and increasing numbers of adolescent girls are being pushed by poverty to seek work outside the home. Thus, *purdah* is redefined as a 'state of mind', which is explained as not requiring isolation; rather it reveals itself in civil behaviour, modest dressing and appropriate behaviour towards men (Simmons, 1996). However, despite their efforts as far as possible to follow traditional definitions of gender, adolescent girls working in factories are still targets of harassment.

Nevertheless, adolescent perspectives — their particular development issues, life experiences and coping mechanisms — are largely unexplored in Bangladesh. This paper focuses on the social aspects of a group of adolescent girls experiences, particularly on the implications of Bangladeshi socio-cultural norms related to notions of honour, shame, purity and pollution, specifically during the floods. For female adolescents in Bangladesh, who are learning to conform and cope with finding their identity in society, a disaster situation is a uniquely vulnerable time. The narratives of these nine girls reveal their anxieties about issues of sexuality, shame, fears of harassment and being viewed as 'bad girls'. In a disaster situation, once coping mechanisms were disrupted, it became increasingly difficult for the adolescent girls to maintain particular standards. Their experiences reflect cultural understandings of female adolescence and sexuality so deeply embedded in Bangladeshi society. Their difficulty in following some of society's expectations has had far-reaching implications on their health, identity, family and community relations. It is hoped that an insight into their experiences will provide knowledge crucial in comprehending the specific development issues faced by adolescent girls. Moreover, this will be of assistance for future flood-related operations better oriented towards the needs and practices of this vulnerable group.

Methods

Bangladesh is a predominantly Muslim country, with a population of 120 million people. It is divided into 64 districts, 490 *thanas*, 4,451 unions and 59,990 villages;³ Dhaka, the capital city, has a population of eight million.

The study took place in both rural areas of Manikganj, and urban areas of Kamrangichor and Badda in Dhaka. Discussions were carried out with nine girls, aged between 15 and 19 years old. Each interview took over two hours — some longer. In-

depth interviews for our case studies and informal discussions were the two main qualitative research methodologies used in eliciting information from the female adolescents and their family members. The adolescent girls were selected randomly, however, we were able to gather information on experiences from those who had lived in shelters and relief camps as well as those who had lived in their own homes throughout the ordeal.

In-depth interviews were conducted with both Hindu and Muslim girls. The data highlight the similarity of their experiences irrespective of religion. The concept of adolescence in Bangladesh is similar to understandings of adolescence prevalent in south Asia. Although notions of *purdah* are enforced on Muslim girls, such cultural norms exist equally for Hindu girls. It can be argued that in Bangladeshi society, adolescent girls in general are subjected to very strict norms and scrutiny, and any 'deviation' has social, cultural and moral consequences. Thus, be they Hindu or Muslim, if a girl is perceived to be behaving inappropriately, such as being dressed immodestly,⁴ laughing and talking with boys or men, walking in a particular manner, seen in 'public' spaces and so on, they will be subjected to harassment, and the family may face dishonour as well. Irrespective of the circumstances, cultural norms are not at all flexible (this is discussed in the research study). In addition, in the case of Hindu girls, parents fear cross-caste marriages, so girls are even more strictly monitored. However, cases do vary. The girls interviewed were from poorer backgrounds and were more conscious of the repercussions of not following social norms. There is competition for scarce resources and fewer opportunities. Thus 'good' behaviour guarantees increased status, material and social resources for the family and the girl and the possibility of decent marriage proposals which will ensure a girl's future security (Rozario, 1992).

The interviews were conducted with each adolescent girl alone in the privacy of their homes to afford them 'space' to discuss sensitive issues privately. They spoke quite candidly of their vulnerability during the floods, their new living arrangements, water and sanitation problems and health and safety concerns. Two sets of informal discussions took place in the *baris* (households) with mothers as well. This was to validate, as far as possible, some of the information gathered, and to elicit some general information on their fears and experiences during the floods. The in-depth case study interviews were more detailed and candid, compared to the informal discussions. All general informal discussions were led by one principal researcher with one research assistant. The assistant observed, offered feedback when needed, took notes and tape-recorded the discussions. All the research participants involved had previous experience conducting in-depth interviews.

