

Encouraging Women's Empowerment: A Qualitative Analysis on Household Food Waste Management in Bangladesh Utilizing 5R Approach

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Abstract

Household food waste management (HFWM) poses a significant challenge in developing countries like Bangladesh due to diverse food waste types, inadequate policies, and rapid urbanization. This study investigates women's empowerment in Dhaka through the 5R approaches: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Repurpose, and Recover. By employing qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews and case studies with a purposive and snowball-sampled group of women, the research examines how the 5R strategies impact women's socio-economic empowerment. Findings reveal that educated women, especially those engaged in roof and balcony gardening, effectively implement the 5R approaches, notably composting kitchen waste. Women in owner-occupied homes demonstrate more comprehensive food waste management practices compared to those in rented houses. The study highlights that HFWM through the 5R approaches improves environmental sustainability and provides economic benefits, such as reducing reliance on chemical fertilizers and creating new employment opportunities. This research underscores the potential for women's active participation in HFWM to contribute to cost savings, fresh produce cultivation, and potential business ventures, thereby enhancing their social and economic status. The insights gained can inform future initiatives aimed at promoting environmental sustainability and gender equality in urban Bangladesh.

Keywords: Household food waste management; recycling; composting; roof gardening; Women Empowerment; Bangladesh.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Waste generation and management are pressing issues globally, with projections indicating a significant increase in waste production due to rapid urbanization and population [37, 72, 108, 118]. In Bangladesh, the problem is acute, particularly in urban areas like Dhaka [2, 3, 11, 42, 59, 70, 94, 81, 107, 110], where the population density and inadequate waste management infrastructure exacerbate the issue [11, 52, 96, 122]. Dhaka generates over 7000 metric tons of waste daily, a significant portion of which is food waste [3, 34, 54, 105, 94]. The management of household food waste (FW) is a critical socio-environmental issue in Bangladesh's urban areas [89, 95, 105, 121, 128, 130]. Despite various efforts to address HFWM through the 5R principles, there remains a significant gap in understanding how these initiatives can empower women [9, 22, 36, 67, 123]. Women play a crucial role in HFWM due to their daily interactions with household waste and their significant involvement in environmental conservation

efforts [19, 24, 25, 38, 39, 58, 67, 97, 128]. However, in Bangladesh, many families do not utilize proper waste management practices, often discarding waste on streets and lanes [27, 64, 81, 121]. This lack of awareness and participation hampers the effectiveness of waste management systems [3, 33, 38, 47, 49, 58, 59, 61, 70, 77, 81, 97]. Bangladesh's waste management policies, initially framed under the 3R approach, have evolved to promote recycling and sustainable waste management practices [27, 31, 70, 95, 115, 128]. The shift towards the 5R approach emphasizes reducing waste at the source and integrating sustainable practices across sectors, essential for achieving environmental and economic goals [56, 64, 66, 73, 90, 116, 121]. The 'zero waste' paradigm, advocating for minimal food waste generation and maximum resource recovery, has been proposed to tackle these challenges [5, 23, 69, 73, 81, 128, 135]. Despite extensive research on the economic feasibility of 5R-based food waste management, there is limited understanding of its potential for socio-environmental

sustainability and women's empowerment. Existing studies often overlook the specific roles and contributions of women in HFWM [89, 95, 110, 121, 128]. This study addresses these gaps by investigating how women's involvement in 5R-based HFWM can empower them and contribute to sustainable development in Bangladesh [22, 32, 36, 121, 126, 133]. Dhaka, as a rapidly growing megacity, faces severe challenges in waste management due to its dense population and unplanned urbanization [89, 96, 99]. The city struggles with inadequate infrastructure, pollution, and climate-related challenges, further complicating sustainable urban living [4]. Effective food waste management is crucial for both economic and environmental sustainability, with food waste comprising 15.96% of the total municipal waste [16, 17].

The primary aim of this study is to explore how women can empower themselves through participation in 5R-based HFWM programs. It seeks to identify the factors influencing women's involvement in these programs and their motivations for adopting 5R approaches. By examining the role of women in HFWM, this research aims to propose strategies for enhancing women's economic opportunities and contributing to socio-environmental sustainability. Given the significant role of women in HFWM, there is a pressing need for operational strategies that develop their skills and provide necessary support for implementing 5R-based HFWM [19, 33, 39, 49, 67, 70, 89, 97]. Collaboration between government, NGOs, and the private sector is crucial to improve waste management systems and enhance women's empowerment through education and training [74].

