Gender and Floods in Bangladesh

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1 On leave from RED from 2001 onwards.
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Background - overview of floods
In 2002, storms and floods ravaged large portions of eastern Asia and Europe. [Daily Star, August 12, 2002]. More than 4.2 million people were affected in Germany alone with the city of Dresden being the hardest hit. Half of Austria went underwater with bridges being swept away and the river Danube cascading over its banks in Vienna. [Daily Star, August 15 2002]. More than 100 people died across central Europe, with scores missing, and thousands stranded. About 1700 people were evacuated in Hungary while heavy winds and rain swept southern Russia’s Black sea coast, killing 34 in the region [Daily Star, August 11, 2002]. Elsewhere in Europe, flooding and storms are thought to have killed 7 people in Romania and Bulgaria, with heavy rains bringing chaos to Croatia, Crimea, and Italy. In Britain, dozens of homes were evacuated on England’s northeast coast after rains brought fresh flooding and 100 families were forced to take shelter in hostels in North Yorkshire [Daily Star, August 12, 2002].

Seasonal floods in 2002 were particularly severe in China with about 8.4 million people affected and 415,000 hectares of crops damaged. The death toll stood at around 900, with more than six hundred thousand people evacuated from the lake area that acts as a reservoir for the Yangtze River [Daily Star, Aug 24, 2002]. In South Korea, the death toll hit 14 after a week of deluges in early August triggered flash floods and landslides. The country mobilized 32,000 soldiers with rescue gear to reduce damage. North Korea also reported damaged crops and heavy rains [Daily Star, August 11, 2002].

For South Asia, the monsoon season arrived early in 2002. Flooding in eastern India, Nepal and Bangladesh resulted in the deaths of more than 900 people. Swollen rivers Ganges, Brahmaputra, and the Meghna forced millions from their homes. In India, more than half of Assam went under water and millions of homeless people took refuge on raised highways and higher grounds, while Nepal faced an outbreak of cholera and other diseases when the waters began to recede leaving drinking water supplies polluted. The rush of water from India and high tides of the Bay of Bengal resulted in 30 out of 64 districts of Bangladesh being affected and 6 million people displaced by floods [Daily Star, July 28, 2002].

It is argued that the capacity of societies to endure disasters is determined by the internal strengths and weaknesses of the society - the level of social, economic and cultural vulnerability. The ability to cope differs depending on its social conditions: poor and rich, men and women, young and old, indigenous and so on. Gender cuts across these various groups and has important light to shed on the devising of specific strategies to cope with disasters [Salvano Briceno, 2002]. Though there is an absence of systematic gender sensitive statistics, it is observed that higher vulnerability and marginalization results in women being more affected than men. In addition, women’s active agency and crucial role in helping families pull through this period are usually ignored [Rahman, Tahmina, 1996]. Images of a

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2 Sabina Faiz Rashid, an anthropologist, is currently enrolled at the Australian National University completing her Doctoral Dissertation on Adolescent women and their reproductive health needs. She is on leave from BRAC till December 2003.
woman giving birth in a tree or a child looking for his parents, or a woman selling off her only jewelry assets to manage the household post flood, demonstrate that gender issues are seldom just a woman’s issue but more often, a family affair, a community concern, and a social issue. Usually the psycho-social and emotional affects of the damage such disasters create are overlooked in favor of focusing on the economic aspects of the damage [Hussein Maliha and Husain, Tariq 2000].

This paper will present the gender
dimension of flood experiences in Bangladesh. I will primarily illustrate the psycho-social experiences and coping strategies of women and female adolescents who live mainly in urban areas, who were affected in the floods of 1998. I will also rely on my own and secondary data on flood experiences in rural areas. Women’s social, economic and political position in societies differ, making them more or less vulnerable to disaster situations [Salvano Briceno, 2002]. It is well understood that gender relations structure people’s ability to anticipate, prepare for, survive, cope with, and recover from disasters [Salvano Briceno, 2002]. In the context of Bangladesh, a large part of women’s vulnerability is caused by gender norms, expectations and social roles. Women are disadvantaged because of their subordinate position in the family arising out of patriarchy and traditionally embedded cultural values. Therefore, women are doubly disadvantaged during a disaster time, as they have limited mobility due to cultural norms of honor and shame, and purdah and most are extremely dependent on male members of the household. The aim of the paper is to give the readers psychosocial insights into women’s experiences during the floods.

Methods
The paper will provide a review on literature available on the situation of older and adolescent women during the floods. The paper will highlight their experiences and coping strategies during this period. The paper will present combined findings from flood related studies carried out in 1998 by the author herself as well as secondary data, both qualitative and quantitative from studies published by the Research and Evaluation Division, BRAC and by other authors and research institutions.

Introduction

A father held on to his son and daughter for dear life to keep them from being swept away by the tidal surge. When it became impossible to hold on to both of them, he helplessly released one - his daughter [Haider et al 1991]

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3 The term gender refers to the status, social roles and relations of women and men determined by society, as opposed to biologically determined characteristics [referred to by the biological term ‘sex’. A gender perspective emphasizes relations between men and women within their social and natural environment. It is part and parcel of the social system and an important factor in determining the access to, or control over resources. Gender relations are also dynamic, in that they are shaped and modified as a result of social change, economic crisis and changing environment [Jennifer Francis, Gender and Water Alliance, November 2002].