My writing on this subject is influenced by my position — as a native (born in Bangladesh) as well as an outsider, as I grew up primarily overseas from 1979 to 1993. The kind of field-work I carried out was influenced by my personal background, my Muslim identity, my status as an unmarried⁵ Bengali woman, and my mixed cultural upbringing as a Bengali in Bangladesh and overseas. Because of my long absence from Bangladesh, I am able to distance myself from Bengali cultural values to a certain degree. I consider myself to be both an insider and outsider in Bangladesh. I do not fully identify with the culture and I believe this marginality was an advantage in my field-work. Further, because my research assistant is Canadian, any biases that I may have are kept at bay.

Finally, this paper is primarily concerned with sharing the views of a group of female adolescents in Bangladesh. The data we have collected raise some important

questions regarding their concerns and well-being. Not all of the opinions are uniform, and divergencies are identified. We do not attempt to imply that this is representative of the whole Bangladeshi rural community, but merely to outline and share with the reader some of the ‘voices’ of poor female adolescents. However, the general problems that it illustrates are common among poor urban and rural adolescents, who are marginalised by virtue of their gender and poverty.

Table 1 Profile of adolescent girls interviewed

<i>Name and age</i>	<i>Place</i>	<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Living arrangements</i>
Ganga 18 (Hindu)	Gheor	Quit school. Tutors children and does household work	Lived at home during the floods
Chandana 14 (Hindu)	Gheor	Goes to school	School was shelter
Anjona 15 (Hindu)	Gheor		Lived at the hospital and then moved to the school with family
Runa 16 (Muslim)	Kamrangichor Rhosoolpur	Works from the house. Assists her mother to make hair pieces	Lived at home during the flood
Shilpi 16 (Hindu)	Kamrangichor-Nabinagar	Goes to school	Lived at home for the first month. Then sent to Moulvi Bazaar to older sister’s place for the rest of the flood period
Jasmine 16 (Muslim)	Kamrangichor-Nabinagar	Used to go to school. Now helps her mother with household work and looking after siblings	Lived at home with family
Nasima 16 (Muslim)	Badda	Garment worker	Lived at home with father, grandmother and siblings
Rehana 18 (Muslim)	TB gate	Garment worker	Lived in rented home
Sheela 18 (Muslim)	Dhaka-Cantonment	Garment worker	Lived in rented home

Findings and Discussion

Living in Public View... Shame Shame!

A majority of the girls experienced great shame because they had to live in exposed conditions. A number of them had to share their living arrangements with strangers in relief camps or live on their roofs, exposed to everyone as their houses were completely submerged by floodwater. A few had to live in cramped conditions with extended family members whose homes had become inhabitable. The adolescent girls were particularly concerned and ashamed about being exposed to the 'public eyes of men' while carrying out their daily activities such as bathing, going to the toilet and sleeping. In addition, they were greatly concerned about having their partially uncovered body revealed and exposed to men. For the girls living in shelters, the particular concerns were living with strangers, especially men and risk exposing parts of their bodies. Anjona lived in a relief camp and spoke about her sleeping arrangements. She stated:

We stayed in the verandah area, and used *kagoj* [paper] and polythene on the floor and a sack was used as partition. On one side of the verandah was the main road. Sleeping there was not too bad ... [she hesitates and then says] as my parents were with me. Actually I felt some shame in case there was *batash* [wind] and my clothes would become disheveled and people could see. I used to go to sleep late at night sometimes because I would worry about my clothes coming up and not being covered properly. This is not my home. I had some difficulties living in this place.

For girls living at home, a major concern was to be confined to their houses, shut in with other family members in front of whom they had to carry out their daily activities.

Ganga talked about her difficult sleeping arrangements. Her family shared their house with another extended family which had previously lived next door. The extended family's house had been completely submerged by the floodwaters. She reported her shame at having to live in such close proximity with another family — especially the male member of the family — for such a long time. She said:

Can you imagine the *lajja* [shame] for us girls? We had to stay in this in room and have to change our clothes, eat, sleep and do everything there for more than two months! When I was sleeping I would think to myself: how am I sleeping? We had *bouji's* [fictive kin] husband also staying there with us! Are my clothes all going here and there? How did I sleep — did he see anything?

In addition to the water-obstructed lanes and roads, concerns about their safety and the need to protect their reputation prevented the adolescent girls from leaving the compound. Ganga explained the difficulty of being confined within the house and the arguments used to encourage her to stay at home.