In summary, this study aims to fill the research gap by examining the opportunities for women's empowerment through HFWM in Bangladesh, focusing on the application of 5R approaches. It seeks to understand how women activists frame their concerns and strategies for empowerment through HFWM, contributing to a sustainable and equitable waste management system.

1.1 Overview of Food Waste

Food waste poses significant economic and environmental challenges globally, with municipalities and urban centres generating substantial amounts annually. In Bangladesh, food waste management traditionally involves composting, landfilling, and animal feeding due to limited valorisation options [1, 48, 62, 84, 105, 106, 131]. This inefficiency results in the wastage of valuable resources—approximately 45% of total food production—requiring urgent measures for recycling and sustainable management [5, 11, 16, 59, 62, 70, 81, 111, 115, 131].

1.2 Household Food Waste Reduction Strategies

Efforts to reduce household food waste focus on minimizing waste generation at the source through

practices like avoiding single-use items and adopting reusable alternatives. Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) and NGOs complement municipal initiatives, advocating for sustainable policies to achieve economic and environmental benefits [26, 67, 74, 128]. Reusing household food waste involves giving items a second life, thereby contributing to sustainable practices and a circular economy [3, 5, 62, 64, 75, 97]. In Bangladesh, initiatives emphasize reusing organic waste as green fertilizer, supported by NGOs and private enterprises for effective waste management [5, 11, 16, 34, 40, 62, 89, 96, 113, 114, 121, 128]. Recycling transforms waste materials into new products, aiming to reduce landfill waste and conserve resources [15, 111, 131]. Composting, widely practiced in Bangladesh, is supported by grassroots organizations promoting waste recycling and management [3, 11, 16, 59, 71, 89, 128]. Women's active involvement enhances these efforts, promoting environmental sustainability, poverty alleviation and economic empowerment [7, 19, 25, 39, 49, 60, 63, 67, 89, 134]. Repurposing involves using discarded items for new purposes, reducing waste generation and fostering creativity [75]. In Bangladesh, women-led initiatives in repurposing contribute significantly to sustainable living practices and food waste reduction goals, empowering communities through innovative food waste management [35, 80, 124]. Recovering useful resources from waste streams minimizes environmental impact and promotes a circular economy [3, 64, 105, 100, 102, 111]. Initiatives in Bangladesh include converting organic waste into energy and implementing waste-to-energy projects, addressing challenges in waste management and contributing to sustainable development goals [3, 11, 12, 16, 47, 59, 63, 64, 70, 115].

1.3 Women's Empowerment Scenario in Bangladesh

Bangladesh's constitution emphasizes women's rights and empowerment, aiming for equality of opportunity in public work and decision-making processes [53, 101]. Despite significant socio-economic progress, many women face barriers such as limited education and economic dependence, impacting their decision-making power and resource control within households [8, 56, 57, 76, 104].

1.4 Women's Participation in Food Waste Management Programs

Women in Bangladesh play a crucial role in managing household waste, including waste disposal, recycling, and income generation. Their involvement enhances economic independence, skill development, and decision-making authority, contributing to sustainable waste management practices [39, 44, 67, 112]. Challenges remain, including limited access to resources and gender-based discrimination, hindering their full engagement in waste management activities. A study conducted in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar, found that women were responsible for cooking duties in 92% of

households [21]. This suggests that women are often the primary decision-makers when it comes to food-related activities in the home, including managing food waste. The study also found a significant negative relationship between households' food waste disposal and their awareness of the amount of food waste generated [21]. This indicates that higher awareness of food waste, which is often driven by women, can lead to reduced waste disposal. While the search results do not directly address how women bakers manage waste in commercial bakeries, they provide valuable context on the importance of women in household waste management. As more women enter the bakery workforce, they may bring their heightened awareness and experience from managing household waste to help reduce waste in commercial bakery settings as well. Some best practices for effective bakery waste management include donating surplus unsold baked goods to food banks, eliminating single-use items like plastic cups and straws, recycling cardboard, aluminium, plastic, and glass, and composting paper towels, napkins, and food scraps [13, 65, 82].

