



UNITED NATIONS
BANGLADESH



FUNDING FOR GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS CSOs IN BANGLADESH DURING COVID-19

RESEARCH REPORT AND
RECOMMENDATIONS



UNITED NATIONS
BANGLADESH



FUNDING FOR GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS CSOs IN BANGLADESH DURING COVID-19

RESEARCH REPORT AND
RECOMMENDATIONS

MAY 2021

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Acknowledgments | 5 |
| Acronyms | 6 |
| 1. Background | 7 |
| 2. The critical role of Women’s Rights Organizations for gender equality in Bangladesh | 9 |
| 3. Rationale and Objectives of the Study | 11 |
| 4. Methodology | 12 |
| 5. Findings and analysis of the survey responses and KIIs | 15 |
| 6. Challenges for funding grassroots and local WROs | 24 |
| 7. Recommendations, Opportunities, and Expectations on donors, policymakers and WROs | 28 |
| 8. Conclusion | 34 |

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Annexures | 35 |
| Annex 1: Analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on gender equality broken down by SDGs in Bangladesh | 36 |
| Annex 2: List of CSOs that participated and responded to the survey questionnaire | 42 |
| Annex 3: List of Key Informant Interviews (KIIS) with donors, INGOs, CSO and WROs | 43 |
| Annex 4: Status of CSO/WROs that reported funding cuts and prospects for future funding | 44 |
| Annex 5: Link to the Survey Questionnaire | 45 |
| Annex 6: Questionnaire for KII with CSOs/WROs | 45 |
| Annex 7: Questionnaire for KII with donors | 45 |
| Annex 8: List of the donors based on the KIIs with WROs | 46 |

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report, 'Funding for gender equality and women's rights CSOs in Bangladesh during COVID-19', was supported by the UN Gender Equality Theme Group and developed by Ms Malashree Bhargava, Independent Consultant. This research report was developed with information received from the following Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Women's Rights Organizations (WROs)- Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), Awaj Foundation, Badabon Sangho, Bindu, Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha, Bangladesh Nari Sramik Kendra, Centre for Peace and Justice, BRAC University, Christian Aid, Eakok Attomanobik Unnayan Sangstha, Family Ties for Women Development, Grameen Alo, Jago Nari Unnayan Sangstha, Manusher Jonno Foundation, Nari Uddug Kendra (NUK), Nijera Kori, Oboyob - Diversity Circle, Program for Women Development (PWD), Steps Towards Development, TARANGO and Trinamool Nari Unnayan Shamity. Among the Development partners and INGOs- Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA), Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), Embassy of Netherlands and Swedish, International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), High Commission of Canada to Bangladesh, Care and Oxfam provided their invaluable inputs during the Key Informant Interviews. Special facilitation support with grassroots WROs was provided by Ms. Julaikha B Hossain, Asian Institute of Technology, Thailand. Ms. Jenni Wisung, Gender Advisor, UN Resident Coordinator's Office and Ms. Punna Islam, Coordination and Partnership Officer, UN Women Bangladesh provided the overall guidance and supervision to conduct the study.

Acronyms

| | |
|---------------|---|
| BNPS | Bangladesh Nari Pragati Sangha |
| BNSK | Bangladesh Nari Sramik Kendra - Bangladesh Women Workers Association |
| CBO | Community Based Organization |
| CSO | Civil Society Organization |
| CEDAW | The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women |
| DANIDA | Danish International Development Agency |
| GBV | Gender Based Violence |
| GDP | Gross Domestic Product |
| GIZ | Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit- German Development Agency |
| ICT | Information Communications Technology |
| INGO | International Non-Governmental Organizations |
| KII | Key Informant Interview |
| LGBTQ | Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer |
| MIC | Middle Income Country |
| MJF | Manusher Jonno Foundation |
| MoWCA | Ministry of Women and Children Affairs |
| NGO | Non-Governmental Organization |
| RWWS | Rohingya Women's Welfare Society |
| SIDA | Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency |
| WFO | Women Focused Organizations |
| WRO | Women's Rights Organizations |

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY BY FUNDING WOMEN'S RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS

In March 2021, the UN Secretary General stated that “*the COVID-19 pandemic has erased decades of progress towards gender equality*”¹. In Bangladesh, the socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 has resulted in increased gender-based violence (GBV) and discrimination faced by women and girls. The already precarious situation for a disproportionate number of women and girls in Bangladesh will be further aggravated if not proactively addressed.

Funding for gender equality, especially through grassroots organizations, is critical to reach the last mile to address the specific needs and risks faced by women and girls. However, funding for these types of organizations, and for gender-responsive budgeting, financial and digital inclusion of women, gender-responsive disaster risk reduction is decreasing globally². A UN Women-led survey on *Closing the Funding Gap for Women Focused Organizations Responding to COVID-19 in Asia and the Pacific* revealed that as of mid-July 2020, there were no direct donor contribution to local women’s rights organizations (WROs) through the COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan in Asia-Pacific. 71% of WROs

-
- 1 SG statement 3 March 2021: Women’s Lives Upended, Rights Eroded amid COVID-19, Secretary-General Says in Message for International Day, Warning Impact Will Outlast Pandemic | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases (un.org): <https://press.un.org/en/2021/sgsm20612.doc.htm>
 - 2 IANWGE (2020) 25 YEARS AFTER BEIJING A review of the UN system’s support for the implementation of the Platform for Action, 2014-2019: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/09/ianwge-review-of-un-system-support-for-implementation-of-platform-for-action>

reported that COVID-19 was affecting them negatively, and 12% fully suspended activities by April 2020. Moreover, the data showed persistent underfunding to initiatives for gender equality and prevention and response to GBV which meant reduced services for GBV survivors³.

To inform policy advocacy and programming in the COVID-19 context in Bangladesh, the UN's Gender Equality Theme Group commissioned a study in 2021 to gauge the funding landscape for WROs and gender equality-related work. The study revealed that out of the 20 WROs surveyed, 50% had experienced funding cuts between March 2020 and April 2021, and respondents furthermore stated that many non-registered grassroots WROs had shut down completely due to cut funds. The resulting closures of field offices and staff redundancies have led to reduced provision of critical services for women and girls. Moreover, WROs in Bangladesh reported that they are largely absent from COVID-19 planning and response efforts. The absence of these critical voices prevents identifying the needs of and reaching the most vulnerable women and girls in remote communities.

Urgent measures are required to halt the backsliding on women's and girls' rights globally and in Bangladesh. This study report contributes to making the case for funding for gender equality, specifically through empowering and funding WROs, and provides concrete recommendations for action.

In sum, the study report recommends that donors provide core, long-term, and flexible funding directly to grassroots WROs; and that donors systematize the tracking of this funding in Bangladesh. The WROs surveyed furthermore stressed the importance of meaningfully engaging grassroots WROs' in all parts of the COVID-19 response, to ensure that the needs of the most vulnerable women and girls are identified and addressed. This requires proactively addressing the power imbalance between grassroots WROs and big NGOs, INGOs and donors, by for example developing the grassroots WROs' capacity in negotiation and communication skills, as well as project management.

3 UN Women (2020) Closing the Funding Gap for Women-Focused Organizations Responding to COVID-19 in Asia and the Pacific: <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/08/closing-the-funding-gap-for-women-focused-organizations-responding-to-covid-19>

BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic, compounded by disasters cyclone Amphan and the monsoon floods in 2020, and the COVID-19 second wave in 2021, have exacerbated the pre-existing vulnerabilities and negatively impacted the already precarious lives and livelihoods of vulnerable women, girls, and persons of diverse gender groups in Bangladesh. Women and girls, especially from slums, indigenous communities, religious and ethnic minorities, women-headed households, refugees, unregistered internal migrants, sex workers, gender diverse communities, persons with disabilities, ultra-poor, and traditionally excluded casts and groups, are the worst impacted by these disasters. Some of them remain ‘invisible,’ by not having received relief and recovery support. The socioeconomic impact of the pandemic on already vulnerable groups have deepened the existing inequalities and injustices and exacerbated the precariousness for these marginalized groups. The impact includes loss of livelihoods, indebtedness, food insecurity, price hike of essentials, with very limited access to basic government services and the justice system. Violence against women and girls, particularly domestic violence and reporting of gang rapes, child and forced marriages and trafficking have increased exponentially in Bangladesh. At the same time, many women have not been able to leave abusive situations or access legal, medical, or psychosocial support due lockdowns.

Since the pre-existing vulnerabilities have increased, there is an immediate need to assist the most vulnerable groups, which is nearly impossible without intervention from women — and gender equality focused organizations. These organizations are instrumental in

ensuring that humanitarian aid and support address the specific needs and vulnerabilities of women, girls and gender diverse groups in Bangladesh. Yet, despite various reports and evidence explaining the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on the most vulnerable women, girls, and persons of diverse genders, there has been no systematic approach to working with women-and gender equality focused organizations in the national COVID-19 humanitarian and recovery assistance, support, and services.

A recent survey on Closing the Funding Gap for Women-Focused Organizations (WFOs) Responding to COVID-19 in Asia and the Pacific⁴ reveals that as of mid-July 2020, there have been no direct donor contribution to local women's rights-focused organizations through the COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan in Asia-Pacific. While targeting funding towards WFOs is critical to achieving Agenda 2030 and Leaving No One Behind, the data shows persistent underfunding to initiatives for gender equality and prevention and response to gender-based violence (GBV) in humanitarian action globally. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in the Asia Pacific, including Bangladesh, reported several impacts on their work, including a shortage of funding, closing offices, the need to minimize staff presence, and reduced services for violence survivors.