It was so bad to be stuck inside the house for three months during the floods. Just eating, sitting and sometimes cooking the food. Sometimes we would go on a

nouka [boat] and go and visit people. We would also go and give drinking-water to some of the houses that did not have access to a *nouka* or a *belah* [boat]. . . . My mother would get angry with us for going outside of the house, but how can anyone stay at home all day every day for three months? She said that going on a *belah*, people will say bad things about us. She said they would say: ‘These big girls — where are they going?’ There is more suspicion in a village. People think that young girls going around might be doing bad things, you know, *prem* [romance]!

However, a few of the adolescent girls who lived in the urban areas of Dhaka city, were not confined at home, but compelled to go to work despite the floodwaters. These girls made important contributions to the family income by working, and thus, could not afford to stay at home. In addition, they appeared to appreciate having a dry place to go where they had space. Nasima commented: ‘I had to go to work because we need the money. We live month to month . . . We wanted to go back to work as well because at least at the factory we can remain dry!’

Adolescent girls living in shelters and in their homes explained the shame and distress they experienced when they had to go to the toilet and bathe in front of male strangers. The ponds were now surrounded by many men, unfamiliar and familiar, similarly displaced, and the toilets were completely flooded and non-functional. The floodwater was very dirty with filth and sewage. As a consequence, most of the girls could not bathe frequently enough which made many of them feel ashamed of their state. Some of them could only bathe every three to four days. Chandana reported: ‘Sometimes days would go by and I was unable to shower at all. Maybe even three or four days. I felt so unclean and dirty *bheethoray* [inside] and I felt bad.’

Ganga also shared her embarrassment:

To go to the toilet was a big problem for me. Can you imagine *bouji*’s husband is in the same room and sometimes I had to go and urinate in the middle of the night right outside the house, in the verandah. I had to pull my pyjamas down and do it right there near the verandah. I felt so bad, because I could not go anywhere and imagine they [the brother, the fictive kin’s husband and her sisters and mother] could hear everything! Sometimes my stomach would hurt from holding it in.

Many girls explained that they were so embarrassed to go to the toilet in public that they would wait until late at night when no one could see. This was the situation of Chandana. She explained how she coped with the situation:

I just held it in — I would try not to go unless I really had to! What I would do is not eat at all sometimes or eat less so that I would not have to go to the toilet at all . . . then when I just couldn’t anymore, I would and stand in the *jol* [water] and do it there. So much shame this is — to be out there in the open like this and do this — I felt so bad about it!

It is reflected in these particular findings that the girls’ experiences in the floods affected their self-respect as they reported great shame and distress. The attitude of modesty and shame about one’s body expressed by all the girls in this study is

considered to be an essential attribute of an 'honourable girl' (Caldwell et al., 1998; Blanchet, 1996). In Bangladeshi society, young girls are taught at a very early age to be very modest and feel ashamed of their own bodies. During adolescence particularly, as girls learn to deal with their own sexuality and gender relations, these notions of shame and modesty are reinforced with greater emphasis. Girls therefore learn that while within the compound their interaction with other male relatives can be rather relaxed, the outside world is an unsafe place where 'honourable' women are in danger. Deviation from these norms, in contrast, brings shame and may ruin good marriage possibilities (Caldwell et al., 1998; Blanchet, 1996; Rashid, 1997). In the context of the flood, sharing their living arrangements with strangers — i.e. male ones — and carrying out their daily activities such as bathing, going to toilet or sleeping in public view were distressing for the adolescent girls. Even though there is flexibility in the applications of those norms for adolescent girls, the code was not significantly relaxed, as adolescence is the period when girls are the most rigorously socialised to conform.

Solidarity in coping

The girls in the study networked with their relatives and friends in their efforts to cope with the disruptions in their lives caused by the floods. Families able to remain in their homes accommodated extended family members whose houses had become inhabitable. Also in quite a few cases where girls were living at home and had to cope with the restrictions in their housing space, the male members of the family helped the girls maintain privacy for their daily activities. For instance, Ganga explained that during the floods, her father went to stay in the bazaar. Anjona also explained that her father would leave home early so that they could have some privacy to carry out their daily activities (bathing and going to the toilet). Ganga reported:

Before the flood, we stayed in the *bari* [home] with our family. In the past my father and brother slept in the *barindah* [verandah] and we [the other sisters and mother] slept in the room. But during the floods, my father went and stayed in the bazaar. [*Bouji's* husband] also left around 9 am and then we would get the opportunity to take a bath and change our clothes.