Efforts to enhance women's empowerment through food waste management focus on increasing awareness and capabilities, particularly at the household level. Community participation and recycling initiatives are recommended to maximize profits through reduced food waste production and proper food waste categorization [3, 5, 11, 15, 25, 27, 47, 48, 59, 105, 111, 115, 125, 131] HFWM plays a pivotal role in advancing women's empowerment in Bangladesh. Implementing the 5Rs—Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Repurpose, and Recover—has strengthened waste management

practices, environmental sustainability, and economic resilience. Women's active participation in HFWM initiatives underscores their agency and socio-economic contributions, highlighting the transformative potential of gender-sensitive waste management strategies [87]

1.8 Environmental and Economic Implications

Effective waste management practices, including recycling and composting, contribute to resource conservation, energy savings, and pollution reduction in Bangladesh. Policy frameworks like the National Agriculture Policy and the Fertilizer Act support composting initiatives to enhance soil productivity and reduce reliance on chemical fertilizers, aligning with global sustainability goals [16, 41, 51].

1.9 Synthesizing theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this research article integrates Ecofeminism Theory and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) to explore the factors influencing women's empowerment through HFWM in Bangladesh utilizing the 5R approach. Ecofeminism Theory posits that women's intimate relationship with nature, shaped by biological and social roles, influences their attitudes towards environmental issues like waste management [43, 88, 91, 103, 129, 132]. This framework illuminates how traditional gender roles and power dynamics affect waste management practices, framing HFWM not just as an environmental concern but also as a feminist issue [92]. On the other hand, TPB provides a psychological perspective, predicting behavioural intentions based on attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control [6].

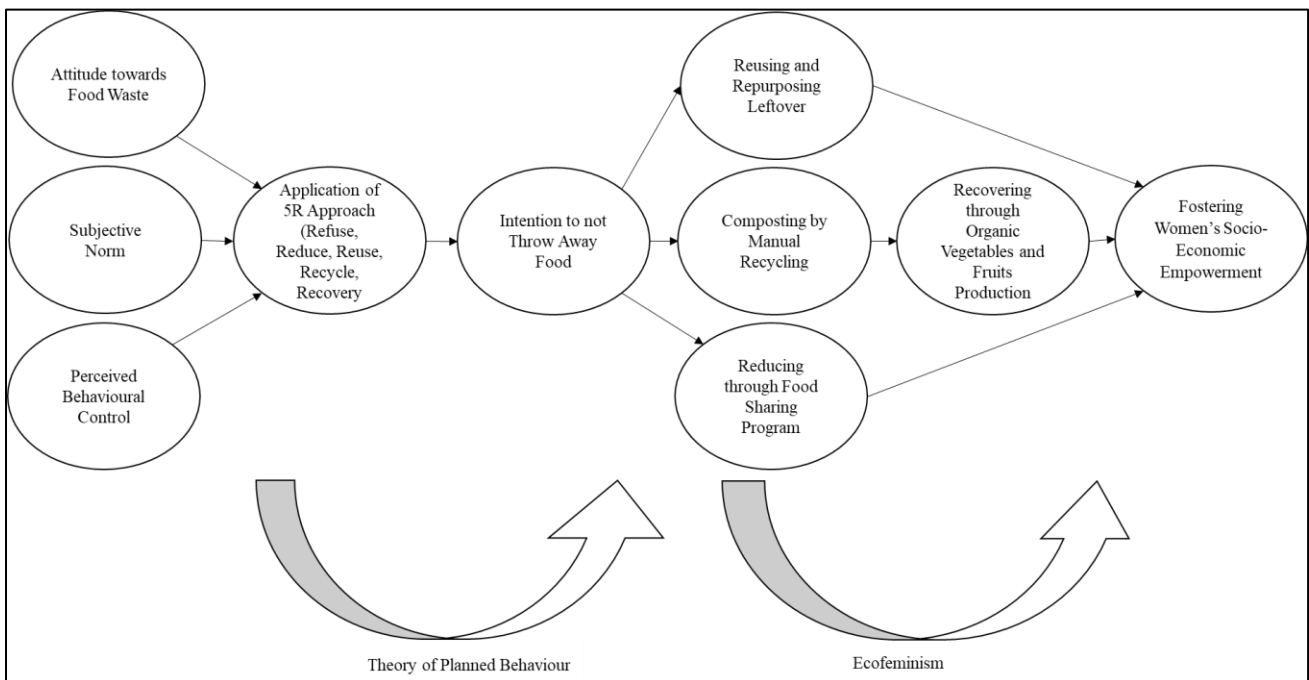


Figure 1: Synthesizing theoretical framework (TPB and Ecofeminism)