4 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 [Blanchet, 1996].

5 Among children of 5 years of age, the death rate for females was 15 percent higher than their male counterparts [AMR Chowdhury et al, 1993].
Although this is an extreme case given to demonstrate the flood experiences of the poor, it does highlight the gender dimension of the flood experience. Bangladesh is no stranger to floods. It is one of the most disaster prone countries in the world. The disaster impact is also greater because it is one of the poorest and most densely populated. In the past, the country faced devastating floods in 1954/55, 1974, 1987, and 1988. In 1998 the worst floods occurred, with 55 of a total of the 64 districts affected [Ahmed SM et al, 1999]. More recently in mid June 2002, 3.5 million people were affected by floods in 30 of the 64 districts. Though not of the magnitude of 1998, these floods caused considerable damage with thousands of families marooned, losing their homes and livelihood. Houses and schools were washed away and road links snapped. Scarcity of safe drinking water resulted in the outbreak of diarrhoea and other health problems, and the acute crisis of food along with the rising of food prices made the situation even worse [The Independent, August 7, 2002]. The situation is further exacerbated as relief tends to be delayed and when it does arrive, it is usually followed by complaints by the poor of corruption by local government leaders who have either diverted or stolen relief aid [Rashid, 2000]. A newspaper report in mid-July 2002 found that many families were still waiting for relief - food, water and other essentials from government and non-government organizations [Daily Star, July 10, 2002].
Table A. Flood affected areas in major floods since the sixties (area of Bangladesh = 1,48,393 sq. km.).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of flooding</th>
<th>Flood-affected area (sq. km.)</th>
<th>% of total area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1954</td>
<td>36,780</td>
<td>24.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1955</td>
<td>38,850</td>
<td>26.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>52,520</td>
<td>35.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>57,270</td>
<td>38.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>77,700</td>
<td>52.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998*</td>
<td>1,00,000</td>
<td>67.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: GOB web site as of 26 September 1998 (http://www.bangladeshonline.com/gob/flood98)

It is well known that mortality during disaster situations is highest where the socio-economic conditions of the people are lowest [Guha-Sapir, 1991 in AMR Chowdhury, 1993]. Poor housing has been identified as one factor for this high casualty rate. In Bangladesh, a majority of the poor live below the poverty line and reside in houses made of straw and mud. A study by AMR Chowdhury et al [1993] found that only 3 percent of houses are strong enough to withstand the onslaught of floods and any tidal surges. Then there is the high population density - with 8369 people per 1000 hectares (the figure for India: 2736; for USA: 269). There is shortage of land that compels many people to relocate in search of jobs and means to earn money to vulnerable coastal areas and small offshore islands where they are most prey to natural disasters [AMR Chowdhury et al, 1993].

Women’s socio-economic status makes them more vulnerable to disaster situations than men. Studies have found that greater number of poor women die than men during disasters [Hena, 1992; Rahman, Tamina, 1996]. AMR Chowdury et al, (1993) reported findings from other studies which found that 42 percent more females than males died in the 1991 cyclone, a pattern which is similar to the 1970 cyclone in Bangladesh. Hena argues, that the higher death rates of women in Bangladesh could be because they tend to be more homebound, are often left at home to look after children and valuables, their sari [outfit] restricts their movements and places them in greater risk during tidal surges and floods. In addition, women tend to be physically less nourished and less capable to cope during disasters [Hena, 1992, AMR Chowdhury et al, 1993]. Usually, widows or young women survivors who are left homeless invariably face destitution and may be forced into prostitution or turn to begging for survival [Rahman, Tahmina, 1996].

It is poor unmarried adolescent6 women are especially vulnerable as socio-cultural notions of honour and shame are prevalent and reinforced within this age group. They are under tighter control to regulate their sexuality and gender relationships. Unmarried adolescent girls are expected to maintain their ‘virginity’ till the time of marriage and to safeguard their ‘purity’ contact tends to be limited to one’s family and extended relations. Thus, for poor female adolescents in Bangladesh, a disaster situation is a uniquely vulnerable time. Most shelters and relief and rehabilitation efforts tend to be inadequate and are stretched to their maximum capacity and beyond. Most lack adequate latrines and water supply [AMR

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6 Adolescents as defined from the ages of 10 – 19 years as defined by the World Health Organisation, Geneva.
Chowdhury et al, 1993; Rashid, 2000; Daily Star, September 1998] and people are forced to live in cramped, unhygienic conditions for weeks on end till waters recede.

Culturally, females are taught modesty and shame about their bodies from an early age, whereas males do not have such pressures [Blanchet, 1996]. Exposed to the unfamiliar environment of flood shelters and cramped relief camp surroundings, women and female adolescents are unable to maintain their space and privacy from male strangers, and have difficulty accessing the few available latrines to bathe or wash themselves. This leaves many females with feelings of shame, exposed and emotionally vulnerable. In addition to being confronted by social, mental and physical hardships, many women and their families also have to cope with economic and emotional crises that come with loss of unemployment, lives, illnesses and food shortages as a result of floods. Although women are more disadvantaged than their male colleagues and bear the brunt of disasters, this paper will illustrate that women are not just helpless victims, but key individuals who strategize and manage their resources to help their families survive during floods and disasters.