Runa also reported a similar situation. She explained:

When we bathed or changed our clothes, we put partitions in the room. When my brother was here during the day ... he would lie there on the bed and cover his face with the blanket while my sister or I got changed.

For going to the toilet, Shilpi and Runa reported that their father made them latrines which they could use late at night when fewer people were around. Others joined up with their female relatives and friends when they had to leave their compound or shelter to go to the toilet or bathe. This was to ensure their protection and to safeguard their reputation, as 'good girls don't walk around alone'. As such, Ganga explained,

A few of us would go to the mango tree, early in the morning and sometimes late at night to go to the toilet. I would go with my mother and my cousin or sisters to a secluded corner when we had to bathe.

One of the girls, Anjona, was able to use her aunt's home after bathing, which afforded her with some privacy when she changed her clothes after her bath. She said,

I had to bathe because sometimes it had been almost three to four days and I had not had a chance to bathe properly. After a quick dip, I would go in my wet *kapor* [clothes] and walk to my *phopoo's* [aunt's] house . . . my aunt's place was right near the *pukur* [pond].

Working at the factories appeared to help these girls cope with the flood, because it gave them a dry place to go where they had a bit more space. The factory managers were also helpful as they provided salines to the girls when they were sick. Moreover, the girls were relieved that the factories were operating, as they desperately needed to continue earning.

Unfamiliar faces, fear and harassment

A common concern brought up by the girls was the fear of harassment caused by the presence of strange males roaming the neighbourhood. Almost all the girls had witnessed or heard stories of girls being harassed. Although the girls explained that some harassment was prevalent during normal conditions, the flood had exacerbated the situation, and the incidence of harassment had increased. Shilpi reported:

It was more scary during the floods because there were more *mastaans* [-hoodlums] and *goondahs* [thugs] hanging around. Some unknown boys would be roaming around in their *noukas* [boats] and harassed the girls around here. I once heard that a girl was just walking along when these boys on a boat came up and tried to grab her. She screamed at them and then they just laughed. Then this other woman came out of her house and yelled at them, and they finally went away. It was worrying because one did not know which of the men hanging around were good and which ones were bad.

The shelters in particular seemed to be perceived as an unsafe place by some of the girls. Chandana reported that she had witnessed numerous fights at the shelters. She also said that she felt scared about being harassed by the boys as they would come from other places by boat to hang out, laugh and do 'rubbish chit-chat' with the other men.

Girls seemed to get some comfort from living close to their normal social network. Anjona reported that the first shelter where she stayed, she felt better because she was close to her relatives and neighbours. She said, 'I am happy to be back in our home. Although the walls on one side are broken, I still feel safer than there . . . everyone is a known face around here in our *para* [neighbourhood].' Jasmine's mother, a widow, reported that she had decided to stay in her home, despite the fact that she had to live on her roof because she preferred to remain close to neighbours. This way she could

rely on their assistance in case she or her daughters were harassed. She stated that if anything happened she could quickly scream for her neighbours.

Some of the mothers seemed to be particularly concerned about the safety of their unmarried adolescent girls. A few of the mothers sent their girls to live with relatives who had not been affected by the floods, as they thought they would be safer there. Food scarcity was another reason to send them elsewhere. That was the situation for Runa's sister and Shilpie. Runa reported,

My sister, was sent after a few weeks to our *mama's* [mother's brother] home. My mother heard that some young girls were harassed . . . my mother felt that my sister should be sent because it was safer for her to be in the village.

