



The Daily Star



# PANDEMIC AND DISASTER - LIFE OF WOMEN AND GIRLS IN CLIMATE-VULNERABLE AREAS

The Daily Star and Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF) jointly organised an online discussion titled "Pandemic and Disaster - Life of women and girls in climate-vulnerable areas" on November 29, 2020. Here we publish a summary of the discussion. Speakers' serial has been maintained as per the flow of the discussion.



**Banasree Mitra Neogi,**  
Gender Advisor,  
Manusher Jonno  
Foundation

This particular study was conducted to observe the collective effects of the pandemic and the climate crisis on women in Bangladesh, especially the ones living in disaster-prone areas. Today's discussion has two main objectives: to showcase the study findings and to find a way to tackle the challenges.

We are more or less aware as to what gives rise to violence and abuse towards women. But, even then, we have been unable to find a way out of the struggle. The main focus of the discussion should be figuring out how we can provide a safe and secure life to the women in Bangladesh. The climate change issue is not just an environmental issue; it is also a social issue which greatly affects women and children. We want to know the gender action plans taken by the government to provide protection to these women. Our goal is to work together for this cause to make sure the women in Bangladesh can lead a beautiful and safe life.



**Muntasir Tahmeed Chowdhury,**  
Managing Director,  
Inspira Advisory and  
Consulting

The research we conducted was a mixed-method study. We collected the data in September 2020, from coastal areas, floodplains, and hill tracts in four districts in Bangladesh (Barguna, Satkhira, Rangamati, and Gaibandha). The number of respondents is 330. Our study tried to compare the trends in the target areas with the dynamics of the whole country.

Out of the 66 percent of women who are subjected to gender-based violence (GBV), 72.7 percent never file reports. 34 percent of women, aged between 14 and 59 years old, believe that husbands hitting their wives are justified. In a survey conducted by MJF in May with 53,340 women and children, we saw that almost 13,000 women and children have been subjected to domestic violence and almost 4,000 women and children have experienced such violence for the first time ever during the lockdown. This indicates that, COVID-19 has not only instigated traditional perpetrators, but also somewhat created new perpetrators countrywide.

Around 85 percent of our respondents have been subjected to violence by their intimate partners during this lockdown, and among 90 percent of these respondents, husbands have played the role of key perpetrators.

In Bangladesh women on average do 3.5 times more unpaid domestic work compared to men. 82 percent of the respondents have said that during the lockdown, the burden of unpaid care work has increased. These factors have also intensified due to school closures or husbands not having jobs and staying at home.

In Bangladesh, almost 51 percent of women aged 20 to 25 are victims of child marriage. And, as a country, we have almost 38 million child brides. According to data provided by BRAC, from July to September, child marriage increased by almost 220 percent. The committees that usually monitor child marriage in the Upazila level could not continue their outreach activities during the lockdown, and a lot of unregistered marriages took place due to this. 25 percent of the respondents have said that they support the idea of child marriage. We have also noticed some additional concerns across the target regions. 80 percent of the women in our study have noted a slump or decline in their income while a huge portion has more or less lost the source of their livelihood. We need to consider alternative income-generating opportunities for this group. Since numerous teenage girls have become victims of child marriage and early pregnancy during this lockdown, we also have to make sure that when schools reopen, they are included in the post-pandemic recovery planning with the incorporation of a flexible learning schedule.

Digital divide is another huge problem that we have noticed. Due to not having a phone at home, many women are unable to report domestic violence inflicted upon them. Women and young girls at the grassroots levels are also being deprived of the various virtual awareness campaigns and telemedicine consultations due to this major digital divide.

Another critical concern is the condition of the cyclone shelters. Many women are unwilling to shift to these shelters due to the terrible ambience and overall environment. Particularly, pregnant and lactating mothers have faced major difficulties caring for their young ones in the congested cyclone shelters. Adolescent women and their parents have also complained about the lack of separate washrooms and proper lighting, due to which many young girls were subjected to harassment.

The relevant authorities are also recommended to pay attention to the issue of embankment repair and maintenance alongside shelter maintenance. Along with this, the government and other NGOs need to take steps in disseminating information about GBV and child marriage to the remote areas and educating them on the topic.



**Dr. Niaz Ahmed Khan,**  
Professor, Department  
of Development  
Studies, Dhaka  
University

We are discussing vulnerabilities present at multiple levels in this scenario. We do not have the capacity to combat every one of these vulnerabilities altogether. What we have to do is analyse the situation pragmatically and optimise our efforts.