There is currently a lack of evidence and data on the overall funding landscape for CSOs, and how much of the funds to CSOs are going to WROs in Bangladesh, particularly during COVID-19. Civil society funding does not always translate into funding for women's organizations. This requires deliberate effort, incentivizing, and tracking.⁵ Funding in response to COVID-19 has the potential to also shift the needle on gender justice, but only if the money supports feminist solutions to addressing the root causes of gender inequality. To do this, donors must transform their power, politics, and practices to put feminist movements driving change on local, national, and global levels at the center.⁶

4 GIHA (2020) Closing the Funding Gap for Women-Focused Organizations (WFOs) Responding to COVID-19 in Asia and the Pacific: <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/GiHA%20Gender%20and%20Funding%20in%20COVID-19.pdf>

5 Guardian (2016) Funding for Women's Rights Groups in poor countries falls by more than half: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/sep/08/funding-womens-rights-groups-poor-countries-falls-awid-forum-brazil>

6 Staszweka, Dolker and Miller (2019) Only 1 % of the gender equality funding is going to women's organizations., Why?: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/jul/02/gender-equality-support-1bn-boost-how-to-spend-it>

THE CRITICAL ROLE OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS FOR GENDER EQUALITY IN BANGLADESH

WROs in Bangladesh play a critical role in meeting the essential and specific needs of vulnerable women within communities in normal times, and in crises. As the pandemic and disasters have increased the needs and vulnerabilities of women and girls, the WROs that serve them have highlighted severe operational and funding challenges. The inability to support and fund grassroots WROs and their consequent shutting down is creating a clear vacuum between the realities, and needs of women and girls in a community, and the lead organizations and donors. It takes a lot of time to build rapport with women and girls in the community, which International NGOs, donors and UN agencies often lack as they implement projects through WROs. WROs have a good understanding and technical knowledge of the issues, needs, and challenges of women and girls at the local level, and because of long-term relationships with the communities. WROs are often the first to reach and provide on-the-ground support to these groups.

The UN Women's study in the Asia-Pacific region reflected that 71 per cent of WROs in the region reported that COVID-19 was affecting them negatively, with 12 per cent suspending activities all together as early as April 2020. Data show persistent underfunding to initiatives for gender equality and prevention and response to GBV.⁷ Gender-responsive

7 UN Women (2020) Closing the Funding Gap for Women-Focused Organizations Responding to COVID-19 in Asia and the Pacific: <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/08/closing-the-funding-gap-for-women-focused-organizations-responding-to-covid-19>

budgeting, financial and digital inclusion of women, gender-responsive disaster risk reduction, and basic services and infrastructure, although increasingly important, are decreasingly prioritized.⁸

Due to patriarchal structures, WROs working with communities are largely absent from planning and response efforts. Findings from the Rapid Gender Analysis in the aftermath of cyclone Amphan that occurred during the peak of the first wave of COVID-19, indicate that only 13% of respondents noted the involvement of women-led organizations/ NGOs and CBOs. 65% of respondents reported that women were not consulted by any response agencies or service providers.⁹ Women's official representation and decision-making power in the COVID-19 response at the local level is much lower than that of men. In terms of CSOs/WRO's ability to represent women's needs and concerns to shape the government response, the Gender Monitoring Network members in Bangladesh reported that government authorities were not consulting women's rights NGOs on the COVID-19 response, neither at national nor at the local level.¹⁰ Thus, the existing evidence available from reports and the field, shows that it is crucial to fund and empower the WROs and women leaders in communities to reach the "last mile" and leave no one behind, especially women and girls at local and grassroots levels.

8 IANWGE (2020) 25 YEARS AFTER BEIJING A review of the UN system's support for the implementation of the Platform for Action, 2014-2019: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/09/ianwge-review-of-un-system-support-for-implementation-of-platform-for-action>

9 UN Women (2020) Rapid Gender Analysis Cyclone Amphan: <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/RGA%20Cyclone%20Amphan%20Bangladesh.pdf>

10 UN Women (2020) COVID-19 Bangladesh, Rapid Gender Analysis: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/RGA%20Bangladesh.Final_.May2020.pdf

3

RATIONALE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Rationale

Given the above background of rising gender inequality and shrinking space of WROs in Bangladesh, the UN Gender Equality Theme Group (GETG) in Bangladesh, co-chaired by UN Women and UNFPA, has commissioned this study to shed light on the funding situation for WROs. The study analyzed the existing funding trends and status of funding for WROs and CSOs working for women's rights and gender equality. The results will inform programming, and advocacy with donors, development partners, and the government to secure and increase WROs' financial resources.

Objectives

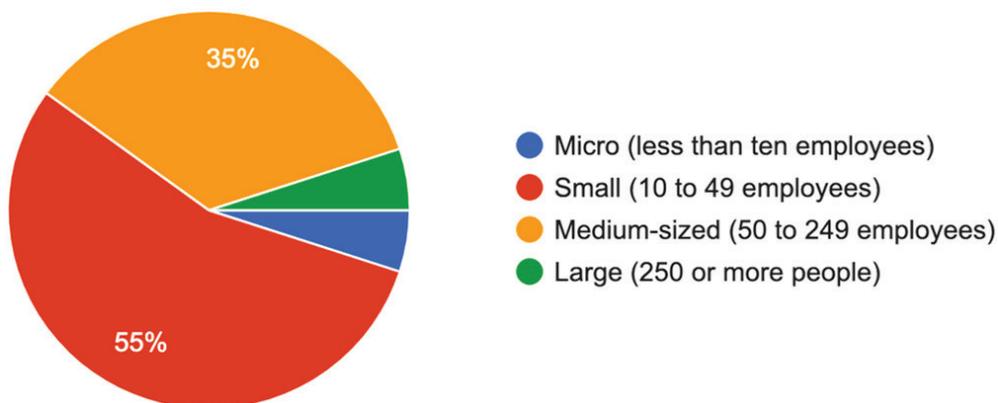
The objectives of the study:

1. To analyze the current status, challenges, and opportunities in terms of funding for WROs and CSOs.
2. To provide specific recommendations for donors and policymakers to stimulate more targeted funding for WROs.

4

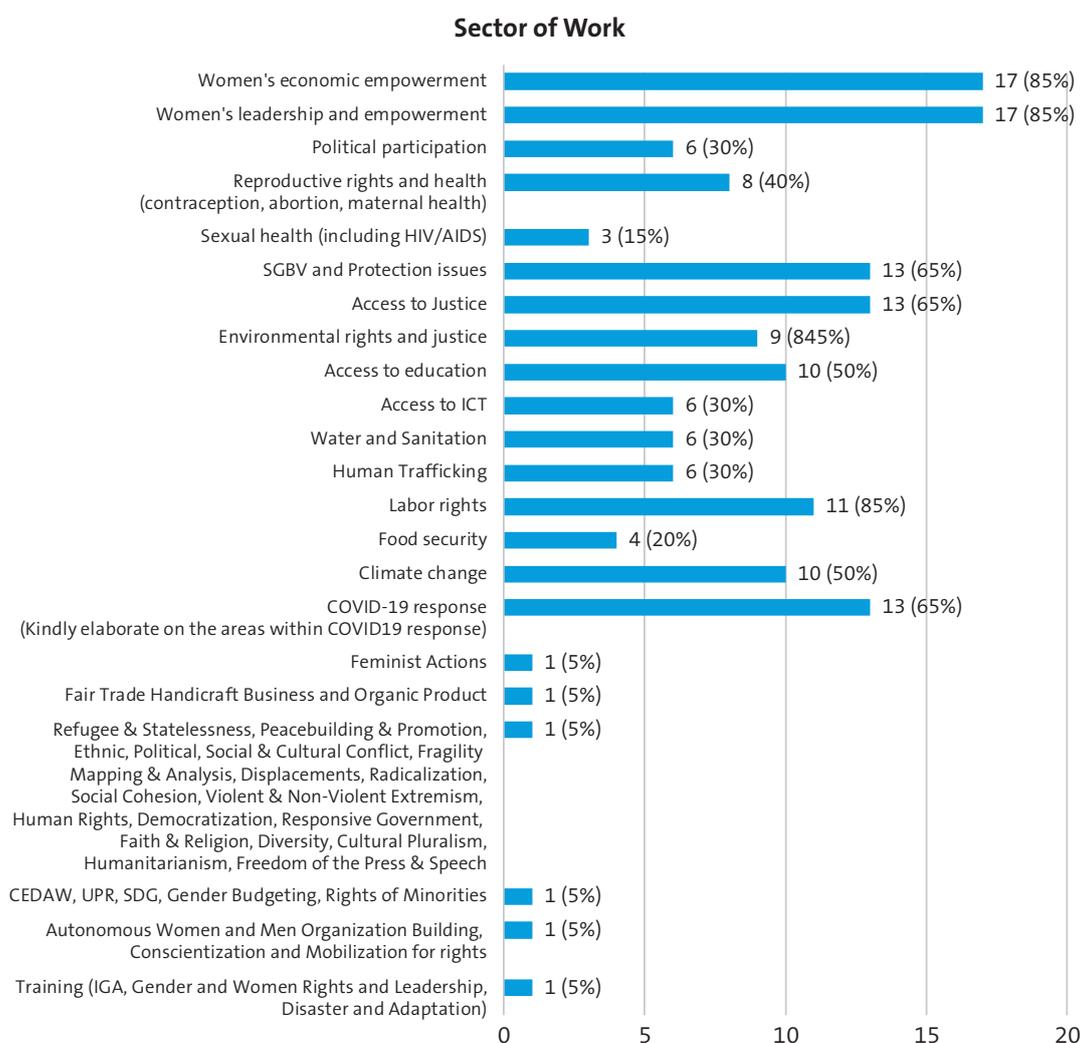
METHODOLOGY

The study consisted of a desk review of the available documents and reports. Based on the desk review, a survey was designed for WROs covering pre-COVID and post-COVID funding scenarios, sources, needs, impacts, challenges, opportunities, and recommendations. The survey explored how COVID-19 has changed funding priority strategies of the CSOs and donors, the impact of COVID-19 on work of CSOs/WROs, and the perceived impact on gender equality due to the lack of funding for WROs. It also covered good/innovative practices, challenges, and opportunities in mobilizing funding by CSOs. Twenty CSO's/WROs responded to the survey. Please refer to Annex 2. Informed by the analysis of the survey responses, Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with the CSOs/WROs, INGOs, and donors. Please refer to Annex 3 for the list of KIIs. The CSOs selected for surveys are well established with grassroots presence for decades and a deep understanding of the landscape. 18 of the CSOs/WROs that participated in the survey are small or medium-sized NGOs, with most consisting between 10 to 49 employees. 70 % of the CSOs/WROs surveyed implemented gender and human rights activities at local and grassroots levels.



