



Understanding Access to Primary Healthcare in Dhaka's Urban Slums: A Qualitative Inquiry into Community Perceptions and Health Equity Challenges

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Background

Faced with rapid urbanisation and a rise in non-communicable diseases in LMICs, Dhaka's public primary health care services are struggling to meet the growing needs of its urban poor. This study investigates health care access and utilisation in urban informal settlements in Dhaka, exploring the contrasting perceptions of service delivery between providers and patients at NGO clinics and government outdoor dispensaries (GoDs).

Methodology

We used a qualitative case study approach, purposively sampling four NGO clinics and two GoDs located close to informal settlements within the city as our cases. For each case, we conducted in-depth interviews with male, female, and Hijra (third-gender) patients within the catchment areas. The data collection process took place between December 2022 to August 2023, following the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) guideline.

Results

We identified five themes that explain health care seeking behaviour for non-communicable diseases at primary health care centres among these diverse low-income urban residents:-

- 1) Costs and perceptions of cost,
- 2) Availability and quality of NCD medicines and facilities,
- 3) Behaviour of providers, both positive and negative

- 4) Perception of PHC focus on Maternity and Neonatal Child Health (MNCH), and
- 5) Patient perceptions of NCDs. Particular barriers included how men and hijras are excluded, how restricted facility hours limit working-class men's access, and how social networks can help reduce exclusion.

Conclusion

This study advances understanding of barriers to primary healthcare utilisation in Dhaka. While global frameworks offer valuable guidance, context-specific strategies such as public-private collaboration, inclusive service design, and community engagement are necessary to address persistent inequities in primary healthcare access in Dhaka City.