



# Call for Action for Gender-Responsive COVID 19 Relief and Response

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Bangladesh Mahila Parishad



*In light of the UN Secretary-General's call to put women and girls at the center of efforts to recover from COVID19 and based on consultations with civil society and community-based organizations, we, the civil society organizations participating in the Gender Monitoring Network facilitated by UN Women, are concerned by how the COVID 19 pandemic is disproportionately affecting women and girls. Inspired by feminist and human rights principles, the Gender Monitoring Network calls on Policy Makers to recognize women human rights and integrate an intersectional gender equality approach in the COVID 19 Response to ensure everyone has access to necessary information and supports and resources. This Call for Action represents the voices of women and other vulnerable groups who are most affected by the pandemic.*

The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified all existing inequalities. Across every sphere, from access to prevention information, means such as water and WASH facilities to implement preventive measures, testing and treatment to loss of livelihoods and exposure to violence and abuse, the impacts of COVID-19 are being felt differently between men and women and gender diverse persons. Women and girls and transgender persons from slums, rural and remote areas, indigenous communities, elderly women, women heads of household, those living with disabilities, facing violence at home, and making a living through informal work such as domestic work and sex work live with the intersectional and compounded discrimination due to class, gender, ethnicity, different ability, occupation, etc. They are experiencing further socio-economic marginalization due to COVID-19.

As the COVID-19 pandemic deepens, economic and social stress combined with movement restrictions and social isolation measures are resulting in growth of domestic violence. According to a survey by Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF), at least 4,249 women and 456 children were subjected to domestic violence in 27 out of 64 districts of Bangladesh in April, with 1,672 women and 424 children facing violence for the first time in their lives.<sup>1</sup> Lockdown and quarantine measures means that many women are confined at home with their abusers with limited options for seeking help and support. The Anticipatory Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment conducted in April 2020 suggested that only 33% women and girls are currently unaware of where to seek help for abuse or ill treatment by anyone including their family members.<sup>2</sup> Justice, health and social services are disrupted, leading to serious risks for survivors and vulnerable women and girls. Helplines and online psychosocial support are also challenging for women living with their perpetrators to access.

The livelihood of millions of women has also been shattered. UN Women's survey shows that women in informal work are losing their jobs and those in formal work are working less hours as a result of COVID-19.<sup>3</sup> The stay-at-home orders and closure of factories and businesses means that many women workers, from RMG workers to those working in micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises, to domestic workers, daily wage workers and sex workers, have lost their income from one day to the next, without any safety nets, financial security or social protection to rely on. Thousands of women migrant workers have also been forced to return to Bangladesh without their pay and they are facing stigma and ostracization in addition to financial difficulties.<sup>4</sup> While various economic stimulus and relief measures have been announced, a gender analysis and close monitoring is required to ensure that these are benefitting the most vulnerable. There is some indication that desperation of families may also heighten the risk of young girls being forced into child marriage.<sup>5</sup>

Lockdowns and social distancing have resulted in sharp increases in domestic and care work needs within the household. Despite both men and women being at home, COVID-19 has disproportionately increased the burden of unpaid domestic and childcare work especially of mothers. The engagement of daughters in housework have also increased.<sup>6</sup> Female single parents are particularly affected by the increased amount of household chores due to the lockdown while they also have be responsible for food security for their families, health care of children and elderly household members. Mental health is specifically an issue for women as a result of the increased uncertainty of income, food security and access to services like health and hygiene and increased care work burden.

For the many people that were already living in the margins of society, access to emergency relief and services has been extremely difficult due to social stigma and discrimination as well as the lack of transparency in how to access relief. The Hijra transgender and other gender diverse community members, many of whom earn a living as sex workers and small business, are badly affected by COVID-19 and are experiencing food shortages. Of the estimated 102,000 female sex workers, majority of those who have

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<sup>1</sup> From a Telephone Survey conducted by Manusher Jonno Foundation in April 2020

<sup>2</sup> COVID-19: Bangladesh Anticipatory Multi-Sectoral Impact and Needs Analysis, Needs Assessment Working Group, April 2020

<sup>3</sup> UN Women, Preliminary findings: Gender-Differentiated Consequences of COVID-19 on women's and men's economic empowerment in Bangladesh (April 2020)

<sup>4</sup> BNSK report

<sup>5</sup> Girls not Brides, COVID-19 and Child, Early and Forced Marriage: An Agenda for Action (April 2020)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

been provided with support are brothel based, leaving street-based sex workers mostly empty handed. An estimated 26000 People who inject drugs (PWID) are passing tough days in this dire situation as a good number of them are living in the streets and almost no help has reached them. Around 13000<sup>7</sup> People living with HIV and AIDS (PLHA) who are very poor and at-risk due to their current health status are also suffering from shortage of food and access to essential healthcare services, along with their family. Returnee migrant workers and slum dwellers have reported that they have been denied relief support since they do not have a Voter ID card for the location that they are currently in.