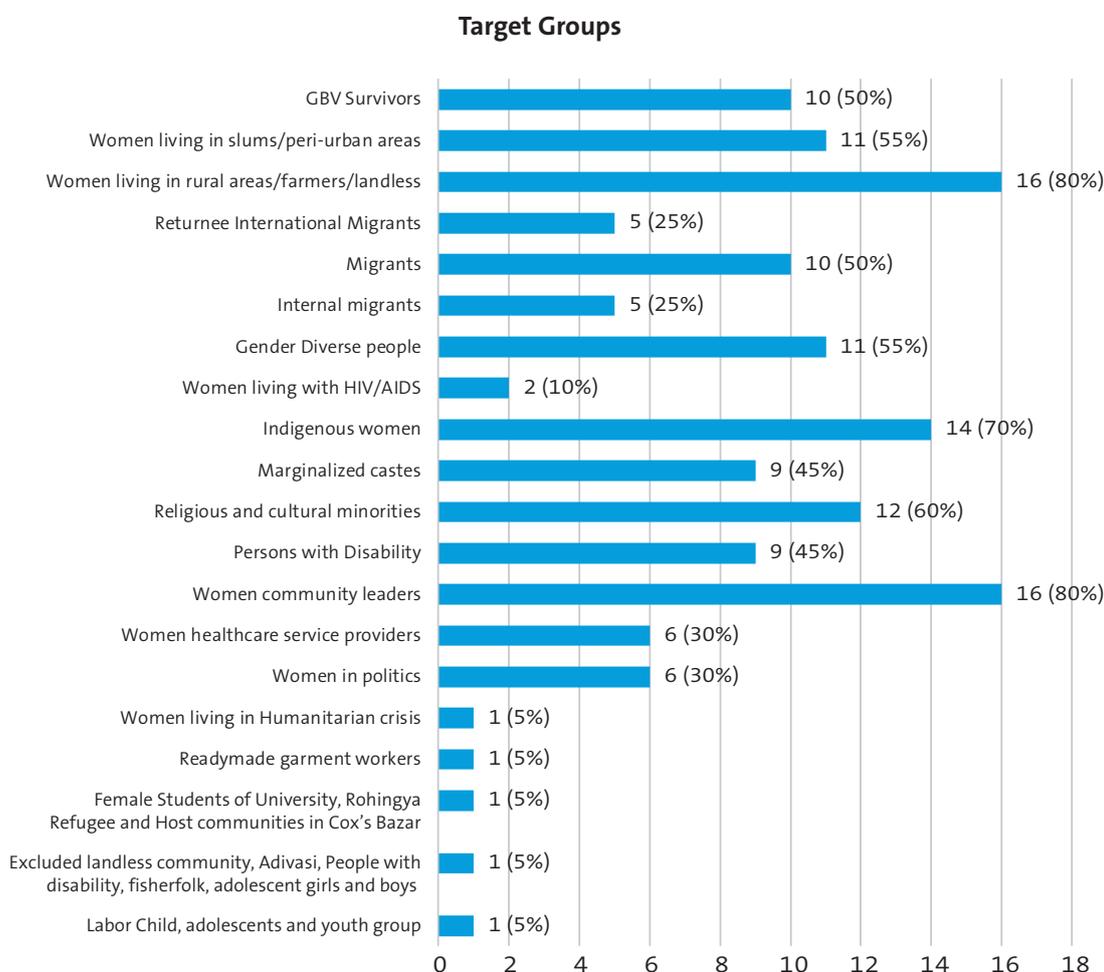
Sectors of work

Majority of the organizations (85 %) work on women’s economic empowerment and women’s leadership and empowerment, followed by SGBV, Protection issues, access to justice, and COVID-19 response (65 %).



Target Groups

- 80 % of the surveyed organizations worked in rural areas and with women community leaders.
- 55 % worked in urban and peri-urban slums and with gender-diverse people.



The INGOs and donors selected for KIIs are known for championing gender equality, and have been supporting this cause for years in Bangladesh and globally. Thus, many of the findings of the study are generalizable and applicable across Bangladesh despite the small sample size. The qualitative and quantitative data and findings were collected, triangulated, and analyzed based on the input and data from desk research, survey, KIIs, GETG Secretariat, UN agencies, NGOs, WROs, and donors. This research report produced specific recommendations for donors and policymakers. It was reviewed by the UN Gender Equality Theme Group (GETG) in Bangladesh.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS OF THE SURVEY RESPONSES AND KIIS

The following key findings are based on the survey responses by twenty CSOs/WRO and 16 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with WROs, INGOs, and donors:

A. CSOs/WROs experienced funding cuts

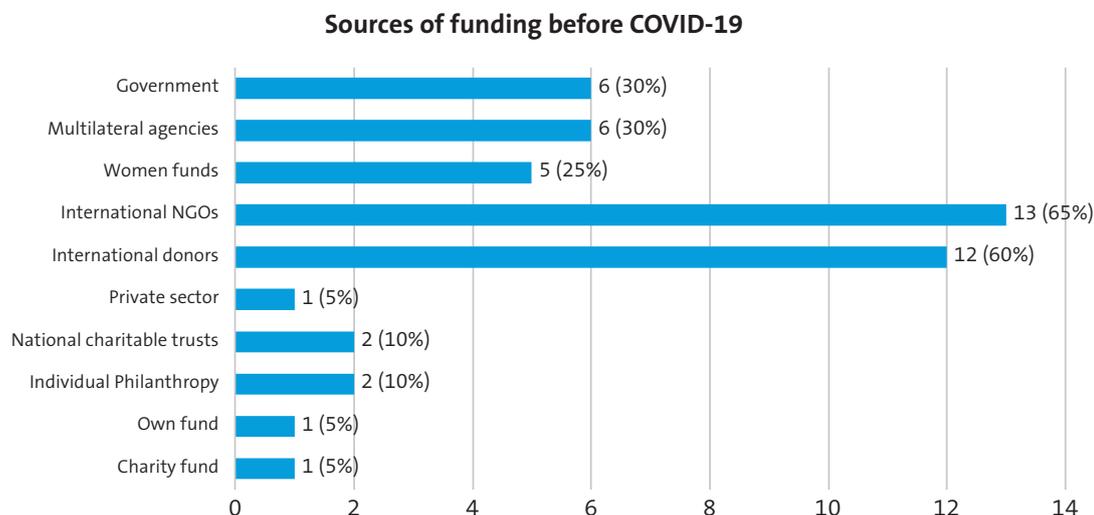
- Out of 20 CSOs/WROs surveyed, 17 were legally registered NGOs, one was registered as a collective/Self Help Group, one CSO was not registered, and one was an academic institute.
- 14 out of 20 of these CSOs/WROs had operated for at least 15 years (before 2009) or more.
- 50 % of the CSOs/WROs reported funding cuts between the onset of the COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020, and the time of the survey in April 2021.

B. Grassroots CSOs shutdown due to funding cuts

- CSOs and WROs reported that they know several other grassroots CSOs/WROs that are not legally registered and that have completely shut down since the first COVID-19 lockdown began (in March 2020) due to the inability to carry out planned activities, which led to budget cuts and consequent inability to pay office rents and staff salaries. This claim was supported by the fact that small organizations and medium-sized national organizations such as MJF and BNPS had to cut down their funding partnerships with WROs.

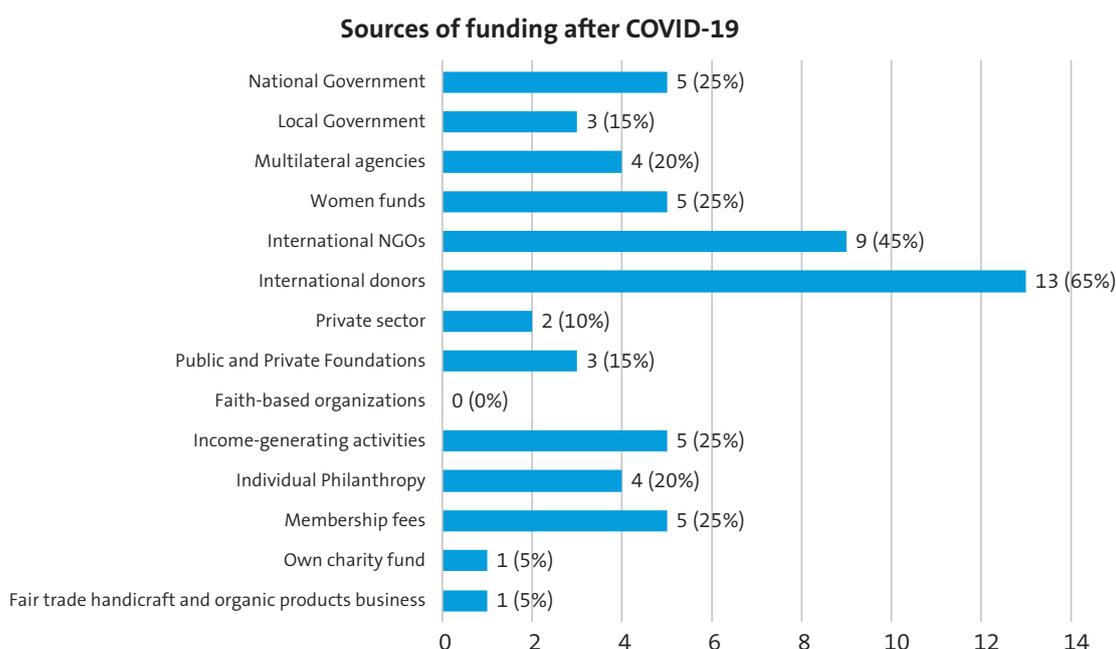
C. Sources of funding before and after COVID 19

- Before COVID-19 pandemic international donors, international NGOs, followed by the government, constituted the main sources of funding sources for local CSO/ WROs surveyed in this study.



