

Increased burdens on women in Bangladesh during the COVID-19 pandemic

On 26 March 2020 the Government of Bangladesh announced a complete ‘lockdown’ throughout the country until 30 May 2020 that included the closure of educational institutions, offices and transportation (Dhaka Tribune, April, 2020). This sudden lockdown led to job losses; 71% in slums and 61 % in non-slum areas. (The Business Standard, 2020). People who worked in the informal sector lost their jobs without any prior notice and were affected the most (Hossain, 2021). Typically, women are considered economically more vulnerable than men (Linde and Laya, 2020). With the lockdowns imposed in Bangladesh, this understandably took a toll on women’s mental and emotional state, particularly due to the growing concerns about their family’s wellbeing.

Methodology

For our research, we interviewed 28 women and 12 men in Bangladesh to understand the specific impacts of COVID-19 on household responsibilities and whether there was a gendered dimension. The first round of interviews, conducted by phone, focused on understanding the changes in household responsibilities for women during the first phase of lockdown

(March-August 2020). The respondents were selected nationwide from our previous data base. 32 respondents were from the Dhaka district, primarily living in urban slums, the remaining 8 were from various other districts. We then selected a cohort of 15 respondents (12 women and three men), with whom we conducted two rounds of follow up interviews.



Characteristics		No. of participants (N=40)
Gender	Male	12
	Female	28
Marital status	Married	22
	Unmarried	5
	Divorced	4
	Widowed	9
Children	Has children	32
	Doesn't have children	8

contd.

Characteristics		No. of participants (N=40)
Occupation of the respondent	Salaried Workers (Community Health Worker- 1, NGO Staff- 1, Domestic Help- 9, Casino Manager- 1, Driver- 2, RMG Worker- 4, Sweeper/Cleaner- 4, Receptionist- 1)	23
	Business Owner (Computer Business- 1, Tea Stall Owner- 3)	4
	Homemaker	5
	Daily Wage Earner (Mason- 1, Hawker- 1, Saleswoman- 2)	4
	Student (College 2nd year and 10th Grade)	2
	Retired (Court Clerk)	1
	Farmer	1

Fears and emotional and mental distress due to COVID-19

A majority of our respondents lived in urban slums, where it was difficult to maintain COVID-19 protocols. This is most evident in the densely populated informal slums, known as *bastis*. In Bangladesh's capital Dhaka, an estimated 7 million people reside in approximately 3,394 slums (BBS, 2015) which have poor, congested living conditions, where families comprising an average of 4.3 members, reside in single 12 square metre rooms (Granade et al., 2018). While most slums in Dhaka have access to piped water, both drinking water and sanitation facilities are shared among at least ten households (Hasan et al., 2021; Granade et al., 2018). All these factors indicated that slums were likely to be a hotspot for COVID-19 transmission. In addition, complying with the various rules of distance was not possible in these spaces.

“We are people living in such a densely populated area, like a colony of ants... They told us to keep a distance of three feet, but if all of us who live in this area all sit together, then not even three inches of space will be there. How can you keep a distance of three feet there?”

(Driver, man, 23 year old)

During this time, the government enforced a lockdown by deploying the police and army to patrol Dhaka streets. No one was allowed to travel without explicit permission. This added to the existing fears of the virus among our respondents.

“I was very scared during Corona. They did not let us out. Who knows what can get in at any time. We stayed among so many families. If it happened to one of us, it would have spread in the whole area. Everyone was afraid”

(Domestic Worker, woman, 28 year old)

However, respondents who mentioned fear of COVID-19 were among the minority when we began data collection in January, 2021. After the first lockdown (26 March – 31 May 2020) had been lifted, we found that for many of our respondents, the fear of COVID-19 had somewhat dissipated by the time we spoke to them and conducted in-person interviews; the messaging around COVID-19 was changing. There was news of vaccines coming to Bangladesh, and the messaging was around keeping the economy open with basic precautions (wearing masks, washing hands, trying to socially distance).

Although schools remained closed, all other public spaces had opened and public transport was also running; visibility of people on the streets during that time – combined with fewer members of law enforcement – provided a sense of relief that decreased the state of fear among the respondents.

“People now are very aware. The government has taken steps to raise awareness through television, mobile SMS etc. In the beginning everyone was terrified of Corona. But they did not know what Corona is, how it spreads, what affect it can have. The people in the slums in my area were very unaware of these. Most of them are illiterate. We tried relieving their fear and growing awareness in them. So they could keep themselves and others safe.”

(Student, man, 23)

Among the respondents, none witnessed any deaths caused by COVID-19; they hadn't even heard that anyone they knew lost someone. Hence, the fear of death or worsening of their health conditions due to COVID-19 was not on their minds. Rather, their main concern was the economic crisis that was caused by the pandemic.

“We were not afraid of Corona. We feared that we might die of hunger.”