In the context of HFWM, TPB elucidates how women's attitudes towards waste reduction, social norms influencing waste practices, and their perceived control over waste management behaviours shape their intentions and actions [10, 20, 50, 85, 93, 97, 98, 119, 127]. By synthesizing these frameworks, this study aims to uncover the complex interplay between socio-cultural dynamics, women's attitudes, and their empowerment efforts in adopting sustainable food waste management practices [86]. This theoretical synthesis offers a comprehensive framework to understand and promote women's empowerment through HFWM, contributing to both environmental sustainability and gender equality initiatives in Bangladesh.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study aimed to explore how Bangladeshi women engage in waste management initiatives and how these efforts contribute to their empowerment. The research methodology was meticulously designed to collect and analyse data that provide deep insights into these research questions. Grounded in the qualitative paradigm and integrating the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) and Ecofeminism, the study employed an integrated methodology to guide theory development, data collection, analysis, and result interpretation. This approach was chosen to comprehensively understand women's empowerment through HFWM using the 5Rs (Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Repurpose, and Recover).

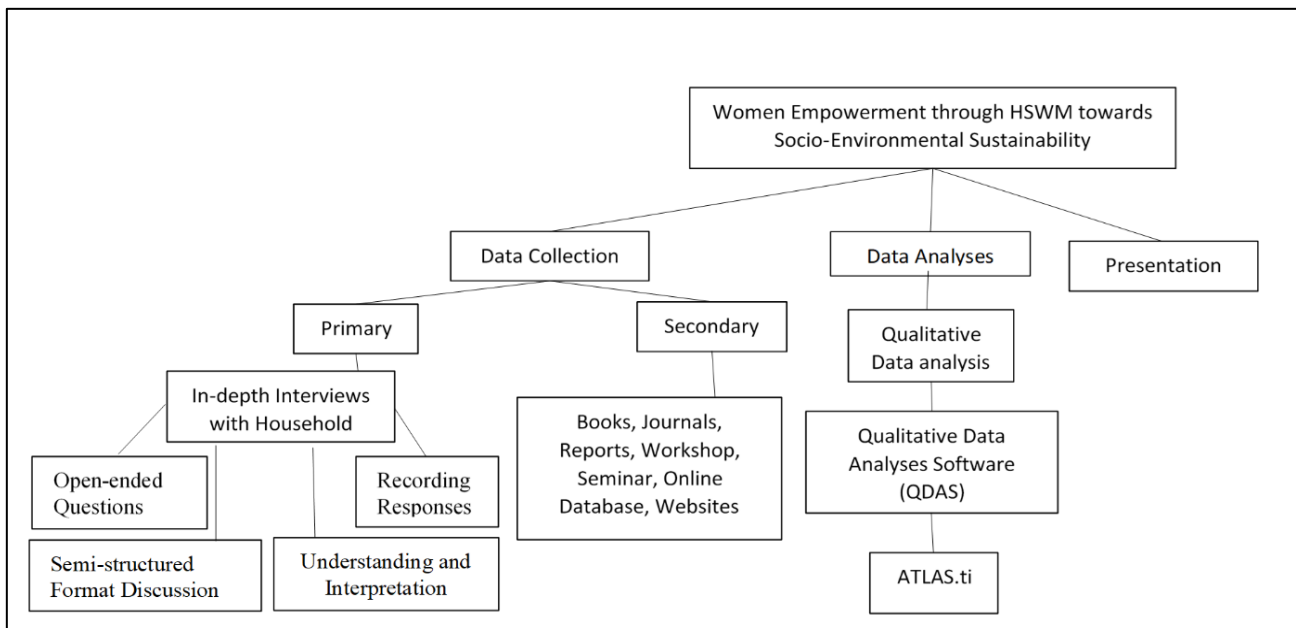


Figure 2: Flowchart of Research Methodology

To capture rich and insightful data, the study employed two qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews of 25 women households and 8 case studies of 4 successful women bakers and 4 caterers. Each method was strategically chosen to provide a holistic view of women's experiences and practices in HFWM. The qualitative approach was justified based on its ability to explore and understand the meanings people assign to their experiences, particularly in natural settings. This method aligns with the interpretive, naturalistic approach described by Strauss and Corbin (1998) and Creswell (2007), emphasizing systematic inquiry into social phenomena to understand behaviour, experiences, and interactions in their environmental and socio-cultural contexts. Case studies served as the primary qualitative research method, offering an in-depth examination of specific instances within their real-life context. Complementing the case studies were KIIs, document reviews, in-depth interviews, and physical observations, all aimed at understanding Bangladeshi women's empowerment efforts in HFWM using the 5R

approaches. The study integrated a robust literature review to synthesize existing knowledge on women's roles in food waste management, sustainable practices, and the specific context of Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Theoretical frameworks of TPB and Ecofeminism guided the exploration of women's intentions and motivations in achieving empowerment through HFWM. The decision to employ qualitative research methods was grounded in recognizing the complexity and contextuality of women's empowerment efforts in HFWM. Qualitative approaches, particularly case studies, were deemed suitable for capturing the multifaceted nature of women's experiences and the socio-cultural dynamics influencing their food waste management practices. Data collection involved comprehensive methods aimed at capturing diverse perspectives and experiences. In-depth interviews were conducted with women actively involved in HFWM in Dhaka, allowing for a deep exploration of their personal experiences, challenges, and strategies. Specific case