D. Sources of funding after COVID-19

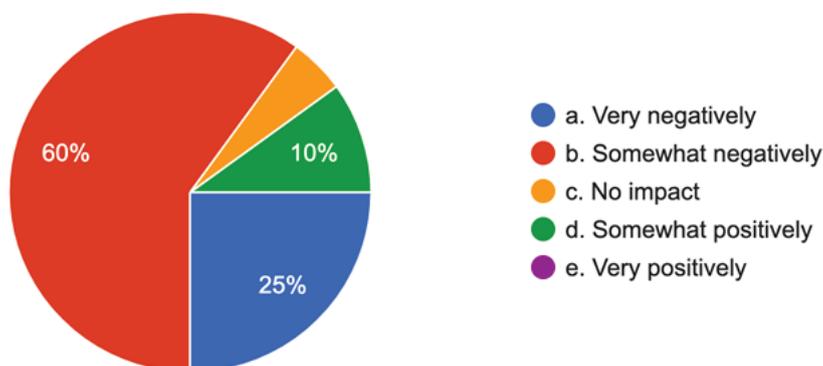
- As per the survey results, after the onset of COVID-19, international donors and the government are the main funding sources for the surveyed CSOs.
- Funding received from International NGOs decreased from 65 % to 45 % between March 2020 and April 2021. There has been an increase in individual philanthropy funds from 10 % to 20 % and international donor funds from 60 to 65 % largely earmarked for generic COVID-19 response.



E. Negative impact of COVID-19 on the operations of CSOs/WROs

- 85 % of the CSOs/WROs reported that COVID-19 has very negatively (25%) or negatively (60%) impacted their operations in the field.

Impact of COVID on the operations of CSOs/WROs

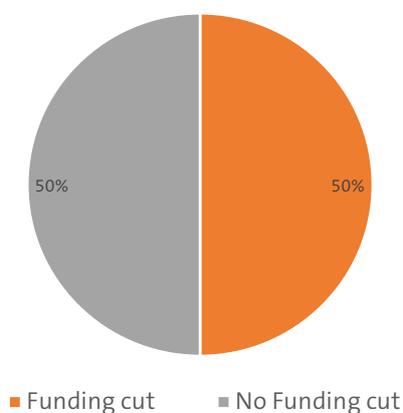


F. Funding cuts since COVID-19

“There is a mindset always to cut the funding for gender issues first”, quoted by a CSO representative

- 50 % of the 20 CSOs/WROs surveyed reported funding cuts since COVID-19.
- 8 out of 20 organizations also reported the percentage of the funding cuts.
- Family Ties for Women Development reported a 100 % funding cut while others such as Grameen Alo and BNSK reported funding cuts of 75 % and 50 %, respectively. Badabon Sangho and BNPS reported 40 % budget cuts. Program for Women Development reported 45 % budget cuts, including from the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MoWCA).

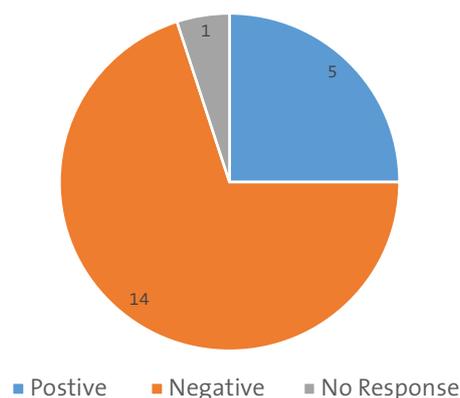
% of CSOs/WROs that reported funding cuts



G. 70 % of the CSOs/WROs reported negative prospects for future funding

- 70 % of the CSOs/WROs perceived negative prospects for their future funding.
- Canada, SIDA, and GIZ have launched new projects for gender equality to be implemented by WROs.
- Netherlands' funding will decrease as development funds are linked with the decrease in national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for the Netherlands. There will be no regular funding for gender equality in the next five years. Small funds are available for human rights projects. However, the Netherlands plans to integrate a focus on gender equality in the economic sphere.
- DANIDA was still waiting for the new budget at the time of the research, but just as the Netherlands, governance and rights were less likely to be a priority as Bangladesh is transitioning towards Middle Income Country (MIC) status. This entails less funding for development activities and a shift towards trade.

% of CSOs/WROs reporting positive and negative prospects for future funding



H. Detailed impact of COVID-19 funding cuts on CSOs/WROs

1. Closure of field offices and limited collaboration with grassroots WROs

- Almost all the WROs reported the closure of their field offices, inability to pay office rents, making staff redundant, or reduction in staff salaries, due to the inability to carry out planned activities during the COVID-19 lockdown. For example, Grameen Alo had to fire 44 out of 65 staff since COVID-19 lockdowns began. This was attributed to a combination of factors: the limitations of WROs to carry out field activities during lockdowns; the pre-COVID-19 trend of cutting funding for development activities in Bangladesh because of the transitioning to MIC status; and the decrease in GDP of some donor countries triggered by COVID-19.

- WROs reported that several other WROs in their areas of operation are completely closed since COVID-19 began, due to the lack of financial support.
- Loss of networking and collaboration with grassroots and local organizations to prevent and respond to GBV in the communities.
- National level WROs also reported funding cuts and project closures in the field, which impacted their local partner organizations. For example, MJF was forced to stop its partnerships with 18 local organizations due to a lack of funding.

2. Making staff redundant or reducing staff salaries

- WROs reported that budget cuts forced them to make some staff redundant, and reduce staff salaries. For example, Family Ties for Women Development reported a 100 % budget cut from March to November.
- The pre-existing absence of core funding to retain staff and volunteers further aggravated the situation.
- WROs reported that staff made redundant could not find new jobs due to very few job openings in the development sector.

3. Severe impact on the women's networks at the grassroots levels

- Budget cuts have severely hurt the local WROs, women's networks, and support services for women and girls at the grassroots levels in rural, peri-urban and urban areas. WROs are unable to directly reach survivors of GBV and gender-based discrimination due to the lack of funding and support.

4. Negative impact on the WROs' provision of critical services for women and girls

- WROs had to reduce their activities in critical and life-saving areas such as safety nets, sexual and reproductive health (SRH), and GBV, including in the refugee camps and host communities in Cox Bazar and Chittagong. For example: BNPS had to downsize their SRH work in Dhaka and Chittagong, resulting from the cut in regular funding from INGOs.

5. Limited capacity for online work, and poor ICT infrastructure and connectivity issues led to the budget cuts for grassroots WROs

- BNPS elaborated that WROs had to limit their physical presence in the office and field due to COVID-19. The environment is not well equipped at the community level for in terms of ICT, and women staff are overburdened by the household and care work while working from home. Some women staff in the CSOs as well as the women and girls at grassroots level were confined at home with perpetrators of violence and abuse and were unable to use ICT even if available in the home.

- Some local WROs/CSOs have received training from the PRISM organization to conduct online work and training at the grassroots level. Some of these trained grassroots WROs are now starting their online initiatives.
- **Good Practice** - National WROs with more capacity and resources such as Nijera Kori and BNPS adopted alternative strategies to adapt to the COVID situation. This helped them to retain and utilize their funding timely. They used media and newspapers, and TV channels for communication. Nijera Kori also introduced an emergency information hotline service to maintain effective relationships among Nijera Kori's local staff, landless members, and the communities to raise awareness about COVID-19 prevention and monitor issues including healthcare access, violence against women, and corruption in relief distribution.

I. Impact on gender equality from COVID-19 induced funding cuts - the WROs/CSOs perspectives:

Almost all the organizations interviewed lamented that the impact of COVID-19, including decreased or no funding, has severely backtracked their previous efforts, gains, and progress made for gender equality and women's empowerment in Bangladesh. Impact on women and girls as elaborated by the respondents include¹¹:

1. Loss of livelihoods, land and income

- While the COVID-19 outbreak has severely impacted employing daily wage earners in the informal economy such as women in the unskilled labor force and women domestic workers, it has also impacted women in the formal economy such as readymade garments and fishery industries. All activities related to many small businesses also stopped, the respondents stated.
- Many women migrant workers have lost their jobs and returned from abroad, and travel bans preventing these migrant labourers to return abroad negatively impact their ability to support their families. Without adequate coverage of social safety nets, these women are pushed into poverty.
- WROs felt that conservative religious groups oppose women's economic empowerment, including equal inheritance rights and land ownership. Instances of land grabbing from women and related violence are becoming frequent as male members and brokers pressured women landowners to sell their lands.
- Some women livelihood groups supported by the CSOs faced difficulties; TARANGO, an NGO working with women artisans, reported that COVID-19 has been affecting their regular work: project & program, production, shipment, and most importantly, the livelihoods and welfare of the women artisans and

¹¹ Please also see the complementary detailed desk research on the impact of COVID-19 on gender quality and SDGs in Annex 1.

their families. TARANGO offices and production centers were shut for months during the lockdown in 2020 because the NGO could not collect raw materials for producers and producers could not deliver their products as transport to and from Dhaka to other districts was restricted. Overall, COVID-19 negatively impacted women's mobility and increased the work burden and home-based and central productions were hampered.

2. Food insecurity and malnutrition

- COVID-19 particularly hit hard daily wage earners both in urban slums, landless in rural villages, and farmers who did not obtain fair prices for their produce. Due to the financial situation, many poor and lower middle-income women and girls had to reduce their food intake as a coping mechanism.
- Many WROs indicated food security as the first priority. Food insecurity is forcing women and girls into exploitation, abuse, and trafficking.

3. Unpaid work and care

- COVID-19 and the lockdown have led to job and income losses and heavily disproportionate unpaid work and care work burdens on women and girls. Unpaid work includes unpaid household activities such as cooking, cleaning, washing and caring for children, elderly and COVID-infected family members. This extra work due to lockdowns and families confined at homes has worsened the pre-existing gendered unpaid work and care burden, aggravating existing gender inequalities in Bangladesh.¹²

4. Education for girls

- WROs also noted that many girls have dropped out of school permanently. Out of school, girls are being pushed into harmful and exploitative practices. Early and child marriages, child labor and trafficking, violence, and abuse against children are becoming rampant. WROs linked the rising harmful practices to increasing poverty and decreasing ability of families to protect and support their children economically.