(Domestic worker, woman, 19)

Our respondents were faced with continued fears around loss of income, food insecurity and increased uncertainty about the future. Thus, when they were asked about their fears around COVID-19, they openly shared that they were rooted around looming starvation if they cannot manage to gather food.

“Honestly apa, there is no fear now. A lot of people talk about the safety measures against Corona. A lot of people, community health workers, explain about coronavirus and its preventative measures. So the fear decreases a lot when compared to before. The fear is not as strong as before. We are trying to maintain safety - we still use a mask when we go outside.”

(Tea-stall owner, woman, 23)



However, after the first and second phase of the lockdown when everything started opening up in June 2020 and August 2021, the main concern of the respondents was being unable to get their jobs back. Consequently, the economic crisis remained the same as it was during the lockdown. Domestic workers, cleaners and other informal workers did not get their jobs back. In the case of domestic workers, many employers were uncomfortable taking them back due to the fear of COVID-19. To those who got their jobs back, the working hours or the responsibilities were reduced which led to a reduction in their income. This whole situation raised concerns about the economic crisis and reduction in food consumption.

“I am able to pay the rent now but during the pandemic I could not. We did not even have enough money to pay for food.”

(Domestic worker, woman, 19)

“I didn't have rice or lentils at home because I didn't have income. We are daily earners, if we don't work, we can't eat.”

(Housewife, woman, 35)

This led to growing emotional and mental distress among our respondents. Without anywhere to go or anyone to share with, our respondents were stressed and irritable. They did their best to cope with their worries and anxieties, and were often responsible for easing the restlessness and stress of their other family members and children.



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“I felt anxious and agitated all the time... our children were crying to get out of the house to play. I have to beat them, give them the food they crave, divert them, do so many things so that they would just shut up and sit quietly at home.”

(Housewife, woman, 35)

However, many others relied on social networks and support from family, neighbours and friends during this time.

Increased household responsibilities

Among 28 female respondents, 21 stated that the pandemic and the initial lockdown had led to a multitude of challenges for them, including increased household work due to the extra precautions they had to take because of COVID-19. As there were more people staying at home at all times (family members not leaving for work or going out to socialise), there was an increase in the amount of cooking, washing, maintaining cleanliness, brining and storing water when compared to the pre-pandemic situation and the burden fell on the women.

“Yes, during the lockdown the work pressure increased. I had to boil water several times a day. Everyone in the family used to say that drinking warm water was good. I had to make tea with ginger because we heard it was a good precaution. I had to keep things clean a lot with soap and water and made sure everyone washed their hands. I had to make food for everyone as well. The children used to bathe or wash their hands and feet in normal times, during the Corona season they bathed to keep themselves safe.”

(Domestic worker, woman, early 30's)

“Well, the added work during the lockdown was constantly making hot water, then spraying the house with disinfectant. I had to clean and sweep more carefully and frequently. So household chores increased, like washing clothes, sweeping and wiping the floors. When men stay at the house all day, the workload naturally increases. Like, it creates a disturbance... Women's work in the house will have to be done, won't it? For women the good work is cooking, cleaning, sweeping, washing these things.”

(Garments worker, woman, 28)

“Yes, it was a lot of pressure but there is nothing to do, is there? If I do not complete my own work, then who will do my work? When I felt really upset, I used to leave the chores undone. I did them later when I felt better.”

(Tea-stall owner, woman, 23)

This burden continued, especially for mothers who still had to work, their children being at home all day since schools in Bangladesh remain closed as of February 2022.

Increased burden of childcare

In most cases, women are considered responsible for taking care of children (Peterson and Gerson, 1992). Among our 22 married respondents, 18 had children. Of these 18, nine married women who had children aged below nine years of age stated that having children increased the pressures at home and that during lockdown, they had the added responsibility of looking after their children, who would normally be in school for a significant portion of the day. Bangladesh had one of the longest cases of uninterrupted school closure lasting from March 17 2020 until late February, 2022.





“I used to cook food, clean the house, all the while looking after the new born and my three-year old.”

(Tea-stall owner, woman)

“Early in the morning, at dawn then I pray my Namaz... I pray, then I mop the house, clean the house, bring water from the tube well, wash the dishes, look after the baby, and feed my children. The older daughter used to go to school, but now she doesn't. So, I wake her up, and then make her ready for coaching at home.”

(Homemaker, woman, 28)

“He used to go to school before. He studied till ‘class 3’. Then the pandemic happened, and he stopped going. I home-school him and prepared him for school. One of my aunts has been teaching him for a month now.”

(Domestic worker, woman, 23)



“Have you ever seen men working in the kitchen? Never! Even though now I have a little pressure due to the lockdown, these household chores are my responsibilities. I cannot ask my husband to do this. My mother, my mother-in-law never did this, how can I?”

(Domestic worker, woman, early 20's)

Even though during the periods of lockdown both parents were at home, most of our respondents agreed that responsibility for children mostly lay with mothers.