studies delved into successful stories of women-led households in Dhaka, highlighting practical empowerment efforts. Observational sessions in two different slum areas documented actual practices and behaviours related to food waste management, providing valuable insights into on-the-ground realities.

Sampling procedures utilized purposive and snowball sampling techniques to select participants representing diverse perspectives and experiences related to HFWM in Dhaka. Twenty-five women from nine urban communities were selected, including women engaged in various roles such as bakers and caterers actively involved in composting and other food waste management programs. In-depth interviews captured detailed insights into the experiences, challenges, and strategies of these women. Dhaka was chosen as the primary research location due to its urban dynamics and unique food waste management challenges, aligning with the theoretical frameworks of TPB and Ecofeminism integrated throughout the study. Data collection took place over five months, from September 2021 to January 2022, targeting successful women practitioners and relevant institutions involved in HFWM. Interviews were conducted in Bengali, transcribed verbatim, and analysed using thematic analysis techniques. Observational sessions were crucial in documenting real-life practices and behaviours related to food waste management. Ethical considerations were paramount, ensuring participant confidentiality, respect for rights, and safety throughout the study. The research maintained a systematic and objective approach to data collection and analysis, ensuring the robustness and reliability of findings.

Data analysis followed rigorous qualitative research principles outlined by Glaser and Strauss

(1967). The data, including KII transcripts, interview scripts, success stories, field notes, and historical documents, underwent systematic analysis involving collection, coding, and interpretation. Theoretical frameworks such as TPB and Ecofeminism provided a foundational basis for the study, guiding both data collection and analysis phases. Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) techniques were employed to classify and interpret linguistic and visual materials, uncovering implicit and explicit dimensions of meaning-making [83, 109]. This approach facilitated the identification and description of issues, structures, and processes related to HFWM and women's empowerment in Dhaka.

In summary, the research methodology was meticulously structured to explore and understand the empowerment of Bangladeshi women through HFWM using the 5R approaches. The qualitative approach, underpinned by TPB and Ecofeminism, provided a comprehensive understanding of women's experiences and the socio-cultural dynamics influencing their food waste management practices. The methodological rigor, including diverse data collection methods and thorough analysis procedures, contributed to a nuanced exploration of women's empowerment efforts in HFWM in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study meticulously analysed socio-demographic data from in-depth interviews with women households and case studies including caterers and bakers involved in FWM programs in Dhaka. The findings highlight that FWM significantly empowers women, irrespective of their socio-demographic backgrounds.