5. WASH

- Reduced access to potable water, sanitation and safe toilets, and basic public health services, disproportionately impacts women and girls, especially in the slums, informal settlements, and in refugee camps.
- Some WROs mentioned that WASH, which is critical during COVID-19, is not prioritized by the donors and its needs urgent attention especially in refugee camps and host communities.

¹² Neelormi (2021) Enough Already! How the Pandemic Affecting the “Stuck in Home” Moms and Girls, Rapid Analysis of Care Work during COVID Pandemic in Bangladesh

6. Gender-Based Violence

- GBV has increased in frequency and intensity as survivors have been confined under the same roof as their abusers. There are increased incidents of VAW, especially domestic violence, sexual harassment cases, rapes, violence against children, torture, and early forced and child marriage. Challenges during the lockdown include difficulties to report GBV and to access legal, psychosocial, and medical help.
- Online attacks on women and girls by conservative and religiously fundamentalist elements have increased. Cyberbullying and online sexual harassment targeting women and girls are also exponentially rising since the onset of COVID-19.
- The mental health of women and girls has suffered in these strained and abusive conditions.
- Due to COVID-19, the organizations have had to limit their work: legal aid, mediation, and community-level activities are impacted. Some WROs such as BNPS tried to introduce more helpline numbers and virtual ways to provide support, but people in the communities where the WRO works are not used to the virtual means.

7. Women returnee migrant workers

- CSOs also reported that women returnee migrant workers have been socially ostracized and perceived as carriers of COVID-19 infection. They have lost their jobs and incomes they earned abroad and are not covered under the local labour laws. The returnees are being forced to live in indebtedness, often without shelter, enough food, and money to support their children and families dependent on them. They are also mentally tormented and require psycho-social support.

8. Gender Diverse community

- One respondent organization working with the gender diverse community carried out a survey in the Hijra community following the COVID-19 outbreak. It was found that 82% of respondents had not earned “a single penny in the last two weeks,” and 59% did not receive any support from aid programmes or families. On average, the respondents spent more than a third of their income on rent. The Gender Diverse community members are afraid of eviction and 86% of respondents did not have savings, and 50% of them were indebted.

CHALLENGES FOR FUNDING GRASSROOTS AND LOCAL WROs

WROs/CSOs, INGOs, and international donors described the following challenges related to funding grassroots and local WROs:

Funding Trends since COVID-19

- Most donors interviewed except Canada and Sweden either maintained or decreased their budgets for WROs and gender equality.
- Gender equality has been a major priority for some donors, such as Canada and Sweden, and backed with adequate funding.
- The reasons for funding cuts include Bangladesh's transitioning to MIC status and the decrease in GDP of donor countries due to COVID-19 pandemic.
- It has led to a decrease in funding for life-saving and critical areas such as food security, SRH, child marriages, and GBV.

- UK's decision to reduce Official Development Assistance from 0.7% to 0.5% of the GDP has impacted the funds for gender equality¹³ as FCDO stopped funding various WROs working on gender equality in Bangladesh.
- GIZ did not cut but reallocated the funding to the immediate COVID response, some of which had a gender focus including addressing domestic violence and preventing child marriage.
- DANIDA also repurposed its funding, including support to risk communication activities. DANIDA is not funding WROs but human rights-based organizations that work mainly with women.
- The Embassy of the Netherlands is phasing out development projects and is instead focusing on trade and advocacy as Bangladesh is transitioning from LDC status. There is a planned budget cut for SRHR delivery. The Netherlands' current projects in the gender (and SRHR) portfolio focus on GBV, child marriage, women's economic empowerment, and access to services and value chains. The current engagement on gender in Bangladesh will gradually shift from a primary focus on SRHR, gender equality programming, GBV, and child marriage to broader advocacy on gender equality and on mainstreaming gender in its priority sectors, i.e., water and agriculture, private sector development and RMG.¹⁴

SDG 5 on Gender Equality backed with budgeting and support for WROs has not been implemented

- WROs mentioned that SDG 5 on gender equality is being discussed at the national level but that specific funding and support to WROs as a part of achieving SDG 5 is not a part of that discussion. A WRO said that "Gender Responsive Budgeting remains on paper."

Rigid compliance structures of donors

- Most donors interviewed, except Canada, do not fund the local WROs directly due to strict donor policy and regulatory compliance structures. Other donors such as the Netherlands, DANIDA and GIZ fund grassroots WROs through lead organizations including the UN, INGOs/WROs.
- A donor pointed out that "quality of proposals and internal management are not up to par with donor standards." Thus, many donors do not fund local WROs. Some donors mentioned that their headquarters assess the organization's credibility and track record in managing large projects. Thus, small grassroots and local WROs are automatically disqualified from direct funding.

13 Chinkin and Anderlini (2021) If the UK is concerned about women's safety, it shouldn't cut the GCRF: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/if-uk-concerned-about-womens-safety-it-shouldnt-cut-gcrf>

14 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Netherlands (2021) Women's rights and gender equality: <https://dutchdevelopmentresults.nl/countries/bangladesh#equality>

Lack of capacity of grassroots WROs because of intrinsic gender inequality in Bangladesh

- According to WROs, donors, in some cases, fail to understand that capacity development of WROs is an integral part of addressing gender inequality. A respondent from a sub-granting CSO explained “since childhood, the women heading these WROs are not educated and do not have access to information.” All the grassroots WROs interviewed expressed their lack of capacity in writing project proposals, reporting, online communication, and English language. Donors do not perceive this as a part of supporting gender equality in Bangladesh. For example, Netherlands said that “funding preferences are not necessarily focused on capacity development of organizations. It is seen as an add-on, and results focus more on impact on the ground.”

Lack of negotiation skills of most local WROs

- A respondent from a national CSO mentioned that WROs often do not negotiate the needs, their expertise, and capability but just apply for the existing call for proposal based on the availability of funds and call for proposals.
- A local WRO said that donors, in some cases, decide on the programme priorities and activities without any consultations or discussions with WROs.

The clear power imbalance between local, national, and international organizations

- Some respondents from INGOs and national CSOs said that WROs have good technical knowledge but lack confidence due to communication issues and unequal distribution of power. There is a clear power imbalance between the local, national and international organizations. One of the CSO respondents said that “on paper, we say that they are partners, but in practice, it is a donor and subgrantee approach.” A grassroots WRO mentioned that “while working with the international NGOs as well as big organizations, we did not have a voice in planning and the freedom and authority to change or revise any activities or budgets.”
- One CSO respondent felt that “even though international development partners and CSOs are very vocal against rising inequality between rich and poor, they are not at all raising the issue of a very high level of inequality in funding between women organizations and other big NGOs. It is high time to address this mismatch between words and action.”

Very limited direct communication between donors and local WROs during COVID-19

- Donors acknowledged the communication gap between them and local WROs, especially during COVID-19.
- Some donors only link with the local WROs through the lead organizations. While other such as Canada, regularly organized direct consultations with local WROs before COVID-19.

- However, since the COVID-19 outbreak, most donors have not organized any direct consultations with the local and grassroots WROs.
- Local WROs echoed this lack of communication and the need for being heard and invited to the online consultations.

Budget cuts for WROs due to the inability to quickly change work strategies from offline to online

- Due to the COVID-19 lockdowns, local and grassroots WROs could not carry out the mass mobilization and training activities in the field as planned. In most cases, this led to budget cuts, closure of their offices, and staff redundancies.
- Most local and grassroots WROs interviewed do not have new opportunities to access funding to continue their work. Some WROs mentioned that they had undergone training to provide online support to the women and girls community and have now started supporting them using online means.
- The national level and established WROs such as MJF, Nijera Kori, and BNPS successfully managed to transform their implementation strategies from offline to online, thus preventing budget cuts.
- Some donors and national CSOs mentioned that alongside with traditional approaches, the CSOs need to apply new strategies to combat the impact of COVID-19 on women and girls in the context of “the new normal” i.e., living with the pandemic.

The decline in direct funding to national and local WROs

- WROs mentioned that intermediary/funds management agents/ subcontracting modalities have emerged in recent years. Hence, the funding priority of donors for national organizations for gender equality, human rights, and women’s empowerment has gradually declined. Increasingly funds are being channeled through international INGOs and UN agencies rather than directly to national and local WROs. COVID-19 has further aggravated the funding situation where the funding cuts have negatively impacted the local and grassroots WROs.

RECOMMENDATIONS, OPPORTUNITIES, AND EXPECTATIONS FROM AND FOR DONORS AND POLICYMAKERS

1. Fulfill the commitments made under SDGs, CEDAW, Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and Grand Bargain

- **Expectations on donors:** In line with SDG 5 and the Grand Bargain, donors and INGOs should fund local WROs as a means to achieve gender equality. There is an urgent need to revive the WROs networks, especially at the grassroots level, which have largely become defunct due to funding cuts and that face grave difficulties to serve women and girls at the grassroots level. Donors and international organizations should realize the commitments made in the Grand Bargain¹⁵ and in the World Humanitarian Summit and invest in long-term and sustainable funding partnerships with WROs.¹⁶ Gender equality and WROs need continuous funding support, especially during crisis times, and not just project/activity-based support.

15 WHS (2016) Grand Bargain – Agenda for Humanity, World Humanitarian Summit: <http://agendaforhumanity.org/initiatives/3861>

16 UN Women (2019) Empower Women and Girls and Gender as a Cross-Cutting Issue 2019 Analytical Paper on World Humanitarian Summit Self-Reporting on Agenda for Humanity Transformation 3D: https://agendaforhumanity.org/sites/default/files/resources/2019/Sep/Analytical%20Paper_Gender.pdf

- Amongst the priority areas for gender equality identified at the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995¹⁷, DAC members have over time focused high shares of aid on gender equality in the areas of human rights, media and education. Donors have placed significantly less focus on gender equality in the areas of environment, and poverty and the economy. For example, almost half of aid in the area of health does not yet focus on gender equality and women's empowerment. Particularly relevant given the current COVID-19 emergency is that only 24% of aid in the sub-sector of infectious disease control integrated gender equality and women's empowerment on average per year in 2017-18.¹⁸

OECD members must fulfill their commitments by enhancing focus and funding to address gender inequality that has been severely exacerbated by the first and second waves of the COVID-19 pandemic in Bangladesh and globally.

