

# “GENDERED IMPACTS OF COVID-19”

Date: May 19, 2020

UN Women arranged a webinar entitled “Gendered Impacts of COVID-19”. The discussion attended by about 150 diverse participants was chaired by **Shoko Ishikawa**, UN Women Country Representative. Panellists included **Dr. Abul Hossain**, Deputy Secretary, Ministry of Women and Children Affairs and Project Director for Multisectoral Programme on Violence Against Women; **Ms. Nobonita Chowdhury**, Director, Gender Justice Diversity and Prevention of Violence against Women initiative, BRAC; **Dr. Nazeen Ahmed**, Senior Research Fellow, Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies; and **Ms. Shampa Goswami**, Executive Director, Prerona Nari Unnayan Sangothon from Satkhira. **Dilruba Haider** of UN Women, opened the webinar with a presentation of key findings from the Rapid Gender Analysis (RGA) of the impacts of COVID-19, prepared by the Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group of the Humanitarian Coordination Task Team, an interagency working group co-chaired by Department of Women Affairs and UN Women.

The RGA identified critical areas where pre-existing inequalities are rendering women, children and other gender groups more vulnerable to the impact of COVID: lack of access to basic services such as health care, nutritional services, maternal health care and support for GBV survivors; protection against GBV, massive loss of livelihoods; unequal burden of unpaid and care work; lack of access to information leading to stigmatization; and lack of participation of women in the decision-making processes of the COVID-19 response. COVID-19 is affecting most of the population in varying degrees, but women, girls and gender-diverse persons are disproportionately at risk and affected.

## Panelist presentation and discussions

The panellists shared the suffering and emerging threats which women are facing as a result of the ongoing crisis and shared their recommendations. Ms. Chowdhury pointed out the vulnerabilities and potential risks confronted by the marginalized women identified by BRAC in their rapid gender assessment based on a survey of their programme participants. She shared how women are faced with significant loss of income, challenges with securing food for their family, increase in household and care work, domestic violence and heightened risk of child marriage, gaps in access to information on means to protect themselves from COVID. Dr. Nazneen Ahmed spoke on the economic impact of the crisis and its implications for the lives and livelihoods of women.

She raised concern for women in the informal sector and recommended post COVID-19 livelihood opportunities for women. Dr. Hossain shared how the GBV services and centres run by the Government are offering support for women during the COVID-19 crisis. Ms. Shampa Goswami spoke about how her organization is engaged in responding to the unprecedented public health crisis through communication activities and mask making as cash-for-work activities involving women at the grassroots level. Ms Goswami also voiced concerns about Cyclone AmPhan and shared how the preparedness actions have been made more challenging due to COVID-19 fears and requirements for social distancing.

The issues raised by panelists and discussions that followed with participants broadly converged around the increase in violence against women and loss of livelihoods of women.



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## Gender-based violence (GBV) including domestic violence

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many women are locked up with their abusive partners while support services are inaccessible. **GBV is increasing because of economic and social stress, restricted movement, and social isolation measures.** According to the RGA report by UN Women, in April 2020 there were 19 rape cases and physical assault cases reported in media, 49.2% of women and girls felt safety and security was an issue due to the lockdown and loss of livelihoods, and 33% of women and girls were unaware of where to seek help. Ms. Chowdhury confirmed that in BRAC's survey, over 30% of women participating in their projects reported facing domestic violence since COVID lockdown started. **She also shared that there is an indication of increase in child marriage out of economic necessity** and local authorities that are supposed to prevent child marriage are distracted. GBV services have also become extremely difficult for victims to access. BRAC itself has **not been able to continue running its 93 shelter homes** from fear of spreading the virus. It is unclear how to initiate legal action when police and courts are not accessible, and **domestic violence is not yet included in virtual courts**, although the Citizens Initiatives for Domestic Violence has written to the Chief Justice about this. Acknowledging Bangladesh's high prevalence of violence against women and girls and its soaring trend during this pandemic, Dr. Hossain shared that the services which the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs offers, including **One Stop Crisis Centres at the Upazila level, National Trauma Counselling Centres, and the National Help Line for GBV - 109 - open 24/7, are continuing to support women during the crisis.** He shared that the National Help Line is receiving approximately 10,000 calls a day now, up from an average of 6,000 calls before the COVID-19 outbreak. MOWCA is also **providing online psycho-social counselling and actively disseminating information** on its helpline and online counselling in collaboration with the ICT Division. He did acknowledge, however, that local level response is not optimal and the local officials that receive referral information from the helpline are not taking action in many cases. In response to Ms. Chowdhury's question regarding how to file a case with the police during COVID, Dr. Hossain shared that **General Diary forms are available online and online submissions can be made.** A number of participants however asked how this would help women who have no access to the internet or mobile phones. Ms. Chowdhury recommended that some services such as the **Women's Help Desks which the government committed to establish in all police stations with the placement of 2 dedicated women police officers to support victims of VAW be put into place urgently** for women that have no way of receiving support otherwise.