Findings

Floods and Urban Slums: Increased Vulnerability of the Poor

Rats, snakes and dirty flood waters!

During the floods, the entire infrastructure of Dhaka came under severe pressure. Roads were covered with water, embankments threatened to crack, continuous rains and blocked drainage and sewage systems created an health and environmental nightmare (Ahmed SM et al, 1999). People from all levels of society, from slum dwellers to the country's elite, were affected with the huge surge of waters. However, the difference was that the rich were able to move around in their cars and most were sheltered in their houses, whereas for the poor, food prices had gone up, their squatter settlements were flooded with overflowing drains, and all basic transportation were disrupted. Life did not stop, and many of the urban poor devised ingenious methods to cope with the disaster (I Ahmed, 1999). The urban poor who migrate from rural areas in search of food, shelter and employment cannot afford housing. They tend to establish shack settlements on empty government or private land, residing illegally, never knowing when they might be evicted [ref]. Due to continuous rains and blocked and poor drainage in the city, the level of the floodwaters had risen to about 4 feet in a majority of the slums and parts of the city. Slums tend to be built on usually low-lying land, which tends to be flood prone. In the severely affected areas of Dhaka city, boats became the principle means of communication (I Ahmed, 1999).

Despite the waters flooding their shacks and rising almost as high as their beds, many families in the slums were reluctant to move, but felt compelled to do so only because of the stench of stagnating dirty water and the nuisance of mosquito bites. Moreover, people shared their fears of seeing snakes, leeches and rats floating in the water. Widespread fears forced many poor families to move from their slums. Many feared being bitten by snakes or rats. Parents worried that their babies may fall from the roof and drown in the water, or they maybe electrocuted because of loose electrical lines lying near floodwaters. Commonly narratives were shared of mothers losing their babies in the waters, of men being bitten by rats and of people dying from electrocution (Ahmed, SM et al, 1999; Ahmed, I, 1999; Rashid and Halder, 1998).
Since most houses are built on flimsy materials, and the flooded drains and overflowing sewage, ensured that a majority of the families were unable to remain on the roofs of their homes for too long. Most moved with their basic belongings of utensils and bedding to nearby shelters and relief camps. During this period, a number of institutions had been temporarily converted into temporary shelters for the poor families. Schools, hospitals and empty construction sites were used as relief camps. When visiting a few of the relief centres, it was found that groups of slum dwellers had moved into similar relief camps. This was a deliberate strategy taken by some to ensure that the families could rely on each other for security and strength in the unfamiliar shelters [Rashid, 2000].

Some of the men and women shared their reasons for leaving the slums:

"The water rose and I was with my two children, so I went and stayed at the medical college... My house is submerged...what to do there is no where else to go for us?"

Another woman exclaimed, "there is feces floating around inside our homes...what will we do? We had to move!"

Despite the appalling conditions in the slums, there were some families who preferred to remain behind in their homes. They refused to move, as they did not want to leave their few household belongings behind. Instead they coped by raising the level of their beds and stoves with bricks and bamboos in an attempt to stay. Most of them were frantic to keep their belongings afloat and used bricks, sandbags and makeshift wooden platforms. A man explained, "We went and got bricks from the roadside and put it under our beds to remain afloat." Some of them spoke of sleeping on makeshift platforms on the main road [not too far from their homes] when they had run out of alternatives. Some of the families had left their cattle and goats in nearby empty buildings and construction sites (I, Ahmed, 1999). Many of the families managed by using sandbags and bricks to prevent water from flooding their homes. Others set up wooden pillars and temporary platforms to live on, and a few had made makeshift arrangements to live on trees. They did not want to move and lived in tension everyday, worrying about the looting of their possessions. (Rashid, 2000).

**Fear of theft - losing their few possessions**

A common concern shared by the families living in relief camps and for those who had remained in the slums was the fear of losing their valuable possessions. For families who had left their belongings behind and sought temporary shelter elsewhere, the concern was having valuable items such as fans or pieces of tin roof material stolen as these items were too difficult to take to a shelter. The most devastating loss for some of the families was the irreparable damage done to their own homes. They were distressed at having their bamboo walls, tin, and other house materials destroyed [Rashid, 2000]. As one man cried out:

"We have lost everything, without our homes we have nothing and now our houses are gone, broken and destroyed. A pa, what are we going to do? Do we sort out our utensils and belongings or buy food? A ll we have is our home and now we have nothing, no tin, no home, everything is flooded!" [Rashid, 2000]

Their main worry was not having a roof over their heads and remaining homeless. The narratives illustrate their despair and utter helplessness over their present situation - with no
home to return to, their cooking utensils destroyed and no money to buy food, their lives were completely crushed by the onslaught of the floods.

**Women’s concerns: shame and sexuality and vulnerability**

As discussed earlier, a number of institutions such as schools, hospitals and empty construction sites were converted to temporary shelters for poor families. A qualitative study by the author on female adolescents [aged 15-19 years] experiences during the floods of 1998, found that most females felt extremely uncomfortable about having to suddenly share living arrangements with male strangers in shelters and camps [Rashid, March 2000]. Many were upset and complained of men being around during their daily activities, while some spoke of the fear of inadvertently exposing their bodies when they were sleeping.