- **Expectation on the government and policymakers:** Bangladesh is a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)¹⁹, a legally binding international treaty that bounds Bangladesh to put its provisions into practice. The CEDAW General Recommendation 37 (2018) on the gender-related dimensions of disaster risk reduction in the context of climate change²⁰ explicitly links disasters, pandemics, and women's rights in an actionable way, including funding and gender-responsive budgeting. It serves as guidance to State Parties to ensure that gender equality and budgeting are central in disaster risk management and humanitarian response and are reported in the Universal Periodic Review. The gender-responsive crisis management and humanitarian action for communities is only possible if the local WROs are empowered and funded to design and implement projects.

2. Recognize and address the reversal in the progress on gender equality since the onset of COVID-19

- **Expectation on donors and policymakers:** Even though Bangladesh is transitioning to become a MIC, the progress made in gender equality has backtracked due to the socioeconomic impact of COVID-19, which is exacerbating the already disadvantaged situation of women and girls and gender diverse groups. To reverse this trend, gender equality must be recognized and funded as a catalytic and non-negotiable component of policy and plans, with the active involvement and lead of WROs.

17 Latest review report of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3850087?ln=en> Bangladesh review report, 2019: <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/CSW/64/National-reviews/Bangladesh-en.pdf>

18 OECD (2020): <https://www.oecd.org/development/gender-development/Aid-Focussed-on-Gender-Equality-and-Women-s-Empowerment-2020.pdf>

19 United Nations General Assembly (1979) Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW): <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/cedaw.pdf>

20 CEDAW (2018) CEDAW General recommendation No. 37 (2018) on the gender-related dimensions of disaster risk reduction in the context of climate change: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1626306?ln=en#record-files-collapse-header>

3. Provision of life-saving humanitarian assistance and essential services for women and girls

- **Expectations on donors and policymakers:** WROs highlighted food security, GBV, WASH (especially in refugee camps and host communities), child marriage, education for girls, and income for women as the most critical issues to be addressed for the women and girls severely hit by the COVID-19 crisis. WROs also indicated the need to support services for pregnant, lactating, and neo-natal infants. The humanitarian response should be through locally present WROs.

4. Stable funding for Gender equality during normal and crisis times

- **Expectations on donors:** Gender equality and WROs need continuous funding support, especially during crisis times and not just project or activity-based support. Donors should not cut the budgets for WROs but instead contextualize donor strategies including revising targets. Donors should factor in that a WRO's core costs can be higher than the activity costs during times of crisis; despite changes in plans and delays in delivery, the WROs still need to maintain staff and pay office rent.

5. Flexibility in funding local and grassroots WROs

- **Expectations on donors:** Grassroots WROs, both registered and small nonregistered WROs, mentioned that donors should be inclusive and allow them to apply for funding. Donors should not apply too rigid funding mechanisms and be more flexible and customize it to WROs' varying capacities. Some CSOs said that donors should allow more flexibility in project implementation strategy and timeline considering the unpredictability of the COVID-19 pandemic, and transition to online implementation. There is an urgent need to localize project goals and objectives and empower grassroots WROs while maintaining standards and transparent operation procedures.

6. Donors should develop a monitoring and tracking mechanism for funding WROs

- **Expectations on donors:** Donors should develop a monitoring and tracking mechanism for funding WROs at the grassroots levels. Not many donors track the funding for WROs with the exception of Canada, EU CSO, Netherlands, and Sweden. None of the donors interviewed had ready data and percentage of funding to WROs available at hand, nor did they share this information at the time of KIIs or afterwards.

7. Intersectionality

- **Expectations on donors:** Donors should prioritize working with a range of different expert organizations to reach different categories of vulnerable women and girls such as women migrants, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and refugees; women in the informal economy, landless, subsistence farmers and fishers; infants, girls,

and elderly women; women and girls with disabilities; women, and girls from traditionally/socio-economically excluded castes, religious minorities, tribes; and women of diverse, sexual orientation and gender identities.

8. Micro-credit groups need to be women-focused and holistically respond to the needs of women

- **Expectations on policymakers and donors:** Several local WROs lamented that micro-credit groups are not very effective without working in conjunction with WROs. WROs reported that male family members are misusing micro-credit money while the women are made to pay rising debts, which further aggravates the situation for women during the COVID-19 crisis. WROs requested policymakers and donors to actively involve WROs in the working of micro-credit groups.

9. Involvement of local WROs in needs assessments and decision-making rights

- **Expectation on donors:** Local WROs should be actively involved in the needs assessments of projects, plans and strategies, including on needs for capacity development.

10. Capacity development of WROs as a component of addressing gender inequality

- **Expectation on donors:** Fund capacity development of local WROs on M&E, reporting, fund management, and soft skills including communication and negotiation capacities. Provide core funding for staff and volunteers in WROs so that the work can be sustained even during the COVID-19 crisis or future disasters.

11. Coordination and communication with grassroots WROs

- **Expectations on donors:** Grassroots WROs expressed their need and interest to be involved in the consultation meetings. They felt that there is a communication gap due to unequal power dynamics. Some respondents iterated that even when meetings are sometimes communicated there is lack of confidence to voice concerns and needs due to inbuilt power relations. There should be strong, gender-sensitive coordination and partnership, including between grassroots WROs and donor agencies.

12. Provision of ICT support

- **Expectations on donors and policymakers:** Grassroots WROs requested ICT training and necessary equipment so that women and girls can continue to learn and earn incomes in the changing environment. Funds should also be channeled to continuously counter cyber bullying and harassment including misogyny and hate speech in cyber space that undermines gender equality efforts.

13. Gender-Based Violence

- **Expectations on donors:** Despite prevailing VAW in Bangladesh, WROs receive little funding compared to international organizations. Donors should be more inclusive and increase the funding and involvement of local WROs.
- **Expectations on the UN:** WROs urged UN Women and other UN agencies to develop strategic partnerships with WROs to reduce gender-based violence in formal and informal sectors.

14. Supporting the effective delivery of existing government funding and provisions for social safety nets

- **Expectations on national and local WROs and government:** Some women groups supported by national NGOs can access government funding. WROs/CSOs should work to catalyze government funding for gender equality issues at the grassroots levels. For example, CSOs such as Nijera Kori worked with the landless and marginalized groups to ensure that government funds are meaningfully used for GBV and social safety nets.

15. Formally recognize unpaid care

- **Expectations on policymakers:** Policymakers and gender champions should intensify formal realization and redistribution of unpaid care work and its financing options as COVID-19 had a devastating impact on the overall economic, mental and physical health of women and girls confined in homes.



CONCLUSION

The findings from the research study underline the extreme financial hardships and logistical challenges faced by the WROs surveyed, and their partners, especially at the grassroots level due to the COVID-19-induced funding cuts for gender equality- and women's empowerment-related work. WROs at the grassroots level have been forced to close their offices and make staff redundant due to funding cuts. The resulting absence of WROs at the field level has negatively impacted the progress made in gender equality over decades in Bangladesh. There is an urgent need to reach and support the most vulnerable women, girls, and persons of diverse genders, which is only possible if the WROs and women networks at the community level are revived, funded, and nurtured. Even before COVID-19, donors started shifting their funding priorities from development issues to trade partnership agreements, thus compromising the basic needs of women and girls, such as food security, GBV prevention, SRH, and protection of livelihoods. Donors need to recognize and pro-actively address the increased discrimination, deprivation, harmful practices, exploitation and abuse, and lack of access to basic services for the most vulnerable women and girls, as a result of the pandemic. There is an urgent need to fund, capacitate and roll out gender equality programs through WROs and women networks across the country.

ANNEXURES

Annex 1: Analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on gender equality broken down by SDGs in Bangladesh

COVID-19 is reversing the progress and development gains achieved in gender equality across SDGs and Agenda 2030. The desk review of the reports and documents reflects that the COVID-19 has negatively and disproportionately impacted women, girls, and gender diverse people rights across SDGs in Bangladesh. Following are the impacts of COVID 19 and its funding situation on the gender inequality organized as per the SDGs:



COVID-19-induced ‘new poor’ between 16 and 42 million people could bring the poverty rate up to 44 per cent. Even before COVID-19, poverty was over-represented among children and women, particularly in women-headed households in Bangladesh, making children and women more vulnerable to disasters.²¹ Women’s poverty status in some poor regions is very high. E.g., in Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), ²² 94 per cent of women live below the absolute poverty line and about 85 per cent below the extreme poverty line.²³ COVID-19, compounded by cyclone Amphan and floods in 2020, had a devastating impact on women and girls’ livelihoods, especially those working in the informal and MSMEs in rural and urban areas. In rural areas, 93.3 per cent of the women are in informal employment, whereas it was 87.3 per cent in urban areas²⁴ with limited access to social protection, public services, and infrastructure, their vulnerability to shocks has increased. Women and girls, especially those who belong to disadvantaged and marginalized communities, have limited awareness of social protection programs and obtain benefits. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, MSMEs accounted for 25 per cent of GDP. ²⁵ And is the largest source of employment after agriculture. The economic slowdown caused by the pandemic has put the livelihoods of millions of workers, including vulnerable informal enterprise owners, day laborers, and those informally employed in MSMEs, at stake. There are yet thousands more unregistered women-owned enterprises. Only 32 per cent of women in Bangladesh have an

21 United Nations Bangladesh (2020) Immediate Socioeconomic Response to COVID-19, Under the United Nations Development Assistance Framework 2017-2021: https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/BGD_Socioeconomic-Response-Plan_2020.pdf

22 Barkat, A., et al. (2009) Socio-Economic Baseline Survey of Chittagong Hill Tracts, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Bangladesh: <http://www.hdcr-bd.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/6.-Socio-economic-Baseline-Survey-of-Chittagong-Hill-Tracts.pdf>

23 FAO (2019) Mountain agriculture: Opportunities for harnessing Zero Hunger in Asia: <https://books.google.com/books?id=AS-1DwAAQBAJ&pg=PA138&lpg=PA138&dq=women+poverty+CHT++bangladesh+94+percent&source=bl&ots=KmAmp2abP6&sig=ACfU3U3o3U194-rZFpZ3cZOb4dPWlTf-h9A&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewi1yerpmtXwAhVIVs0KHVXTBf4Q6AEwCXoECAwQAw#v=onepage&q=women%20poverty%20CHT%20%20bangladesh%2094%20percent&f=false>

24 UN Women (2020) COVID-19 Bangladesh Rapid Gender Analysis https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/RGA%20Bangladesh.Final_May2020.pdf

25 IFC (2020) Business Pulse Survey: Impact of COVID-19 on MSMEs in Bangladesh: <https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/b16f90a1-253e-419a-b1fc-739bdec9985c/Bangladesh-Business+Plus+Survey-C.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=nm9GQXS>

account at a formal financial institution. More than 60 per cent of women do not have access to finance due to institutional, cultural, social, and economic barriers.²⁶ Women and girls are at the risk of falling into debt traps and a vicious poverty cycle and exploitation.