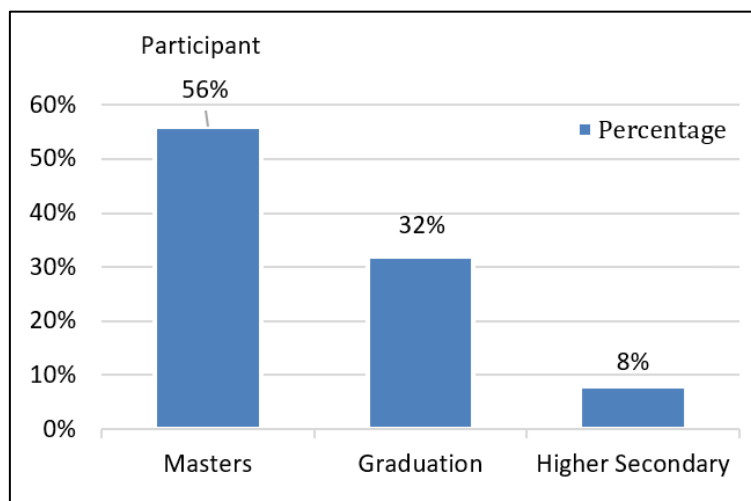


Figure 3: Educational Diversification of the Participants (Field Data, 2021)

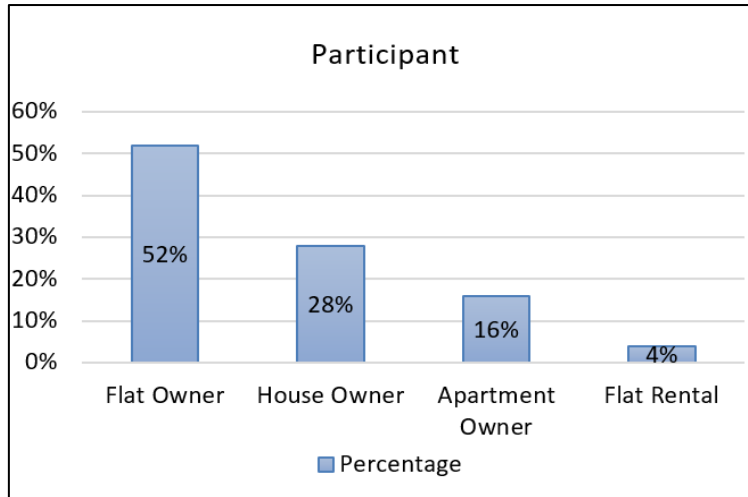


Figure 4: Diversification of Housing Condition among the Participants (Field Data, 2021)