"We stayed in the verandah area [of the shelter], 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. Aurally I felt some shame in case there was batash (wind) and my clothes would becomes 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."

Rashid [March 2000] found that for young women tending to even the most basic needs, such as going to the toilet was a horrible experience. Most toilets were completely flooded, or washed away and non-existent. The floodwater was also very dirty with filth and sewage. As most young girls are used to wearing clothes that cover their entire bodies, accessing a public latrine became very difficult. Many felt ashamed and distressed that they were forced to bathe in front of male strangers in camps and shelters, or had to go without bathing for days. Many girls spoke of controlling themselves till late at night and then accessing the latrines. Some even resorted to urinating directly into the floodwaters late at night.

"I would try not to go unless I really had to! What I would do is not eat at all. Sometimes I would eat less so that I would not have to go to the toilet at all... Then when I just couldn’t hold it back anymore I would go and stand in the water and urinate there. So much shame this is - To be out there in the open like this and do this - I felt so bad about it!"

Young adolescent women, who remained in their own homes but had to share living space with other family male members, also faced dilemmas. One girl, Ganga, shared her predicament of resorting to sneaking around at night to urinate or defecate in her verandah and constantly worrying that a male would hear or see her:

"To go to the toilet was a big problem for me. Can you imagine bouji’s [non kin woman staying with her family] 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 just pull my shalwar [pyjamas] down and do it right there near the verandah. I felt so bad, because I could not go anywhere and imagine they could probably hear everything!" [Rashid, March 2000].

It wasn’t just adolescent women who suffered during the floods. Older women and middle aged women also felt ashamed when forced to defecate inside the home or forced to bathe in front of male strangers. Some women expressed their dismay at the situation: “A pa, what to
do now? We put our feces in polythene packets or newspapers and throw it into the water and we have to do the same thing with our children’s feces...” Women also felt that there were many more males loitering nearby because of the floods. Like the adolescent women, many spoke of controlling themselves for as long as possible, and only if they had no choice, urinated or defecated inside their homes. A few women spoke of the indignity of having to take baths on the roadside in public view: “All of us take baths together. We take turns taking a bath on the roadside. They see us but what else can we do?” [Rashid, 2000].

It was found that while men would go by rafts or boats to a distant place for defecation, with some even defecating and urinating in the rafts, women would wait till dusk or early morning to urinate or defecate. In desperation, one marooned woman in the urban slum lamented “...we cannot eat properly, we cannot bathe properly and we cannot leave the house...what to do?” [Ahmed SM et al, 1999]. These culturally reinforced notions of shame among females when exposing their bodily needs to the public eye is more or less absent among males in Bangladeshi society. In general, males are more commonly seen in the public domain and do not feel threatened, or fear rape/ harassment and ridicule if they were to go out to urinate or defecate away from their homes late at night. In fact, due to the lack of sufficient toilet facilities, it is a common sight in urban and rural areas to see men [old and young] squatting on roads and walkways against walls or trees to urinateth in full public view. These differing attitudes towards their bodies can be directly attributed to the fact that culturally females are taught modesty and shame about their bodies from an early age. Females are expected to cover their bodies from very young and usually have limited mobility in the public domain. Such attitudes are considered a virtue in females. In contrast, males do not have such pressures and are not made to feel ashamed of their bodies and self. Instead for males, their primary role is to ensure women [mothers, sisters, wives and other women] do not break any of the norms of appropriate conduct; thereby upholding their family and their own honour [Blanchet, 1996]. Such attitudes not only shape gender roles, behaviour and relations, but really impact psychologically on poor women and increase their distress during the floods.

Floods and movement to new shelters and camps tend to result in displacement from familiar territory and leads to confinement or interaction with both male and female strangers. As a result, many young women would walk together in groups of 3 or 4 female relatives and friends, when needing to use latrines located far away. They would do the same for bathing to ensure their protection and safeguard their reputation [Rashid, March 2000]:

As one young girl, 16 years of age, explained their strategy of going to the toilet:

“A few of us would go to the mango tree which was about 5 minutes away to defecate early in the morning and then sometimes late at night; we would go together to go to the toilet. It was safer. I would go with my mother, and my cousin or sisters to a secluded corner when we had to bathe.”

7 The situation was worse for pregnant women. One study found that two women gave birth in a shelter, under extremely unhygienic and cramped conditions while another two were on the verge of delivering. There were no facilities to assist the pregnant women in case of emergencies. Fortunately, for the women the two deliveries went smoothly [Karim and Sultan, 1999].

8 They will face the wall or sit in a corner and urinate on public roads and footpaths without any shame or backlash from society.
Menstruation

Difficulties for young women were further intensified when they experienced their menstruation either for the first time or while living in cramped and confined shelters [Rashid, March 2000]. Menstruation signifies the coming of age or ‘womanhood’ for young girls and soon after menarche, or in some cases, even before menarche, adolescents’ girls are married off. Cultural and religious symbolism of sexuality, fertility and pollution are strongly associated with menstruation, and thus it is considered a shameful and hidden subject. Various social norms exist to contain the polluting effects of the blood and to maintain the purity of the girls. The social taboos surrounding menstruation are so great, that young adolescent girls usually don’t even share their menstruation experiences with their mothers [Blanchet, 1996; Huq and Sattar, 1991].