The girls working in the garment factory reported that they were compelled to go to work because their families were dependent on their salary. However, on their way to work not only did they have to cope with walking in dirty floodwater, which was waist high or even higher, but they also had to cope with considerable harassment. Nasima reported:

I had to walk in the water for at least an hour before I could get to work. My clothes would get wet as I had to walk in the water [often alone]. The water some places was almost up to my chest and some places up to my waist. It felt so bad to walk for so long in the water with all the clothes sticking to my chest and upper body like that. Then we had to go and work in the factory all day in the wet clothes. I was often harassed as I walked to work because the boys would say to me and the other girls 'We can see everything' and 'Wet clothes — look at the *mal* [goods]'. One evening when I was coming back from work at 8 pm, a boy came up to me and said 'Wait, I have something to say to you!' I told him that I had to go and could not speak with him. All these other boys stood around laughing and they kept saying 'Catch her, keep her, grab her.' I was scared but I kept my head down and kept walking but with all the mud and water it is difficult even to walk that quickly.

Rehana related another incident of harassment that she witnessed as she was going to work:

In front of me a girl was walking and everything was wet of hers as she was walking in the water [which was quite high]. She was trying to cover herself with her *urnah* [cloth that covers the upper body] when some boys in a boat just grabbed her *urnah* and ran off.

Most of the girls in this study expressed a general feeling of helplessness in the face of such harassment and believed that the best response was to ignore it. For instance, Jasmine stated: 'It is better for us to put our heads down and not say anything. What is there to say?' While Sheela reflected, 'In the past I would give *gali* [abuse] but now I have learnt not to say anything.' Sheela also seemed to put the responsibility of harassment on the girls. She narrated a story about a girl who, according to her, was responsible for the dreadful consequences, because of her attitude. She said:

I heard a girl was raped and killed when walking home from work. This sort of thing is the girl's fault. Why wasn't she more careful? She must have argued back or shown *jheed* [stubborn behaviour] to the guys!

However, it is also necessary to point out that the response to harassment varied. Rehana for instance, responded back to the assailant when her friend was harassed. She reported:

Once during the floods, I was in a *rickshaw* going to work with a friend. Another boy on another *rickshaw* came up to us and pushed my friend off the *rickshaw* and threw her in the water. I jumped off and screamed at him, 'Don't you have a mother or sisters, why do you do this?' He said, '*Beyshorom* [shameless one] *chola pheerah korey* [roaming around]! You are bad. You left the village to come to Dhaka town because you are bad.' I said to him, 'A lot of people have come to Dhaka to work, what is wrong with that?' I felt very bad ... Why do they say such things? We work so hard — aren't we human? My biggest sadness is that we work so hard to live and eat but they [men in society] still view as bad girls!

One of the factors which can explain the increase in incidence of harassment during the floods was the increased exposure of the girls to men, who were loitering around more than usual since their work was interrupted. Caldwell et al. suggest that in Bangladesh culture, there is a common perception that teenage girls have no strong will to resist importuning or even violent males, and that any weakness on a girl's part (such as having exposed body parts) makes her a deserving target. In addition, males are rarely held accountable for harassing young girls and the victims often get blamed (Caldwell et al., 1998). In the case of female garment workers, some argue that many try to protect themselves from negative judgements in the 'public space' of the streets by covering their head and upper bodies and by ignoring men who accost them, as they realise they are particularly vulnerable targets for harassment (Amin et al., 1998). In the context of the floods, a number of girls, who were not garment factory workers, also became exposed to the public space of men. Many were living in unfamiliar environments, with their families, separated from their previous social network. This created unnecessary tension and anxiety for the girls and their family members.

'Bad girls do these things!'

In a manner prevalent in the south Asian region, narratives about sexuality with female adolescents suggests social norms define a 'good' woman as one being ignorant of sex or passive in sexual encounters (Amin et al., 1998). A few of the girls in the research study, made references to 'bad girls'. In Bangladeshi society, being labeled 'bad' or *nosto* [spoilt] means being regarded as sexually promiscuous (Rozario, 1992). Chandana narrated:

You see I would not come out of our *chala* [partitioned area]. There are many *kharab* [bad] boys and girls who do a lot of yelling and chatting together. Boys of all ages and types would come and laugh and hang out. Boys came in *noukas*

[boats] from other places to do *ajjay bajjay udda* [rubbish chit-chat] with the other men. Sometimes people would talk about those girls ['bad' girls] who would come up and down from the roof all the time with the boys, *mayrah chol cholah!* [these girls are precocious].