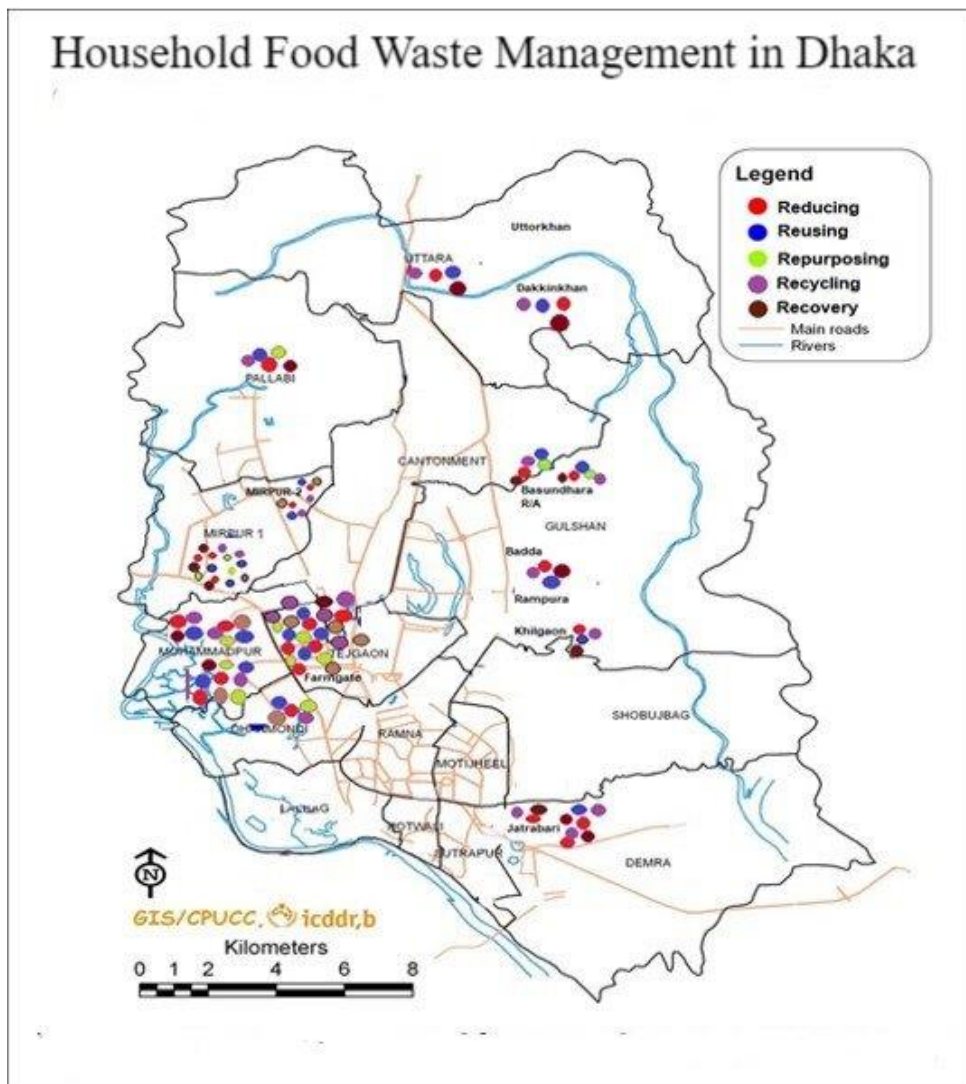


Figure 5: Distribution of HFWM in Dhaka City (Source: Field work, 2021)

Education levels correlated with better understanding and implementation of HFWM practices. Most interviewees were housewives dedicating

substantial time to HFWM, while women in catering businesses highlighted the impact of occupational roles on FWM behaviours.

Housing conditions, categorized into flat ownership, apartment ownership, flat rental, and house ownership, also influenced HFWM practices. Female-headed households with rooftop gardens actively practiced FW composting, reducing municipal food waste collection volumes and enhancing home aesthetics and environmental value. The study emphasizes that socio-demographic diversity shapes effective FWM strategies, highlighting the need for tailored interventions to enhance women's empowerment and environmental sustainability in urban settings. The integration of the 5R approach in HFWM fosters women's empowerment by providing practical skills, generating income, and fostering environmental stewardship. This study reveals that women's engagement in FWM through rooftop and balcony gardening reduces domestic food waste and transforms waste into valuable resources. Middle-aged women, with a minimum of 10 years' experience, primarily learned gardening and FWM techniques from their mothers, followed by online platforms like YouTube and Facebook. About 56% of women employed all five FWM strategies, while others used three or four, with a strong focus on composting for their gardens. Each woman-headed household spent over three hours daily on FWM tasks.

The GIS-based map constructed during data analysis illustrated the geographical differences in FWM practices [46, 78, 117], showing that urban infrastructure and socio-economic conditions greatly influence FWM behaviours.

Case studies of bakers in Dhaka incorporating all five 5R strategies demonstrated significant empowerment through effective HFWM. These bakers pre-planned food waste management activities, composted 70% of daily food waste, and utilized eggshells and vegetable peels in gardening. This management fostered respect within families and communities, enabling women to partake in decision-making processes. Financially, they earned 35k-40k BDT monthly, contributing to family expenses without relying on their husbands. Challenges such as ingredient scarcity, high costs, and consumer reluctance to buy premium-priced baked goods were noted, yet their food waste management practices inspired others in the community to start baking businesses and engage in FWM. The bakers observed financial, social, and environmental benefits from HFWM, saving money on fertilizers, producing organic food, gaining respect, and promoting cleanliness and sustainability. The findings underscore the transformative potential of gender-sensitive FWM strategies in promoting inclusive growth and environmental sustainability. Women's active participation in FWM, including sorting, recycling, and composting, reduces household food waste and contributes to economic resilience and empowerment. This study fills gaps in existing literature by providing

empirical evidence of how HFWM enhances women's socio-economic empowerment in Bangladesh, integrating theoretical frameworks such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) and ecofeminism. The data highlight the broader societal benefits of women's involvement in FWM, emphasizing the importance of community participation and addressing institutional barriers to foster sustainable FWM practices and socio-economic development. By integrating cultural values and community support, women's active participation in FWM not only reduces food waste but also generates income, enhances food security, and promotes environmental sustainability, thereby advancing the discourse on women's empowerment through HFWM practices in Bangladesh.

