

## **Working towards an “Equal Future” in COVID-19: Eliminating Domestic Violence against Women in Bangladesh**

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Bangladesh is observing its glorious 50 years in 2021 with many optimistic reasons to celebrate. After being an independent nation, Bangladeshi women have come a long way striking every hurdle in their paths. They have paved their ways towards entrepreneurship, leadership, workforce empowerment, politics, and education, creating a milestone towards building an egalitarian society. However, when a crisis strikes in whether national or global, natural or man-made, the women and girls are the first front liners to endure the ugly factors deeply rooted in our society that comes to surface as discrimination, domestic violence, sexual violence, early marriage, and restrictions imposed for namesake of different cultural, religious and patriarchal-misogynist factors. The surge of the second wave of COVID-19 Pandemic has prompted a question regarding the safety for the women nationwide as well as globally. In 2021, by just observing the International Women’s day on the theme “Women in Leadership: Achieving an equal future in a COVID-19 world” is not enough, addressing the issue of violence and ensuring peace and security for every woman should be the main motto.

This COVID-19 pandemic has pointed out to us clearly the underlying facets of inequality existing in our society. In the first wave the number of resurgences of violence in every manner towards women and girls of every social class were devastating. Experts have repeatedly mentioned how vital it has become to see the Post-COVID world through a gendered lens in order to ensure a safe space for everyone. Though Violence Against Women (VAW) is a worldwide common phenomenon, the recent pandemic seems to have spiked the rate globally and nationally in a short span of time. In the recent [report](#) by UNFPA, UN Women, ILO in association with Quilt.AI, an analytical company showed that internet searches related to violence against women and help seeking rose significantly during COVID-19 lockdowns in eight Asian countries namely- Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. The big data

analysis of the report found that online searches between October 2019 to November 2020 were mostly related to physical violence- including keywords as “physical abuse signs”, “violent relationship”, “violent partner signs”, “how to cover bruises on face” respectively in Malaysia, Philippines and Nepal increased 47 per cent, 63 per cent, and 55 per cent and searches related to help-seeking as “domestic violence hotline” increased in almost all the 8 countries up to 70%. Also, a significant rise in online misogyny including trolling, victim-blaming, online harassment and negative attitude towards females were seen prominently in the social media sites. Among 7 countries from these 8, there were search analysis points regarding partner violence, sexual abuse by violent partner, likely by the survivors of partner violence. According to Action Aid Bangladesh, worldwide violence against women, especially domestic violence, has increased extensively: such as in 2020 the increase is in Italy 59%, in Nigeria 700%, in Palestine 700% and in Bangladesh 983% compared to 2019 during lockdown period in respective countries. Especially focusing on Bangladesh, they found that sexual and domestic violence has increased tenfold, and a 345% increase in cases of physical violence against women in Bangladesh has been observed (Source: [Daily Star, November, 2020](#)). Manusher Jonno Foundation, a renowned NGO working against VA, reported that 4,705 women and children were found to have reported of Domestic violence in April 2020 (Source: [Daily Star, November, 2020](#)). Violence in the community level has increased heavily on the girls as well giving a spike to 72% increase in Child marriage in 2020 according to [BRAC](#). According to the statistics of Ain O Salish Kendra, 554 women were victims of domestic violence of which 367 died and 90 committed suicide. 218 women were subjected to violence for dowry of which 89 died as a result of the abuse and 18 committed suicide (Source: [Daily Star, April, 2021](#)). These situations did not only rise due to the frustrations and unstable situation due to COVID-19 Pandemic, the patriarchal culture and gender inequality permeating different spheres of the society that exist across every institution, including State, family and society are the leading causes to it.

It is an irony that Bangladesh has a specific law- The Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act 2010 (DV Act), which is currently being implemented for women is the National Women Development Policy 2011 and a part of that policy is dedicated to violence against women including Domestic violence; but most of the women in Bangladesh do not have an idea about this law at all. We even have many women-friendly laws as in the Prevention of Women and Child Repression Act, 2000, the Acid Control Act, 2002 and the Acid Crime Prevention Act, 2002 were

some of the good laws that Bangladesh had enacted. The State actors have taken some significant steps regarding legislation and law enforcement as introducing separate Female police/RAB cell as hotline for the victims, increasing support services for the survivor women and the most recent edition will be the death penalty for the rapists; but still in fear of family honor most women would remain silent and endure domestic violence till death rather seeking help.

These steps as improving acts in the laws and legislation, increasing support systems for the survivors but to work towards a better future, safe environment and most likely towards building an “Equal Future”, we need to address the issue of violence against women and especially domestic violence in a very intimidating way as it is the main cause that is pulling our independent women backwards. Along with enactment of laws, ensuring proper implementation of laws are crucial. Bangladesh needs to tackle this in a more structured approach. The financial tension, growing frustration of safety, health issues, unstable socio-political environment every factor has its own contribution to the increase of domestic violence in the pandemic. Though there is a 24/7 National Helpline for Violence against Women remained open during the lockdown, providing effective legal, medical and psychosocial support to the victims within the existing constraints proved to be a challenge. Adequate number of government funded safety shelters and trained personnel can be a great remedy towards the elimination of violence cases as well as a proper implementation of the law. Along with a holistic approach by all the concerned state/non-state stakeholders, implementation of the law against the perpetrators are inevitable. Though many NGO, INGO and other institutions are taking initiatives to help the constrained women who are a victim of domestic violence but due to the absence of integrated state-run measures, the steps taken by these institutions are rarely seemed to be of help. Government and Non-government stakeholders have taken some initiatives as victim support centers, some safety shelters, one stop crisis point and support services that have been proven as great measures towards the elimination of VAW but we are still at the ‘break-even-point’ and need to reach our optimum level and for that coordination of both the concerned actors are absolute necessity. As different crisis management is done by publicity, we need to promote our rights, our laws and initiatives against VAW so that women do not endure these tortures and seek help or take proper actions against the violence against them. Bangladesh needs to come up with an innovative approach as online texting service from the national helpline or create a digital platform or an app that can help the survivor in such a mechanism that does not need to have a phone call and the victim can seek help easily by saving

herself from the eyes of the perpetrator. The service providers need to be more empathetic at their own respective service so that every woman can feel safe to seek help or reach out easily. To be more inclusive we need to have a policy and a structure that can help women of every social class whether the person is from a majority group or a minority and help women know their rights at every level. Though COVID-19 pandemic is making it harder to address the issue, concerted commitment to protect the rights of women and aligned structured approaches to reach out to every girl and women in crisis can contribute to reaching our goal. The males of the society should equally be aware and participate to ensure the peace and safety for women and contribute to eliminate the misogynist attitude of the society. Then one day we can have the “Equal Society” for all.

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