Another girl Jasmin commented about a girl living with them in a shelter, 'She is a bad girl she goes here and there and talks to boys ...' The girls also talked about the importance of maintaining one's honour and reputation. As Nasima stated,

because of the floods there are a lot of problems and the girls have become *oshohai* [helpless], there is a chance for the men to do something! *Ak bar manshoman geyley feeray ashbay nah* [once honour and dignity are lost, they cannot be retrieved]!

Sheela expressed similar sentiments about maintaining one's honour. She commented,

You see there are bad girls around, they dress up all the time and they give us a bad name. The boys hanging around also tend to think we are bad and they used often say to me, '*Jai bi* [will you come with me]?'

These references to honour in this particular context can be explained by the importance in Bangladeshi society to preserve females' virginity until marriage, as discussed earlier. No physical test is required to prove a girl's virginity but her reputation is a crucial factor. Strong sanctions exist against interactions with men, and none of this activity is socially approved of or accepted (Amin et al., 1998). As reported by Blanchet, to have been raped, to have had sexual intercourse with a lover or to simply have been seen in a dubious location, could irreversibly affect a girl's reputation. Thus, maintaining honour is critically important and is the reason why young girls are often reluctant to speak of their own experiences of sexual harassment (Blanchet, 1996). One of the respondents, Runa, willingly discussed this issue but defensively added:

We are not like that though. No one can say anything bad about us. We never left our home and went outside. Our family has lived here for 20 years! I hear about things happening to some girls who were walking around in particular places.

Menstrual blood and pollution

Menstruation appeared to be a particularly private matter for the girls. This is because menstruation signifies the coming of age or 'womanhood' for young girls in Bangladesh. Soon after menarche, particularly in rural areas, adolescent girls are married off, although this practice is changing. Sexuality, fertility and pollution are strongly associated with menstruation, and thus it is considered to be a shameful and hidden subject (Rashid, 1997). When a young girl is menstruating, she is considered to

be ‘dangerous and polluting’ to the social and moral order. Therefore, various social norms exist to contain the polluting effects of the blood and maintain the purity of the girls. The social taboos surrounding menstruation are so great, that young adolescent girls usually do not share their menstruation experiences even with their own mothers. In the context of the floods, a main concern for adolescent girls was to hide the fact that they were menstruating from male and female family members and outsiders. They explained that it became very difficult to be discreet about their *menses* (periods). A few appeared to be able to confide to their close relatives about this delicate subject. A few of the girls explained their predicament. Ganga explained, ‘We all do our own thing when periods come and if we have problems we normally ask *bouji* (fictive kin). But it is tense to have all this happening during the floods!’

Chandana commented:

I got my periods during the time we were staying there. I told my sister who explained to me what to do while we were living there. She must have told my mother because my mother knew about it as well. My sister said to me, ‘This is a problem, *mela* [big] problem: how to change and wash it?’ A lot of the people were on one side of the verandah and we were on the other side. While I was there, I noticed that a girl had got her periods, and she was trying to hide it, as she was ashamed. Finally a day later she came up to me and said, ‘In the floods it has happened what will I do?’ I told her what I have been doing and told her to speak to a *didi* [anyone who is regarded as a older sister, not necessarily related by blood].

Jasmin, for example, explained:

I didn’t feel good having it [periods] during this time because I felt *lajja* [-shame]. It is already difficult to wash and because there is dirty water everywhere one cannot even bathe properly and the cloth⁶ does not even dry quickly.⁷ The blood is dirty blood and I just felt very unclean and dirty all the time! To be like this and not be able to keep myself clean properly made me feel very *kharap* [bad] *monay monay* [in my heart]!

The feeling of dirtiness was also expressed by the other girls. In addition to not being able to bathe properly, girls explained that they had difficulty finding space and time to wash their menstrual rag without being seen by others. Because of the floodwaters, space was very limited and most people were confined in cramped surroundings. This situation made it even more difficult for young girls to change their menstrual cloth. Nasima lived with her father, grandmother and her two younger brothers in one room in Badda. She explained her frustrating situation:

I got my menses (periods) during the floods. What was really bad was that I had to keep the same cloth on all day, even if it was completely wet. It would just fill up with blood and I would be too scared to sit or do anything in case someone saw something. I couldn’t wash until late at night. Often at midnight I would get up and wash it in the *bonnar pani* [floodwaters]. I used to feel so scared, as there are so many snakes in the floodwaters. My grandmother never said anything but she knew what was happening. I would dry it behind the *alnah* [cabinet] or near

the corner of the *pak ghor* [kitchen] where no one would go as I normally did all the cooking.