Support from family (husbands)

During the interviews, respondents were asked whether their husbands provided any support in completing the household chores. A majority of them responded that they did not receive any such support. Our female respondents felt that men are not capable of carrying out these responsibilities.

Some of our female respondents opined that they are not used to their husband's assisting in the kitchen or in the regular household chores. It feels very awkward and out of place to them that a man is helping with the tasks that they consider to be for women. They are not accustomed to seeing men helping women in the kitchen.

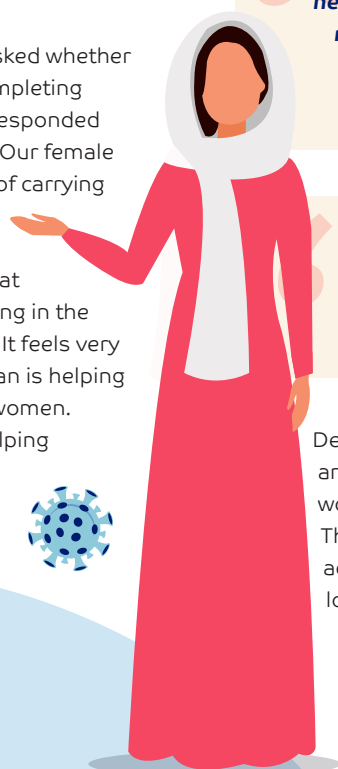
“Their father does not really take care of [our children]. When I am not home, I ask my neighbours to look after them, or sometimes my daughter (who is nine) looks after her younger brother (who is four).”

(Domestic worker, woman, 24)

“My husband doesn't help with household chores. Nothing, he won't say anything. He will quietly leave the home.”

(Domestic worker, woman, 35)

Despite most of our respondents reporting struggle and lack of support, four out of our 19 married women gave us a very different type of response. They happened to have a supportive partner who acknowledged the increased household work during lockdown and these partners tried helping their wives.



“Not everyone is the same. Many men think that the females should cook. They think that we should cook them the food as they earn the money. But my husband loves me like that. He feels good helping me.”
(Domestic worker, woman, 19)

Momena is a 23-year-old housemaid who lives in Kallyanpur in a joint family with her husband, two-year-old daughter and in-laws. Her husband was a rickshaw puller but lost his job during the first phase of lockdown. Throughout the lockdown, her husband was extremely supportive. She shared that she never had to feel distressed because of the support of her husband. He helped her with the household chores, even when she would request him not to work so much as the neighbours might make fun of him. Her husband apparently enjoyed working and reassured her that it did not matter what others thought, he wanted to help her.

“I wake up during the time of Fajr [the prayer time before dawn]. perform my prayers, do my household chores, make breakfast for everyone and then by nine, I try to leave for work... My husband is helpful as well. But he is a heart patient, so I don't let him do heavy work. He just brings groceries sometimes, maybe feeds my mother-in-law sometimes. My mother-in-law is a paralyzed patient.”
(Community Health Worker, woman, early 30's)

“Yes, my husband looked after my daughter when she would cry. When I breastfed her, he would cook for me even or heat the food. He even does them now.”
(Domestic worker, woman, 19)



Support from other family members

12 female respondents got additional help from the other family members who are women. They got help from their daughters, mothers-in-law, daughters-in-law, sisters-in-law, mothers etc. Our findings indicated that respondents (or respondent's wives) with other female members living with them had additional support in household workload.

“My daughter helps out with household chores. She helps out with whatever work there is at home.”
(Homemaker, woman, 28)

“The females of our house do all these. My bhabhi (sister-in-law) and wife are there to complete all the tasks.”
(Factory worker, man, 32)

“Since my aunt was pregnant, I used to do her work as well. Like after finishing my household chores, I used to go over to their house and do their dishes, my aunt could not bend over, so I used to sweep the floor and then wipe it as well. While she was pregnant, she could not do this work, so I did it for her.”
(Student, woman, 17)

Conclusion

Our findings showed that in terms of household workload, women tend to take on more responsibilities than their male counterparts. Many women had to put up with this increased workload without any kind of support during the lockdown. Our initial findings show that both men and women are used to the notion that the household responsibilities are women's; men are not accountable for doing anything. They are used to this dynamic of work distribution in the family. This is a common practice of gender roles in patriarchal society, women are most likely to take responsibility for household chores (Fikree and Pasha, 2004). Their constant labour in the house comes with a significant impact on their health and wellbeing and in most cases, their well-being is overlooked. Moreover, this workload also has an impact on their mental health, with women having noticeably higher amounts of distress compared to men in general (Matud, 2004).

We will have to ensure justice to the group who is more vulnerable to pandemic. It is unfair to see one specific group is suffering more than another group within the same household. These problems need to be identified through the gender lens and solved accordingly and also we need to ensure the inclusion of the vulnerable groups that are impacted more in the pandemic.

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