## CALL FOR ACTION

**We, the signatories of the Call for Action, are concerned of the disproportionate effects of COVID-19 on women and girls and the most vulnerable population and call Government of Bangladesh to ensure a gender-responsive, human rights based inclusive response to COVID 19 through the following actions.**

1. Ensure stronger inter-ministerial coordination of the socio-economic response to COVID-19, and set up an **Advisory Committee that includes government and non-government experts that focuses on gender equality and social inclusion of the most vulnerable** for an overall gender and diversity-responsive COVID-19 response that will leave no one behind.
2. **Increase women's representation in COVID-19 response planning and decision-making and consult organizations and networks that represent the voices of women and gender-diverse populations.** Evidence shows that policies that do not consult women or include them in decision-making are simply less effective and can even do harm.
3. **Declare Gender Based Violence (GBV) response services as essential and life-saving services** and allocate additional resources to ensure **continued operation of justice, health and social services** for affected women and women at risk.
  - Support Ministry of Women and Children Affairs to expand dissemination of information on online and off-line support available to survivors of GBV, including contact information of district-level Domestic Violence Law enforcement officers and how to file incident reports.
  - Increase telephone and online counseling and rapid response helplines or apps with effective services while also ensuring that the most vulnerable women and gender diverse people who do not have access to technology are reached; special attention should be given to extending these services to women with disabilities, indigenous groups and those from other minorities groups.
  - Establish helpdesks for legal support at upazilla level
  - Ensure National Trauma Counseling Center and One Stop Crisis Centres continue providing essential services in a safe manner, including provision of counsellor for gender diverse population
  - Strengthen the monitoring mechanism of government services to ensure quality of the support provided to victims and survivors of violence against women and ensure accountability and transparency.
  - Support shelters operated by NGOs so that they have the resources, capacity and equipment such as PPEs, COVID prevention and response protocols and funding to arrange transportation for victims and continue to provide a safe space for women and gender-diverse people in need.
  - Increase the number of women police among those who are in the frontline, ensure that women's police desk remain responsive to call for help, and strengthen the role of the Women's Police Network.
4. Ensure that women and girls in the marginalized communities have access to COVID-19 public health and GBV prevention and response messages, including on child marriage, through **means of communication that are more accessible** to them such as TV, radio and SMS.

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<sup>7</sup> Information from Lighthouse

5. **Prevent sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA)** in quarantine and isolation centres and during relief distribution through adopting a Code of Conduct, training personnel, and distributing information to beneficiaries.
6. Pay attention to the significant **role that women are playing as frontline health workers and community health workers**. Raise awareness amongst the general public to **combat social stigma surrounding women health professionals**. Ensure their **access to women-friendly PPE** and support for their **mental, physical and sexual and reproductive health**. Support them manage their family care responsibilities through flexible hours and access to COVID-safe childcare service.
7. Ensure that provision of sexual and reproductive health care services is continued, with special attention to adolescent girls.
8. Strengthen **implementation and monitoring of Government's relief measures** such as food and cash distribution by **partnering with NGOs and Community Based Organizations led by women and gender-diverse people** that can ensure that the most vulnerable people are reached. This includes the support of the Wage Earner Welfare Board that has been promised to returning female migrant workers.
9. Urgently **expand the existing social safety net and cash transfers programmes** targeting the newly vulnerable women, girls and gender-diverse people to ensure food security, and to compensate women, especially those in the informal sector, who have lost their income or need to reduce their working hours due to increased unpaid care responsibilities.
10. **Design economic response and recovery packages with a gender lens and assess their impact on women and men**. The Government must ensure that measures aimed at saving jobs and helping businesses weather the crisis benefit women. This includes targeted support to feminized sectors and occupations, including SMEs and women-owned enterprises.
11. To ensure that all women and girls have access to information and digitalized services that are being promoted to respond to COVID, **close the digital gender gap** in partnership with the private sector by subsidizing or introducing affordable internet connections and devices and building the capacities and skills of women and girls.
12. Launch a **nationwide advocacy and media campaign**, inclusive of disabilities and other diversities, to address and prevent gender-based violence, end child marriage and other harmful practices for women and girls and promote sharing of household and caring responsibilities between women and men and transgender persons.

The Call for Action is endorsed by the following civil society organizations (in alphabetic order) representing the Gender Monitoring Network: Aain O Shalish Kendra, Bandhu, Bangladesh Mahila parishad, Bangladesh Nari Sromik Kenra, Bindu, Christian Aid, Light House, Manusher Jonno Foundation, Naripokkho, and Prottoy Unnayan Shongstha.