Ganga, who also had difficulties finding places to dry the menstrual cloth, said:

We cannot keep that cloth inside the house. My mother offers her *puja* [prayers] in there; our *thakur* [religious leader/icon] is there ... Older people say one should not have it inside one's home, one should get rid of it or burn it.

Huq and Khan (1991) also discussed some rules that girls must observe as to where to keep their cloth. They found that because menstrual blood is considered polluting, girls could not keep their menstrual rags in a room for prayers. They also found that it had to be hidden from the view of others as it could pollute them. A few of the girls believed that they should not be going out in such a state. Nasima explained her predicament, 'Especially during the floods my menses came and I could not bathe properly and I did not feel clean and I feel dirty and I think it is better not to go anywhere outside the house.'

Beliefs and practices regarding menstruation varied. Some girls could not afford to let the restrictions interfere with their essential work. This was the situation for Sheela. She explained that in the factory where she worked, girls would come to work during their menstruation period and change at work. She related:

Girls who had their menses would come with extra pyjama and *shalwar*⁸ and menstrual cloth to change at the workplace. What else could they do? They are very poor and could not afford to miss even a day! They would always come an hour earlier to do all this.

These findings suggest that menstruation is a particularly vulnerable time for young adolescents who mostly end up coping on their own. However the situation appeared to be exacerbated during the floods with no access to clean water and cramped surroundings which afforded them no privacy. In addition, as it is such a taboo subject, most of the girls did not receive much support or explanations from older female relatives.

Illness and shame

Girls reported they had some health problems. One of the girls, Nasima, explained:

All this walking in the water caused a lot of problems for us girls. We had *gota* [boils] and *chulkani* [itchy rash] on our legs and feet and even our hands and nails! Most of us have had to wash our clothes and even the *kapor* [cloth used for menstruation] in the floodwaters, and not being able to dry it properly, the cloth sometimes remained damp. This gave some of the girls problems near there [the genital area]. Some of the girls had so much scratching down there that they could not even walk. A lot of the girls felt a lot of shame to talk about these things. But since we are all girls, we confided to one another. One girl said to me, 'I have *gotas* [rash] down there because of the floodwaters. I cannot sleep properly at night. What will I do?' A few of the girls bought Savlon which they

mixed with water and dipped a cloth in the water to wipe themselves in the [perineum] and they wiped their feet and legs. However, I did not have any problems like that except near my feet.

Huq and Khan (1991) suggested that even in normal conditions, girls have difficulty drying their sanitary pads appropriately and therefore, many girls experience perineal rashes and urinary-tract infections. In the context of the floods, the difficulties appeared to have increased. One of the mothers (Jasmin's) mentioned that she faced similar problems during menstruation. She believed that because she had been washing the cloths in dirty water and was compelled to reuse them even if they were not dry, she had developed persistent perineal rashes and cramps as well.

Other girls that experienced ailments in the perineum area reported feeling ashamed and felt uncomfortable with the idea of going to a doctor (especially a male doctor) to discuss this delicate subject. This attitude towards male doctors was also reported in a study on Bangladeshi adolescent girls' beliefs and practices related to menstruation (Huq and Khan 1991). Social pressures and attitudes discourage girls, especially when unmarried, to seek help from male doctors for 'female' problems. In addition, during the floods, many girls reported that access to medical services was difficult. Therefore, most girls had to manage on their own. Jasmine stated, 'A few of the girls bought Dettol and mixed it with water and wiped themselves there [in the genital area] ... but the itching was terrible.'

Some of the girls spoke of having general health problems such as fever, diarrhoea and jaundice. The garment girls mentioned receiving saline from the factories. One girl, Sheela commented, 'there were quite a few illnesses during the floods. We (the other garment workers) all had diarrhoea and the office gave us saline.' One of the girls, Runa was affected by jaundice for a few months during the floods.