In the context of floods, Rashid’s study [March 2000] found that the main concern for adolescent girls was hiding their menstruation from family members and outsiders. They expressed the difficulty in being discreet about their menstruation. A few, however, were able to confide with close relatives on this delicate subject.

“I got my menses [menstruation] during the time we were staying at the shelter. I informed my sister. 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 the doth and where will you wash it?’ There were a lot of 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 menses and I think it was her first time. She looked so young. She was trying to hide it, as she was ashamed. Finally a day later she came up to me and said, ‘this has happened to me in the middle of the floods, so what will I do?’ I told her what I have been doing and told her to speak to her didi (her older sister)...”

Due to the floods, there was limited space, which made it even more difficult for young girls to change their menstrual cloth. A young woman who was living with her father, grandmother and two younger brothers in one room in an urban slum, shared her dilemma:

I got my menses during the floods. What was really bad was that I had to keep the same doth 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 the blood. I couldn’t wash until late at night. Often at midnight I would get up and wash it in the 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 cabinet or near the corner of the kitchen where no one would go as I normally did all the cooking.

In general, menstruation is a particularly vulnerable time for adolescent girls and they mostly have to cope on their own. The situation, however, appears to worsen during floods due to the lack of access to clean water and cramped surroundings that afford the girls no privacy. Furthermore, being the taboo subject that it is, most did not receive support or explaining from older female relatives [Rashid, March 2000].

Harassment of young women at shelters and at work
A flood study in the Sobanbagh area [Ahmed SM et al, 1999] found that in the shelters many men and women, including young girls, slept in common areas without any physical boundaries or partitions. Young women complained that they were constantly teased and harassed by males and passed sleepless nights fearing molestation and attacks. The older men and women admitted to taking turns in keeping guard at night against any untoward incidents. Many families complained of sex workers taking shelter in the same place and many incidents of clandestine illegal sex. One girl reported witnessing numerous fights and recounted hearing of an incident of harassment by male hoodlums:

> It was scarier during the floods because there were more mastaans (hoodlums) hanging around. Some unknown boys would roam around in their boats and constantly harass 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 into the boat. She screamed at them and they just laughed. Then this other woman came out of her house and yelled at them. then they finally went away! [Rashid, March 2000].

Rashid’s study [March 2000] found that mothers who were particularly concerned about the safety of their unmarried adolescent daughters, and could afford to, send their daughters to live with relatives not affected by the floods. That was the situation for one respondent: ‘My sister was sent after a few weeks to our mama’s (mother’s brother) home. My mother heard that some young girl’s were being harassed. My mother felt that my sister should be sent because it was safer for her to be in the village.’ One mother shared her worries:

> We remained on the tin roof of our house. We cooked there, slept there, and spent the entire period of flood on that roof. I could not sleep in the night. I was worried about my two young daughters. It was dark all around during the night as the electricity supply was cut off. The young boys used to hang around with their boats and make dirty comments. I lay awake in the darkness thinking about the danger that might occur to my daughters. Finally we sent them to my brother’s house, which was out of the flood-affected area [Shahaduzzaman, BRAC Report, 1999].

It is situations like this, which highlight how disaster is not just about a woman’s issue but more often a community concern and a social issue [Hussein Maliha and Husain, Tariq 2000].

There were girls who continued working in garment factories during the floods because of poverty constraints. Many had to face constant harassment. These young women walked for hours in dirty stinking floodwater to their workplace, and were completely drenched by the time they arrived at work. One girl explained feeling self-conscious while walking to work as the flood-waters made her clothes stick to her body at which boys would taunt and humiliate her by shouting loudly, ‘we can see everything, look at her goods [referring to her breasts].’ She also relayed a harrowing encounter with a number of boys one evening after work:

> One evening when I was coming back from work at 8 p.m. 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 to even walk that quickly. I was so scared!” [Rashid, March 2000].

Due to the floods, young women were more vulnerable and helpless. Most chose not to retort as they felt that if they did the consequences could be dire. The girls reported hearing many stories of boys raping or throwing acid as revenge on young women who had answered back or threatened them with action; therefore women usually hesitate and prefer not to retaliate. One young woman explained, ‘due to the floods there are a lot of problems and the girls have become helpless. Now there is a chance for the men to do something! Once a girl’s honour and dignity is lost, it cannot ever be retrieved or bought back!’ This statement is significant [Rashid, March 2000]. References to honour in this particular context can be explained by the importance in Bangladeshi society to preserve females’ virginity until marriage. No actual physical test is required to prove a girl’s virginity but her reputation is a crucial factor. Strong sanctions exist against interactions with men. To have been raped, to have had sexual intercourse with a lover or to simply have been seen in a dubious location with a male can irreversibly affect a girl’s reputation. She will find it difficult to get married and even her sisters may be affected negatively. Thus, maintaining honour is so important and this explains why young girls fear harassment and are often reluctant to speak of their own experiences of sexual harassment [Blanchet, 1996, Amin et al, 1997]. Many younger women are already constrained by societal norms and gender expectations, and a flood situation only exacerbates their predicament.

