The Gender Dimension of the COVID-19 Crisis: A Bangladesh Perspective

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The COVID-19 has taken the world by storm as the pandemic went across the globe. This unprecedented public health risks, the global economy experiencing a massive shock. The COVID-19 pandemic had proven deadly across the world. Bangladesh is a developing country with a limited resources and a huge population. Gender has always been an indicator of development of a country and Bangladesh as a country made a significant progress. However, the after effects of the pandemic such as massive unemployment, disruption of global supply-chain, loss of FDI – has a gender dimension in this pandemic.

Poverty, socio-economic stress, scarcity of resources as well as scarcity of health care facilities to meet everyone's needs is putting enormous stress on the limited resources of the country. Disease outbreak like this affects the both genders in the society differently. It is clear that a pandemic such as this would increase the existing social inequalities between the genders along with the re-enforcing the pre-existing discrimination of within the social indigenous and marginalized groups in the society.

Bangladesh, not been an exception to these risks, has been exposed to substantial economic fallout due to the pandemic crisis, resulting in immense amount of financial pressure in all classes of people. Unemployment has become one of the major concerns now due to massive lay-off in the service sectors. Due to the socio-economic circumstances, people from all social class are fighting their own battles against the pandemic crisis. It is clearly evident that the wealth gap between the rich and the poor is widening, while the lower and the middle income people are being the most vulnerable. Disease outbreak like this affects the men and women of the society differently. At the same time, the existing social inequalities between the male-female along with the pre-existing discrimination in the society is growing. Rise of Gender Based Violence (GBV), intimate partner/ domestic abuse, sexual harassment, mental health breakdown,

unmet needs of SRHR services, work-life imbalance are making women, children, indigenous, marginalized groups and gender diverse persons of different social class more vulnerable. These are some of the key issues that are found by observing the lockdown situation through the lens of gender in Bangladesh that suggests the need of gender-sensitive intersectional approaches to eradicate the underlying unequal gender power relations compounded by discrimination in the society in times of Covid-19.

Globally, gender based violence are on rise due to this pandemic crisis and social distancing scenario is "fueling" into it. In Bangladesh, violence against women had been an endemic issue for a long time and now the overall lockdown situation made it even worse. The recent Facebook Live streaming incident of a Bangladeshi man suggest that outlook towards the females in Bangladeshi society poses a clear and present danger towards the females. Rights activists from different areas have validated that this pandemic and lockdown has made women and children more vulnerable to domestic abuse as many of them are confined to their homes. Most of the women are left with no external support. According to the recent report, published through online press briefing of Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF), reputed organization working on the women issues on May this year, suggested that 4,249 women and 456 children were subjected to domestic violence in 27 districts of Bangladesh amid the lockdown implemented by the government to combat the corona virus pandemic. According to the organization, almost 1,672 women and 424 children endured the violence for the first time during this lockdown. Most of the reports of Bangladesh on lockdown period states that as financial pressure is getting higher due to unemployment and massive economic fallout, the earning members (which in most cases are men) are lashing out their frustrations over the women and children and they are becoming the main victims of the domestic violence from their own families. Lack of access towards information on Gender Based Violence (GBV) hotlines and Safe Shelters for women, due to fighting pandemic crisis, are leaving women with fewer options to escape the violence.

During this pandemic lockdown, the mental health situation is severely deteriorating with the rising number of affected patients and the death rate due to covid-19 as well as other socio-economic issues affecting people across the world. Increasing number of women are experiencing different kinds of domestic abuse, whether physically or mentally, along with the fear of the Coronavirus, financial loss and feeling the stress of increased burden of caring for the

others. As a result, a substantial number of women and young girls are facing mental health issues in Bangladesh. Though most of the people apart from gender grounds are at risk of mental breakdown, but due to the financial stress and family protection concerns in fear of virus, the women are being the vulnerable group facing more stress.

Viewing the pandemic crisis with the gender lens, another key issue is the lack of basic necessity among the marginalized people in society and different communities of indigenous people of Bangladesh. Due to the lockdown, people who work as daily need basis, from different ethnic community as Garo, Chakma etc and indigenous communities as the Bede, Munda, etc are practically jobless. The "Stay-at-home" orders and the suspension of economic activities are impacting women who are disproportionately engaged in different informal job sectors e.g. domestic work, sex-work, microbusiness, street-cleaning etc. and also for the socially marginalized people. The situation is getting more difficult for the socially marginalized groups such as the differently abled people, the communities of migrated people, fishermen, cleaners, sweepers as well as Transgender community due to the pre-existing severe discrimination in the society towards them by others in getting access to the basic health facilities like others. These people are not covered by the pre-existing social assistance measures and thus are failing to get the access now which are making their livelihood very difficult. In this pandemic situation, women from the socially marginalized groups, ethnic community and indigenous community have become more vulnerable due to lack of basic human necessities, more difficulty in getting relief, maintaining hygiene code and ensuring their own safety also. These aspects now give a more prevalent view to the necessity of gender-sensitive approaches regarding fighting the pandemic crisis situation.

This pandemic of 2020 has become a phenomenon for the global socio-economic sector, jeopardizing many industries and the livelihoods of the global citizens. Viewing this disease outbreak in the gender perspective, many key issues have come forward regarding different marginalized, indigenous and gender diverse groups of people. To fight against the pandemic crisis, cooperation between government, legal and development agencies, NGOs, social welfare organizations, Woman's organizations and community based organizations must effectively respond to the crisis. It is clear that we need a blend of strategies, policies and effective interventions to combat gender-sensitive issues.

The problem COVID-19 poses a series of issues, such as health issues, financial meltdown and domestic violence – all affecting the females of our society, regardless of social class and financial abilities. Wider and coordinated provision of essential healthcare services including access to SRHR services, mental health support needs to be ensured for the vulnerable women and children. Special attention should be given for ensuring safe pregnancy and childbirth as well as towards the pregnant women and new born babies so that they do not get affected. Transparency in relief giving services by priority based targeting of female headed households, single mothers and the most vulnerable and marginalized communities must be ensured. To prevent GBV, domestic abuse and sexual harassment; hotline services need to be more responsive and service providers should be trained to provide rights-based survival centric guidance and instructions, being more approachable. Temporary COVID-safe shelter home can be a big help for the violence survivors and for the marginalized people who might in need of a place to stay. It is also important to ensure emergency response at all levels of people in urban and rural level. Government and private initiatives together is needed for raising awareness to the people, especially rural one about the health risks of covid-19, emergency response information, relief procedure whereabouts, hygiene issues in a coordinated manner by both as well as ensure to abolish any harmful gender norms, practice or superstitions regarding pandemic by understanding the dynamics of the vulnerability to infection, exposure and treatment that can influence men and women differently.

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