Food security for women and girls remains a concern in Bangladesh, even during normal times. Due to harmful social and gender norms, women and girls often eat less and last, with 45.70% of women of reproductive age with anemia. COVID-19 resulted in critical food and nutrition security impacts for the poorest, particularly in urban slums, cut off from market access and livelihoods, especially those underserved by national social protection programs. COVID-19 lockdowns and job/income losses, the four dimensions of food security - food availability, access to food, food utilization, and food stability - are directly or indirectly challenged. During cyclone Amphan and floods, poor people confronted a shortage of potable water and edible foodstuff. In deeply flooded areas, young girls were reportedly scrounging for edible reed and roots, while women of all ages travel long distances by boat or raft to fetch drinking water. Poor women often tend to collect relief if anything is offered in the neighborhood. However, such an act on a woman's part is considered 'disrespectable' in social norms. Those seeking relief generally face exploitation and hardship in post-flood normal life. Disaster-related food insecurity leads to transactional sex, human trafficking, exploitation, forced labor, and forced marriages.²⁷



In Bangladesh's health system, more than 94 per cent of nurses, 90 per cent of community health workers, and all midwives are female – has placed women on the front lines of both the consequences of and the response to the pandemic. They are at a high risk of contracting the virus while balancing their incomes with risks to their health. Under extreme, protracted pressure, frontline health workers are at elevated risk of anxiety, burn-out, and depression that could further undermine public access to health services. The Rapid Gender Analysis of cyclone Amphan indicated that access to quality, life-saving sexual reproductive healthcare services and information is limited due to disruption to healthcare facilities and the struggle to cope with COVID-19. The existing referral system is not functional to connect women, girls, and other at-risk groups to appropriate multi-sector GBV prevention and response services in a timely and safe manner. The crisis-affected people do not have access to quality mental health and psychosocial support to cope with the impacts of the disaster, global pandemic, and GBV incidences. Displaced persons, including adolescent girls and women, remain among the most severely affected groups facing unequal access to aid, humanitarian assistance such as dignity/hygiene kits.

26 UN Women (2020) Supporting the Recovery of Women Entrepreneurs and Women's Micro, Small, Medium Enterprises from The Impact of Covid-19 In Bangladesh: <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2021/04/supporting-the-recovery-of-women-entrepreneurs---bangladesh>

27 UN Women (2018) Gender Equality and the Sustainable Development Goals in Asia and the Pacific Baseline and pathways for transformative change by 2030: <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/461211/gender-equality-sdgs-asia-pacific.pdf>



More than 1.5 million students are out of school due to COVID-19 in Bangladesh. Girls are likely to be the first to drop out permanently from schools. School closures combined with the widespread job and income loss and economic insecurity among families are increasing the risk of child labor, sexual exploitation, teenage pregnancy, child marriage, violence, and trafficking. As the death toll from COVID-19 increases, many children will be orphaned and vulnerable to exploitation.²⁸ Children with disabilities are amongst the most marginalized at all levels of education, particularly in remote learning contexts. COVID-19 pandemic, school closure has exacerbated multidimensional poverty risks and intergenerational poverty for the poorest Bangladeshis. The disruption of school feeding programs has impacted nearly three million children, adolescents, and youth who rely on free or discounted meals provided at schools are at risk of undernutrition. Girls' education and development will be significantly affected as they are likely to do more household work and risk being subjected to SGBV, sexual exploitation and abuse, without access to the psychosocial support that schools provide.²⁹ For boys, those in low-income families are more likely to discontinue school and become child laborers.



The multidimensional crisis unleashed by the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated structural inequalities, vulnerabilities, and pre-existing barriers for women, girls, and diverse gender groups in access to services. For example, women and girls are more food insecure with poorer nutritional indicators than males in the same household. Domestic work is increasing for both women and men, but the burden of unpaid childcare work is increasing much more substantially for mothers and female caretakers. Gender inequalities typically result in lower school enrolment rates for girls than boys, which leads to poorer health outcomes. The compounding hardships linked to COVID-19 and those created by the cyclone and monsoon seasons are expected to have severe socioeconomic impacts on many of the country's most vulnerable and most at-risk populations. These phenomena have highlighted the importance of ensuring that both response and recovery interventions must aim to undo pre-existing institutional dysfunctions, power imbalances, and the structural drivers of multidimensional inequality that have magnified the pandemic's impact.^{30,31} Many women and girls in rural areas spend long hours collecting firewood and water, compromising their health and safety and taking up time that could otherwise be spent on paid work, education, leisure, or rest. Many

28 UN Women (2020) COVID-19 and violence against women and girls: Addressing the shadow pandemic: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/06/policy-brief-covid-19-and-violence-against-women-and-girls-addressing-the-shadow-pandemic>

29 UN Women (2020) COVID-19 and violence against women and girls: Addressing the shadow pandemic: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/06/policy-brief-covid-19-and-violence-against-women-and-girls-addressing-the-shadow-pandemic>

30 United Nations Bangladesh (2020) Immediate Socioeconomic Response to COVID-19, Under the United Nations Development Assistance Framework 2017-2021: https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/BGD_Socioeconomic-Response-Plan_2020.pdf

31 FAO (2020) Dhaka Food Systems Situation Report

women have lost their jobs and income, especially in the informal and MSMEs sector. Women are also in the frontlines of COVID-19 response. There has been an increase in domestic violence and abuse. The poorest and marginalized women, girls, and diverse gender groups are the worst impacted. These include women and girls from the indigenous ethnic minorities including *Vedas, Harijans, Kayaputra, Dalit, Rishis, Munda, Garo*, people from tea plantation communities, *Bihari*, marginalized groups, e.g., sex workers, LGBTQ+ community, *Bede, Bonojibi*, cleaners, and sweepers who are not properly targeted and enlisted for relief support for COVID-19. In the relief distribution (priority) list, there is no category for women-led households to be prioritized. As a result, women-led households and single parents are struggling with receiving relief.³² Other vulnerable groups left behind include women and girls with disabilities and living with HIV/AIDS, who face challenges accessing health services due to stigmatization and social ostracism, and sex workers, whose income has been essentially zero since COVID-19. Approximately 84 per cent of women with disabilities report having experienced at least one act of emotional, physical, or sexual violence from their partner during their lifetime.³³ Women and girl refugees and internal migrants are also extremely vulnerable during COVID-19 due to a lack of social and legal protection in the case of refugees.

A small-scale survey among 80 transgender people during the pandemic found that 95 per cent had decreased income, 71 per cent had borrowed money to support basic needs, 81 per cent has a decreased diet. Fifteen per cent reported experiencing discrimination while receiving aid, while approximately one quarter had not received any aid at all. While data on this demographic is almost non-existent, anecdotal evidence suggests that sexual minority groups face additional challenges in accessing formal and informal education, especially at the secondary or tertiary levels, including technical and vocational education and training.



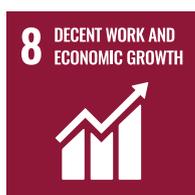
Across Bangladesh, women and girls are responsible for water collection in over 90 per cent of households. The time, burden, and risk exposure consequently increase protection risks and inequities along gender lines. Women's workload has increased manifold in collecting water, maintaining cleaning, sanitizing, and health hygiene maintenance of children and male members of the households.

Particularly in poor urban areas, there are insufficient latrines, water, and handwashing facilities. This impacts women's health and security and increases the risk of violence significantly. Often low-income women, children, elderly, pregnant women, people with disability, third gender, minorities, slum dwellers, people in hard-to-reach areas, and those from excluded groups are affected most when WASH services are not inclusive enough. Areas impacted by cyclone Amphan and monsoon flood further led to waterlogging and lack of access to potable water and sanitation facilities.

32 UN Women (2020) COVID-19 Bangladesh, Rapid Gender Analysis https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/RGA%20Bangladesh.Final_.May2020.pdf

33 Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2015)

The problem of drinking water becomes evident during this. The responsibility of providing pure drinking water and fuel generally falls upon women. It becomes difficult for them to fetch water and fuel from a far distance in flooded conditions. As a result, many households suffer from hunger during post-flash-flood if they cannot manage dry foods. Waterlogging compels women to stay in marooned conditions for several months a year. During floods, women's privacy seems to be completely challenged, which ultimately renders enormous social suffering for them. The outburst of epidemics is common as people hardly manage to access safe sanitation and pure drinking water during and post-flashflood conditions.



The economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures enacted to contain it may cause as many as 4.8 million migrants³⁴ to return to their home communities in Bangladesh. The return of so many migrants to their home communities has raised serious health, social protection, and economic concerns. Of the more than 375,000 migrants that returned between January and mid-September 2019,³⁵ approximately two-thirds arrived empty-handed, including 93 per cent of women returned. Returning migrants, with more than half of those who had lost their jobs due to the pandemic, suffered from hunger and reported psychological problems. Approximately 90 per cent of women returnees are household members with no savings, while three-quarters of returnees – both male and female – reported indebtedness.³⁶ Once back in the home communities, migrants returning during the pandemic have faced stigmatization as potential virus carriers. Migrants who returned sooner than planned find themselves unable to pay debts, including those taken out to finance their overseas work. The loss of their livelihood has knock-on effects for households dependent on remittances, which will lead to food insecurity, further increases in debt, and the deprivation of basic needs, including health, education, and housing. Women migrants often lack access to gender-responsive social protection mechanisms such as sexual and reproductive health care, particularly those working in informal employment, especially domestic workers.



During normal times, living conditions in urban slums are much worse than in other parts of Bangladesh for almost all indicators and are moving towards crisis levels. Migration rates are the highest among youth, with more women moving to urban areas than men.³⁷ COVID-19 pandemic had devastating impacts on the poorest, especially women and girls living in Bangladesh's urban areas. Employment opportunities and market access for the poorest workers in informal sectors in urban areas were significantly curtailed during the lockdown, with 63 per cent of wage earners rendered

34 IOM internal assessment

35 Expatriates' Welfare help desk at Hazrat Shajalal International Airport, Dhaka

36 ILO Commissioned Strategic Roadmap for Mitigating Challenges of COVID-19 for MOEWOE.

37 The highest levels of migration are among those aged 15-19, followed by those aged 24-29

inactive for at least three months.³⁸ In urban slums, women live mostly through self-employment as temporary housemaids(in Bangla, Thika Jhee), food producers, food vendors, and own micro-scale businesses. Delay or absence of the job translates into the loss of employment, food security, and protection concerns. In slum areas, there are insufficient latrines, water, and handwashing facilities, which impacts women's health and security and increases the risk of violence significantly Since COVID-19. There has been a significant increase in domestic violence and SGBV in slums. Women's workload has increased manifold in collecting water, maintaining cleanliness, sanitizing, health hygiene, and maintaining children and male household members. Job and income loss, food insecurity, increased household chores, childcare work, and domestic violence are causing physical and mental harm to women and girls. Moreover, waterlogging due to recent floods and unavailability of safe drinking water and sanitation sources, lack of privacy in overcrowded slums further exacerbated women's conditions. Only 11 per cent of urban households are enrolled in safety net programs, compared with 36 per cent in rural areas.³⁹



COVID-19 has exacerbated the vulnerability of women and girls to climate change and disasters, not only because several climate-induced disasters occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic and eroded people's adaptive capacity to absorb shocks and manage multiple disruptions in the lives of the most vulnerable - indigenous groups, those in marginal professions, the landless and resourceless, women-headed households, disabled, adolescent mother et al.



Bangladesh is experiencing high levels of gender-based violence, including domestic violence and gang rapes targeting women and girls; this seemingly increased according to media reporting during the lockdown periods. Women and girls are confined in homes with their abusers and unable to report abuse and violence. Even the justice system is not functional during the pandemic as the local courts are closed. Conditions of women and girls, especially refugees, migrant workers, both internal and external migrants, are precarious. In some cases, poverty is pushing women and children into exploitation and trafficking.

38 Livelihoods, Coping, and Support during COVID-19 crisis, Dr. Hossain Zillur Rahman, Dr. Imran Matin, PPRC and BIGD (16 April 2020).

39 World Urbanization Prospects 2018, Population Division, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA)

Annex 2: List of CSOs/WROs that participated and responded to the survey questionnaire

1. Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK)
2. Bindu
3. Family Ties for Women Development
4. Badabon Sangho
5. Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha
6. Christian Aid
7. Program for Women Development(PWD)
8. Awaj Foundation
9. Trinamool Nari Unnayan Shamity
10. Oboyob - Diversity Circle
11. Eakok Attomanobik Unnayan Sangstha
12. Steps Towards Development
13. Grameen Alo
14. TARANGO
15. Jago Nari Unnayon Sangstha
16. Centre for Peace and Justice, Brac University
17. Nijera Kori
18. Nari Uddug Kendra (NUK)
19. Bangladesh Nari Sramik Kendra(BNSK) - Bangladesh Women Workers Association
20. Manusher Jonno Foundation

Annex 3: List of Key Informant Interviews (KIIS) with donors, INGOs, CSO and WROs

WROs/CSOs

1. Jago Nari Unnayon Sangstha (JNUS)
2. Bangladesh Nari Pragati Sangha (BNPS)
3. Bangladesh Nari Sramik Kendra (BNSK)
4. Program for Women Development (PWD)
5. Nijera Kori
6. Family Ties for Women Development
7. Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF)
8. Grameen Alo

International NGOs

9. Care
10. Oxfam

International donors

11. Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA)
12. Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA)
13. High Commission of Canada to Bangladesh
14. Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) - German Development Agency
15. Embassy of Netherlands

Annex 4: Status of CSO/WROs that reported funding cuts and prospects for future funding

| CSO/WRO | Size | Funding cut | % of Funding cut | Prospects for Future funding |
|--|--------|-------------|------------------|------------------------------|
| Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) | Medium | 0 | NR | 0 |
| Bindu | Small | 0 | NR | 0 |
| Family Ties for Women Development | Small | 1 | 100 | 0 |
| Badabon Sangho | Small | 1 | 40 | 1 |
| Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha | Medium | 1 | 40 | 0 |
| Christian Aid Program for Women Development(PWD) | Small | 0 | NR | 1 |
| Awaj Foundation | Medium | 1 | 45 | 0 |
| Trinamool Nari Unnayan Shamity | Medium | 0 | NR | 1 |
| Oboyob - Diversity Circle | Micro | 0 | NR | NR |
| Oboyob - Diversity Circle | Small | 0 | NR | 0 |
| Eakok Attomanobik Unnayan Sangstha | Medium | 0 | NR | 0 |
| Steps Towards Development | Small | 1 | NR | 0 |
| Grameen Alo | Small | 1 | 75 | 0 |
| TARANGO | Medium | 0 | NR | 0 |
| Jago Nari Unnayan Sangstha | Small | 1 | NR | 0 |
| Centre for Peace and Justice, BRAC University | Small | 1 | 20 | 1 |
| Nijera Kori | Large | 0 | NR | 0 |
| Nari Uddug Kendra (NUK) | Medium | 0 | NR | 1 |
| BNSK | Small | 1 | 50 | 0 |
| Manusher Jonno Foundation | Medium | 1 | 20 | 0 |
| Total | | 10 | | 5 |

Legend

| | |
|-----|-------------|
| Yes | 1 |
| No | 0 |
| NR | No Response |

Annex 5: [Link to the Survey Questionnaire](#)

Link for the Survey Questionnaire Google Form - [Analyzing the funding landscape for Gender Equality and Women's Rights Organizations](#)

Annex 6: [Questionnaire for KII with CSOs/WROs](#)

1. What are the major funding sources and donors for your organization?
2. To what extent has your funding decreased since the COVID-19 pandemic started?
3. What are the impacts of funding cuts on your organization and activities?
4. Why do you think that it is critical to funding WROs?
5. Is there any gap between the donor priorities and needs of women and girls on the ground?
6. Has there been an impact of COVID-19 on gender equality due to the lack of funding of women's rights organizations? Please elaborate.
7. Did your organization have a consultation with the donors to adapt the priorities and strategies given the COVID-19 context?
8. What are the challenges to ensure funding?
9. What are the potential opportunities for funding?

Annex 7: [Questionnaire for KII with donors](#)

1. What is the status of your Official Development Assistance/ other types of support since COVID-19? Has it decreased, remained the same, or increased?
2. What are the major funding sources and donors for your organization?
3. What are the priority issues for women and girls funded by your organization?
4. What is the percentage of funds given to the Women's Rights Organizations pre-COVID and during COVID-19?
5. Did your organization have any consultations with the WROs on changes in priorities and strategies due to COVID -19?
6. Has there been an impact of COVID-19 on gender equality due to women's rights organizations' lack of funding? Please elaborate.
7. What is the mechanism for funding WROs?
8. How do you monitor the funding for WROs?
9. What are the challenges in funding, especially for WROs and gender equality?
10. What are the opportunities for funding for WROs?

Annex 8: List of the donors based on the KIIs with WROs

| | WROs | Donors |
|----|-----------------------------------|--|
| 1. | Jago Nari | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> UN Women , AusAid, GMWC, NAD and Christian Aid. Lead organization for Ausaid is BRAC and for UN Women – GNWP – Busto Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (2012-2016) and ICT (2017-2018). |
| 2. | BNPS | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Caritas , Diakonie- Bread for World – Germany, Netherland Embassy BNPS does not get regular funds except from German organizations. Previous funding: UNTF, UNDEF (through Proposal calls) , Oxfam, UN Women, Manniondaniels and Green party. |
| 3. | Nijera Kori | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> INGOs - Bread for the World , Swallows in Bangladesh, Interpartis (Canadian NGO) and IICO. Nijera Kori receives bilateral funding: Currently Canadian, German and Swedish. Dutch and British earlier. It does not accept corporate funding. |
| 4. | Family Ties for Women Development | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No big donor funding Before COVID – Ministry of Women and Children Affairs and Local Engineering Government Organization . After COVID BRAC and FAO funded to help farmers. No more donors. |
| 5. | MJF | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> FCDO, Swedish Corporation Agency, GAC, Swiss Development corporation, Women without Borders and Portkcus. |
| 6. | BNSK | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> UN Women, British Council and ILO Ministry of Women and Children Affairs |
| 7. | Grameen Alo | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> MJF, Swiss contact Bangladesh, Global Fund, USAID, Oxfam , Action Aid. Global Fund for Women – American , US. Ministry of Women and Children Affairs. |
| 8. | Programme for Women Development | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Oxfam, MJF, UNDP , Nari Pragati Sangho, Nari Pokkho, BNPS – UN Women |

UN Women Bangladesh Country Office

Road: 43, House: 39, Gulshan 2, Dhaka - 1212, Bangladesh

Tel: +88 02 988 3828, 985 6641 Fax: +88 02 985 8593

www.unwomen.org