## Unemployment, economic impact and loss of livelihood

The COVID-19 outbreak has impacted women and men very differently. Dr. Ahmed remarked that no doubt jobs have been lost but the situation is worse for women who were already disadvantaged in the labour market. The gender gap in labour market is already huge. In Bangladesh women's labour force participation is low and most women work in the informal sector, therefore, **women were already behind men in terms of economic participation and as COVID-19 evolved women are suffering more now.** According to the RGA report of UN Women, 93.3% of women in rural areas are in informal employment compared to 87.3% of women in urban areas (LFS, BBS 2016-17), and their earnings are at risk considering the countrywide lockdown. UN Women's survey findings show that many women have lost their jobs, or their working hours were reduced (83% of formal employees, 49% of informal employees). In the readymade garments sector, 65% of employees are women (around 3 million) who are among the hardest hit by COVID-19. As a result of initial closure of 1,904 factories in March as ordered by the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments, 2,138,778 workers in the readymade garments sector lost their jobs. Some 4,500 female sex workers residing in 11 brothels in 8 districts lost income. In Bangladesh, 3,350 Hijra community members and 8,533 floating Hijra were affected and 82% of transgender people had no income in March.

Most of them did not get any support. Ms. Chowdhury shared that 91% of the 557 of their programme participants who were surveyed said that their income has been affected, and 69% of female respondents and 67% of male respondents reported that their income had totally stopped in the first week of national shutdown declared by the Government. The BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) study on the economic impact of the crisis shows a 16% increase in the population in extreme poverty. Among people living in extreme poverty, 40% do not have any food. Among all survey respondents, 73% of women and 63% of men reported that they are struggling to meet their need for sufficient nutritious food. The closure of schools and workplaces have increased the **burden of domestic care work on women**. Women are not only struggling as frontline workers, but they are also battling in the domestic sphere of life. UN Women's rapid survey suggests there has been little to no re-distribution of domestic work during the confinement. Although men are at home and sharing some responsibilities for children's education or playing with children (10% as opposed to women's 5%), women's household chores have increased and is disproportionately affecting women. Ms. Chowdhury agreed with this finding and shared that BRAC's survey also revealed a significant increase of domestic work and care work for women. She shared that 89% of women that they surveyed reported that they do not have any leisure time since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis.

Although the government stimulus package includes a commitment to distribute BDT 2500 to 50 lakh poor families, there are **challenges for women to access this payment because the fund transfers are made through mobile financial services**. Many poor women do not own mobile phones of their own. Ms. Chowdhury shared that the procedures for signing up for mobile financial services which requires for women to have a National ID, a mobile number registered against this ID could be difficult and recommended that some flexibility be applied to allow women use other forms of IDs. Dr. Nazneen Ahmed also shared that the Government has allocated BDT 20000 crore for MSMEs and 5% of this is specifically for women entrepreneurs. The Ministry of Women and Children Affairs should work closely with Bangladesh Bank to ensure that women entrepreneurs leading small and medium-sized enterprises are able to access and benefit from it. For the businesses in the informal sector, the Government has allocated BDT 3,000 crore to be disbursed to micro entrepreneurs through non-governmental organizations. Many of **women entrepreneurs are not aware about these measures** and NGOs could ensure that women in the informal sector know how to access these funds. In terms of other measures to support women's economic livelihoods and their recovery, Dr. Ahmed and participants provided the following recommendations.

## Recommendations

- ➔ Conduct a survey to identify new vulnerable communities/women due to the COVID-19 pandemic; **develop and revamp the programmes for vulnerable communities** to reach out to them in a holistic and comprehensive way.
- ➔ The Ministry of Women and Children Affairs can work closely with Ministry of Labour and Employment and Ministry of Youth and Sports on an initiative to support **short term employment with the provision of skill training for women**.
- ➔ Mass people need to be made aware of the service which has been established to **file General Diary (GD) online for receiving legal help**.
- ➔ The **national ID card process of the Government needs to be eased** as individuals must have an ID card to receive any cash assistance from Government and non-government entity.
- ➔ Prioritize training on **e-commerce and use of digital platforms for young female university graduates and women small enterprises owners**. Prepare them to be part of the digital economy.
- ➔ Ensure that women who are engaged with poultry, livestock, and milk production have continued access to **good supply chains**.
- ➔ Support women to engage in **ago-processing** which is a sector with growing domestic demand due to fall in exports.

## Recommendations

- ➔ Provide **women in the informal sector with easy loan opportunities** to get back to business. To this end, advocate with the SME foundation to introduce special measures to support the most disadvantaged women entrepreneurs.
- ➔ Establish **alternative livelihood opportunities for migrant women workers** returning from overseas. Take steps to **arrange training** for them to include them in the workforce.
- ➔ Provide **training for sex workers** that wish to engage in adopt an alternative livelihood activity.

In her closing remarks, Shoko Ishikawa reminded participants that we should not forget the gender digital divide that exists in Bangladesh when devising solutions to GBV and women's economic empowerment. We need to use this current crisis as an opportunity further **promote digital access for women**. We need to work with the private sector to put mobile phones and smartphones in the hands of women so that women are not left behind.

## Note

Full Report provides further details and elaboration:

<https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/05/covid-19-bangladesh-rapid-gender-analysis>

Video link of the webinar: <https://bit.ly/36pxPm5>