Unemployment
Most of the poor are unskilled, and involved in the informal sector in insecure, low paid jobs. A majority tends to work in uncertain jobs as wage laborers and daily laborers. Numerous flood reports found that almost all of the poor became unemployed for months on end (I Ahmed, 1999; Ahmed SM et al, 1999). All of the women and men complained of the lack of work available, “My husband cannot ride a rickshaw; it costs 30 taka daily to rent but where will he go with it. There is flood now and he cannot ply his rickshaw and so there is no income.” One man said, “I used to drive the truck from here to collect sand and bricks and take it to Gulshan and Baridhara. I earned 150 to 200 taka a day...now I have no job and I am unemployed [Rashid, 2000].

Some of the women living in urban areas, complained that they were unable to continue their income earning activities such as selling vegetables, sugar cane, and selling clothes because prices had risen. “A pa, now a mishti kumra (pumpkin) costs 12 taka or more, 20 taka in some places, before we could buy mishti kumra for 4 or 5 taka...now how can we buy and how can we sell?” In the urban areas, women who did petty trade by ferrying different consumer goods like saree, etc. or sewing clothes and supplying to different shops in the markets were totally out of business. A woman from a female headed household, who relied on brick breaking, was left with no job or income. She said, ‘we usually go and work in Sobhanbagh but now it is all flooded and we cannot earn any money.’ Another woman, who was still able to break bricks [although her place was slowly getting flooded], said that she was relying on the 3 takas she made per tokri (basket) to survive [Rashid, 2000]. This highlights that situation of female-headed households who may be even worse off.

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9 Local three wheeler type of transport.
As Ahmed et al. found in their flood report, opportunities for alternative income is very limited during the floods for both men and women, but more so for women. Some of the men tried to earn an income from alternative occupations like ferrying people on boat, catching fishes where possible, ferrying people in the inundated roads in small boats or rickshaws in urban areas [1999]. Young women involved in garments work complained that factories were not paying their regular wages. The young women were informed that the market was not very good at the moment and therefore they were unable to sell the garments. A mother said, ‘Apa, for two months they have not paid my daughter her salary...what will we do?’ [Rashid and Halder, 1998]. But most employment prospects are extremely gender specific and tend to be male oriented work, and many women who run female headed households are left with less or no options.

**Selling of Assets**

Both in rural and urban areas, the majority who cannot manage any alternative source of income attempt to meet daily family expenses by taking loans from moneylenders or relatives, borrowing daily necessities from grocery shops or well-off neighbours, advance sell of labour and crops, etc. The wage labourers and the marginal farmers in the village try to survive by selling valuable assets of the family like ornaments, poultry and livestock. A study by Nasreen and Hossain [2002] found that it is women’s assets such as jewelry, livestock and utensils which are more likely to be sold than any other item to manage during a disaster period. This is significant as these items are often the only assets women have. Out of her sample, 46% sold their own personal assets to survive. Nine percent of women sold their natal land to cover household costs during this period. Due to cultural restrictions on mobility, women without male household members sold their assets to neighbours rather than at the bazaar where they could have fetched a higher price.

Women who belonged to non-governmental organizations such as ASHA, BRAC and Proshika expressed concerns about being unable to repay loans during the flood period. One woman said, “we cannot even sell saris anymore, where is the money?” A number of flood reports found that women sold their personal and other possessions such as gold earrings to repay loans; others took loans from relatives (interest free) or moneylenders (with high interest) to pay. Thus the consequence is further debt problems for the women and their families. Wood argues that the loss of one set of resources for the poor can send families or particular members into a downward spiral, ‘intensifying their burdens and decreasing the prospect of recovery’ [1998].

**Domestic tensions**

Lack of income, hunger and helplessness of the situation led to increased tension within family and domestic violence. This was reported in 8 studies carried out in the urban area during the 1998 floods [Ahmed SM et al, 1999]. The women explained that due to the recent flood, there was less money, and greater pressure on the husbands to provide for their families. “Apa, due to the frustration of being unemployed they beat us!” Most of the women and men agreed that the lack of work, the increasing uncertainties due to the floods, had led to increased tensions amongst family members, resulting in some incidents of domestic violence. As one woman explained, “When there is crisis then of course there are more fights between husband and wife.”

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10 Statement in italics is mine.
In one of the slums visited, a group of women pushed a young girl, [no more than 16 years of age forward] and exclaimed, "look at her, look at her arm A pa, it is broken" [I looked to see a large bruise on her arm and her face was considerably swollen]. She retorted: "He beat me because I asked him for bazaar money. He hasn't bought anything for the last two days so I asked him for money to buy food and he beat me..." [Rashid, 2000].

Coping during the floods - the crucial role of women
The women bore the brunt of the disruption of normal livelihood in terms of collection of safe water and preparing and distributing whatever food they could manage (by begging, borrowing, standing in long cues for relief materials) among the family members, keeping little for themselves, etc. A study found that during the flood period, unemployed men usually sat idle gossiping in tea stalls or in corners, and some moved elsewhere, leaving their households members behind [Nasreen and Hossain, 2002; SM Ahmed et al, 1999]. Some men who did not have any income or jobs remained at home. Although in rural areas, it was usually men who were responsible for saving livestock as it was their most valuable productive asset. However, very few men were found to share the workload with their spouse, especially in urban areas. One middle-aged man in the urban area said, "I am not used to carrying out household chores. I used to be a driver, my duty was to give money in my wife's hand" [Ahmed SM et al, 1999]. Women were the household-based workers who took responsibility for protecting their homes, children and other members of the family.