The study has significant theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, it integrates the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) and ecofeminism, demonstrating how subjective norms and perceived behavioural control mediate women's empowerment through HFWM. This integration provides a comprehensive understanding of the socio-psychological and socio-ecological factors influencing food waste management behaviour, filling a gap in existing research. Practically, the study highlights the 5R approaches' effectiveness in enhancing women's empowerment in Dhaka, offering socio-economic benefits, improved social status, and psychological well-being. Participation in food waste management not only provides new income-generating opportunities but also fosters a sense of agency and pride among women, promoting gender equality. Additionally, it underscores the environmental and health benefits of reducing food waste destined for landfills, resonating with TPB's emphasis on sustainable behaviour change. The study's findings, based on qualitative data, reveal that socio-demographic characteristics significantly influence women's food waste management behaviour. By documenting these practices, the research situates itself at the intersection of food waste management strategies and women's socio-economic empowerment, offering valuable insights for policy and practice aimed at promoting sustainable food waste management and women's empowerment.

4. CONCLUSIONS

To address the challenges and opportunities in HFWM in Dhaka, Bangladesh, several recommendations are proposed. First, enhancing primary food waste collection at the ward level with increased community engagement and improving secondary transfer and final disposal through city corporations is essential. Establishing partnerships between governmental and commercial groups is necessary for sustainable FWM. Comprehensive regulatory guidelines for handling various types of waste, including municipal, household, medical, and electronic waste, should be created. This includes

addressing collection, separation, transportation, and disposal stages, and ensuring safety measures and incentives for waste workers. Furthermore, a systematic approach to FWM, including collaboration with municipalities and the informal sector, is recommended to support entrepreneurial ventures in FWM. Addressing gender disparities, promoting equitable treatment, and improving working conditions for women are crucial. Supporting women's initiatives, providing entrepreneurial training, ensuring education and access to relevant technology, and establishing multi-stakeholder platforms for inclusive FWM planning are also vital. Encouraging private sector partnerships to create recycling facilities and promoting green jobs for women, along with implementing waste segregation practices and public awareness campaigns, are recommended for effective FWM.

Future research should focus on several key areas to enhance understanding and promote women's empowerment in household FWM. Conducting comparative studies in urban and rural areas will provide insights into women's empowerment efforts across different contexts. Assessing the long-term socio-economic impacts of women's participation in 5Rs-based FWM programs through longitudinal studies is essential. Analysing existing FWM policies to identify gaps and opportunities for promoting gender-sensitive approaches will inform policy development. Investigating technological innovations to enhance women's participation and empowerment in FWM, along with research on occupational health, hygiene, and safety, will address the specific needs of women workers. Strategies for increasing community engagement, particularly targeting women's participation and leadership, should be explored. Evaluating the social, economic, and environmental impacts of women-led FWM initiatives will provide valuable information for future programming. Developing capacity-building programs for women, focusing on skills development, leadership training, and access to resources, is necessary. Integrating gender mainstreaming principles into FWM research, policy, and practice will ensure equitable outcomes. Finally, implementing participatory action research methodologies to engage women directly in designing and implementing FWM interventions is recommended.

The study demonstrates that women in Dhaka, involved in roof gardening and FWM, exhibit unique characteristics compared to other Bangladeshi groups. Their distinct environment and lifestyle, influenced by property ownership and long-term residence, impact their FWM activities. These women dedicate a portion of their daily routine to these activities, alongside regular household duties. The study highlights the need for policies that reflect their experiences. However, the findings are specific to certain areas of Dhaka and cannot be generalized to all women in Bangladesh or globally.

Therefore, further extensive research, including comparative studies in urban and rural areas, is recommended. By implementing these recommendations and conducting further research, stakeholders can work towards inclusive, effective, and sustainable FWM systems that empower women and promote socio-economic development in Bangladesh and beyond.

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