Fear of abandonment

A girl in the study, Runa, had recently been married. She reported being very afraid her husband would abandon her, because with the floods, her family had no more money to pay the dowry. She reported:

I was recently married about six months ago, but my husband has not been able to take me to his place. He wanted me to remain here with my parents during the floods as it was easier for him to visit me since he works in Dhaka town. My parents have not been able to pay the full amount of the dowry of Taka 10,000, and that is why he has not been able to take me to his home. Now due to the floods, there will be less money available to give him! What will happen I don't know? But he says he will take me.

Jasmine had similar stories about girls who were unable to pay dowry. In most marriages, the bride's family is required to pay a certain amount of money and goods in kind, as dowry. If families are unable to pay the dowry, then the girls can be 'justifiably' abandoned, mistreated or returned to their parents (Amin et al., 1998; Blanchet, 1996). The floods affected the income-earning capabilities of numerous families, and thus, directly affected the lives of some adolescent girls.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore adolescent girls' perspectives and practices during the floods of 1998 in Bangladesh. It also intended to raise awareness about some important issues particular to adolescent girls in disaster situations. The findings suggest that the girls' difficulties in conforming to socio-cultural norms caused many girls some loss of self-respect and shame. For instance, bathing or going to the toilet in public, sharing their sleeping arrangements with strangers and male members of the extended family, and being unable clean themselves appropriately when menstruating were all great sources of concern. In addition, several girls had to cope with the increased incidence of illness — their vulnerability compounded by limited access to health services and their reluctance to seek help. Several girls also had to cope with the increased incidences of harassment during the floods. As such, being exposed to strangers, being separated from their social networks and unable to maintain their seclusion and exposed to the 'public spaces' of men, all combined to increase their vulnerability. Another important issue raised by a few of the girls was the fear of abandonment related to difficulties in paying their dowries to their potential spouses. Finally, where solidarity among family members and neighbours was maintained, it appeared to help greatly the adolescent girls' ability to cope with the disruption in their lives. Many of them networked to ensure their needs were met. Being close to relatives and neighbours was perceived to be very important by these adolescent girls.

It is therefore argued that adolescent girls are a group with distinct needs, who were a particularly vulnerable group during disaster situations such as the 1998 floods in Bangladesh. Central to their experiences and coping strategies during the floods were notions of honour, shame, purity and pollution, which regulated their sexuality and gender relations. The social norms related to these notions are normally reinforced with greater emphasis during adolescence and profoundly influenced girls' attitudes and behaviour. In the context of the floods, these understandings were not significantly relaxed despite the difficulties encountered by the adolescents. Female adolescents' attempts and sometimes inability to follow these norms made them particularly vulnerable, and has had far-reaching implications on their health, identity, family and community relations.

Recommendations

Awareness needs to be raised among community members about the particular issues faced by adolescent girls, particularly unmarried ones. Community members could start problem-solving in anticipation of the next floods. For instance, if harassment is an issue raised by the people in the community, sessions could be organised for different groups (such as schoolgirls, women and men) during which they would be encouraged to discuss their concerns freely and try to think of new solutions. Women and adolescent girls could also be targeted specifically to discuss taboo subjects such as menstruation, with the intention of bringing the subject out into the open and therefore facilitating access to support for adolescent girls.

As we attempted to address issues faced by adolescent girls in the context of the floods, two avenues of research suggested themselves. First, we need more information on adolescents' needs, perceptions and practices. Second, more research should be carried out exploring their experiences during disaster situations.

Notes

1. Purdah has shifting meanings contextually and historically. Here it refers to the seclusion of women. However, norms can be flexible depending on the class and economic situation of the women and their family.
2. Caldwell et al., (1998) found in such understandings prevalent in South India, Sri Lanka and parts of Africa.
3. Bangladesh is divided into 64 districts, 486 *thanas* and 4,405 unions; the union is the lowest level of administrative unit.
4. When discussing the issue of 'covering one's body', we are not referring to the veil but to the appropriate covering of girls' arms, hands, legs, chest and so on.
5. I was unmarried at the time this research study was carried out.
6. Usually a torn piece of sari material/cloth is used as a menstrual rag.
7. One of the mothers said that she had some problems during her periods. She had to wash the cloths in dirty water and then forced to reuse them before they were dry; she got an itchy rash down there that would not go away for quite awhile. This was also mentioned by one of the girls interviewed in the later case studies.
8. Traditional dress consisting of a long *kurta*, long pyjamas and another piece of cloth covering the chest area.

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