Traditional gender specific chores such as carrying water, cooking, caring for children and animals [poultry, goats, cows etc], became very difficult for women during this period and many risked their health and their lives. Women traveled long distances by raft, boats and walked or even swam to obtain water. Especially when travelling in flood-waters knee high or waist high, the saris11 would cling to the bodies of the women, making it difficult for them to walk properly. Many had to remain in their wet saris all day long because few had any spare ones [Nasreen and Hossain, 2002; Ahmed SM et al, 1999; Rashid 2000]. Some men did help with carrying water.

Nasreen and Hossain’s study also highlight women’s active role during this period, with women selling jewelry, their only asset, and walking miles to obtain water for the family for cooking and washing. Women usually found alternative sources of food and relied on their extensive female network for resources to manage (2002). Despite the difficulties, women came up with ingenious solutions to obtain water and other resources. For example, when the area of Jolpur was flooded, women had difficulty collecting water, as all the tubewells were flooded. Many of the women came up with a strategy of accessing water by closing the nozzle of the tube-wells and pumped continuously till water flowed through the heads [top] of the tube-wells. Women would then put their kolshis [pots] under the floating nozzle of the tube-wells and and start to pump. When they found that that the colour of the water was different from the flood-waters they would raise their pots. Women managed to do this by standing waist high in the flood-waters. Women grouped together in pairs and groups to help each other. Although they rarely managed to exclude flood water from the tube-well water, they reported using alum for purification [Nasreen and Hossain, 2002].

11 Traditional dress for the women – it is 12 yards of cloth wrapped around the woman.
Women managed in other ways, like collecting flood-water and waiting for the sediments to deposit at the bottom of the kolshi to later use for drinking and cooking. Some women stored rain-water to use for drinking. Several flood reports found that in many places of Dhaka city, women accessed water from schools, mosques and other sources where water was still available. In a few of the privately owned slums areas, tenants convinced their landlord to open the main tap [previously under lock and key] for their daily needs (Nasreen and Hossain, 2002, Ahmed SM et al, 1999, Rashid and Halder, 1998).

The prices of basic food items generally multiply, with severe stress imposed on the poor women and their families, who are not only unemployed but suffer from severe financial constraints. To save on costs, most of the family members cut back on their food intake, particularly the women. Many of the women admitted cutting back on eating rice twice a day to once a day to every couple of days or less. Most relied upon the roti (flat bread) distributed by the relief agencies to fill their stomach. A woman said, ‘I keep the relief roti of 8 chappatis (flat bread) and eat 2 every day for 4 days.’ Women resorted to using kerosene instead of gas for cooking. The women also tried to obtain food by gathering edible or wild plants, and small amounts of low quality food such as rotten or discarded vegetables and even relied on other women for rice and other foods. Some of the women would even sacrifice their hunger and eat less, to ensure that their children and husbands were receiving at least 2 meals a day [Nasreen and Hossain, 2002; Rashid, 2000].

Women complained that the prices had shot up for most cooking items, and kerosene which had previously cost 15 taka was now available for 20 to 25 taka in most of the shops. Prices for food items such as bitter gourd had risen from 12 taka to 25 taka, and potatoes, which had cost 5 taka, were now available for 17 taka.\footnote{This was during the 1998 floods.} Lentils [the staple food for most Bangladeshis - very nutritious and filling] had risen from 5 taka to 40 taka.\footnote{These findings come from another study by my co-author S. Halder and I, conducted in Dhaka city during the floods of 1998. We visited a number of slums.} Many of the poorer families relied on dry foods such as muri (puffed rice), molasses, and ate rice with dry chillis or salt. Unlike the rural families, the families living in urban areas suffered greatly, because they didn’t have any food stocked up as they were used to buying food on a daily basis (Ahmed, SM et al, 1999; Rashid and Halder, 1998).

**Health and Coping Mechanisms**

In 1998, the floods lasted for over two months and left much of the population with severe health problems. Diarrhoea, chest infection, skin diseases and malnutrition were widespread. There were fears of mosquitoes spreading malaria and dengue fever for which there are no vaccines available. Children and women, especially pregnant women are at special risk during a disaster time. The floods threatened the nutritional status of women and children, where already 90% of all children and 53% of all women are already malnourished [Ahmed SM et al, 1999].

Apart from diarrhoea, the most common illnesses that people suffered from during the flood were fever, cough and the common cold. There were some cases of pneumonia as well. Since children were confined in one place, many of them played in the dirty flood-waters. One man remarked, ‘there are no places for children to play, how long can they sit on the macha...
They spend most of the time in the water just playing. As a result they end up getting fever and cough." One woman was suffering from fever when she was interviewed. She said, "Many times I had to walk in chest-deep water. My sari remained wet for a long time. I stayed day after day surrounded by water. That's why I got fever" [Shahaduzzaman, 1999]. In addition to this, most of the respondents reported developing sores on their feet and various skin diseases from walking and sometimes even wading in the unhygienic and dirty water [Shahaduzzaman, 1999]. People had very little opportunity of seeking treatment for their illnesses; because they had no money to spend on treatment of illness or no health care provider was available in the vicinity, excepting of course the neighbours who happened to be folk practitioners. A woman complained, "...my son is so sick from 'amasha' (dysentery)...the NGO doctor gave us some tablets but how can a child eat tablet? We need syrup!" Most of the pharmacies were under water and the chambers of the private practitioners were also closed during the 1998 floods [Shahaduzzaman, 1999]. Nasreen and Hossain also found in the study sample of 101 women, about 46% of the women resorted to using indigenous roots and herbs to manage their illnesses during the floods [2002].

Rashid [March 2000] found that young adolescent women were reluctant to report 'embarrassing' health problems such as persistent rashes, cramps and ailment in the perineum area. One of the girls explained:

"All this walking in the water caused a lot of problems for us girls. We had boils and rash on our legs and feet and even our hand and nails! Most of us have had to wash our clothes. The cloth used for menstruation in the flood-waters was not washed in clean water and could not be dried properly. This gave some of the girls problems near there [she hesitates - the genital area]. Some of the girls scratched themselves so much 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, some of us confided to one another. 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..."

Young women that experienced ailment 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. 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 appeared to resort to their own remedies. Huq and Sattar [1991] suggested that even in normal conditions, girls have difficulty drying their clothes appropriately and as a result many girls experience perennial rashes and urinary tract infections. In the context of the floods, the difficulties appeared to have increased with the lack of privacy and access to water. One of the mothers mentioned facing similar problem. 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 perennial rashes and cramps as well.

Helping each other
Flood reports found that in a disaster situation, people helped each other in whatever way they could. Some of the better off families distributed cooked food and other materials to poor neighbours in the rural areas. Those who could manage a boat shared it with
neighbours for going to places. Young boys and girls were seen to ferry people voluntarily from across to main roads. Families were found to volunteer information on other families so that no one missed relief goods; on occasions, they also received relief materials on behalf of absentees [Ahmed SM et al, 1991].

A study also found in two urban areas, a large number of families were all living together in temporary shelters. In these shelters, there appeared to be an organising committee who had a list of all of the families living there. The food items were passed onto members of the organising committee, who were in charge of distributing the food and relief items to all the families residing in the shelter. Families volunteered information on other members in the neighbourhood, and some families even volunteered to keep relief goods on behalf of families who were unavailable during the distribution of relief items. According to NGO staff, follow up visits revealed that all of the families no matter how desperate or poor, had always passed on the food items to the concerned family members, rather than keeping the food for themselves [Rashid, 2000].

Many of the men who were confined in the homes with their daughters/sisters mothers or wives, made an effort to leave the house during the day to provide some privacy for the women. One father built a separate make shift latrine for his daughters to access at night [Rashid March, 2000]. One of the adolescent women reported:

“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 girls who were working at the factories, factory managers were helpful as they provided salines to the girls when they were sick. Some factories provided food and other forms of temporary services to their staff [Rashid 1998]. In some rural areas, when families moved to drier and safer places, the women slept inside the temporary shacks [jupris] made out of polythene and straw; while the men slept outside on the footpath guarding their families. In some homes, women huddled on the bed together, while the men slept on the floor [Ainun Nishat et al, 2000. ‘Coping with the flood.’ In The 1998 Flood: Impact on Environment of Dhaka City. pp187-201].

**Discussion**

The paper attempted to highlight the gender dimension of flood experiences for the poor, particularly for women and young female adolescents. The paper illustrates some important issues particular to women and adolescent girls in disaster situations. Bathing or going to the toilet in public, sharing sleeping arrangements with male strangers, and being unable to clean themselves appropriately when menstruating were all great sources of concerns for women, particularly for female adolescents. Whereas for men, culturally reinforced notions of shame is more or less absent, and males are more commonly seen in the public domain and do not fear rape or harassment, or ridicule if they urinated or defecated late at night or in public places. Males were even able to access boats to use as toilets. In contrast, young unmarried women brought up to be modest and shy about their bodies, had to cope with increased exposure to male strangers everywhere, and faced greater incidences of harassment during the floods. Women demonstrated their resourcefulness by going to latrines together in groups for security, accessing water from schools and private taps, sharing food, and using low cost
indigenous medicines, all of which helped them and their families survive. Although some men did help with securing water, ferrying people on boats, holding on to livestock, and assisting their women folk by building latrines, and giving them space for privacy, the major burden of household chores fell on the women. A few studies also found that many of the urban males who were unemployed sat around shops, while the women worked. Men, women and their families had to cope with the increased incidence of illnesses, which was further aggravated due to limited access to health services and lack of funds. For female adolescents, social and cultural attitudes meant that they were reluctant to seek help for reproductive related health problems. Overall, community support and solidarity greatly helped families cope with the disruption in their lives.

My research identifies a number of issues that are important for gender sensitive disaster intervention. These include (i) improvement of shelter accommodation with separate spaces for women and young girls, (ii) separate latrine facilities for older and younger women, and (iii) medical teams should remain alert and all relief camps should be equipped with full time doctors/physicians with appropriate basic drugs and other preventive medicines for poor families [Nishat A et al, 2000]. Finally, the stories of the women, both older and younger, demonstrate that disasters are not only a woman’s issue, but a family and community concern.

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