Our current government model for development is a financial growth-centric one with a focus on increasing Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Such a growth-centric development model is incapable of ensuring proper justice and equality for all. In these models, men and women with multiple levels of vulnerability will always remain marginalised. Discussions about these growth-centric models in general need to be highlighted so that we can achieve greater development with the help of our government.

In the current situation, we cannot single out an institution to provide aid. The government alone cannot tackle the destruction caused by Covid-19. Hence,

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Reintroduce the Upazila level outreach programmes to monitor child marriage
- Ensure alternative income-generating opportunities for women in the vulnerable communities who have faced loss of livelihood due to the pandemic or the cyclone
- Reduce the digital divide
- Repair and maintain the coastal embankments incorporating both engineering and nature-based solutions together
- Install proper cyclone shelters with amenities that meet the needs of women and children.
- Introduce flexible learning schedules in the post-pandemic period for teenage girls who have become victims of child marriage and early pregnancy due to the lockdown
- Disseminate information about GBV and child marriage to the public and educate them on the topic
- Integrate women and ensure their effective participation during policy discussions regarding their development
- Convert schools, colleges, madrasahs, temples, and mosques into temporary cyclone shelters during crisis times to make them easily accessible for women and make sure that the future designs for the above mentioned establishments are done in such a way that they can serve as women friendly shelters
- Empower NGOs and link them strongly with government's initiative
- Provide recognition to unpaid domestic care work
- Continuation of gender budgeting based on need assessment for ensuring protection of women and girls is necessary

various government and non-government partnerships are crucial at this time. Secondly, in the context of every resource-allocation we make, be it for our budget, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Five-Year Plans and so on, we have to primarily consider the effects on the female and youth population. At the same time, we have to ask ourselves whether the development steps being undertaken are providing equality and justice for all.



**Dr. Fazle Rabbi Sadeque Ahmed,**  
Director,  
(Environment and  
Climate Change),  
Palli Karma  
Sahayak Foundation  
(PKSF)

The government can take the lead for disaster response but the support of NGOs is essential. GDP growth does not draw an accurate picture of the conditions of the vulnerable people and neither does it help us in understanding what we should do to bring aid to them.

The government has taken measures to tackle the current challenges. However,

management is not our strength. To properly reach the most vulnerable communities, a lot of work has to be done in terms of implementation of policies. Economic development of the vulnerable women is of utmost importance if we want to see Bangladesh as a developed country by 2041.

90 percent of PKSF's beneficiaries are female. Government relief packages worth about Tk 2,500 crore will be disbursed through PKSF. We try to work in an organised manner by first collecting relevant data. The data is collected by speaking to the heavily affected groups. We have already started working in the field. PKSF offices reopened full-time much earlier only to manage the relief packages. However, although we spend around Tk 4,500 crore annually, it is not enough compared to the requirements in the field.



**Dr. Sharmin Neelomi,**  
Professor, Department  
of Economics,  
Jahangirnagar  
University

The percentage of child marriage increased in May and June. When we say that it has increased, we have to be able to say in what context, as for example the reference time. The reasons behind such an increment can be poverty since many have lost their jobs, or the fact that social distancing was not really maintained and the girls were married off.

Integration of the women themselves in their development processes along with policies to expand their capabilities is needed. We need to be more attentive in ensuring women's participation in achieving their own development.

You can only fight against natural disasters if you have the ability to do so. This ability is a direct outcome of development. We were unable to develop a cyclone shelter back in 1990. The cyclone shelter we have been able to establish now has no toilets. We are planning on building cyclone shelters with separate space and toilets for women, as well as areas reserved for lactating mothers. We are also thinking of including midwifery services.

girls, we have various programmes aimed at improving the lives and livelihoods of women and female children.



**Kaiser Rejve,**  
Director-  
Humanitarian and  
Resilience, CARE  
Bangladesh

In the middle of the pandemic in May, Cyclone Amphan hit our coastal areas. Cyclones Aila and Sidr had previously affected the same regions. There have been many rounds of floods from July, especially in the northern area. After the disasters, the humanitarian community came together to assess the damage and the affected peoples' needs. A rapid gender analysis was conducted as well. In the Amphan-affected area, GBV and psychosocial trauma were on the rise. Access to health services was a massive issue at the time. The referral system of GBV broke down. The challenge with addressing GBV in the response and recovery plan lies in funding. For example, we targeted a 25 million US dollar humanitarian response programme for Cyclone Amphan. 4.1 million dollars were required for tackling issues with violence against women and sexual and reproductive health, but we were only able to secure 1.1 million dollars. This lack of funding led us to being unable to meet the needs. If we do not take preparations in the recurrently affected areas, the emergency response will never be able to fulfil these needs.



**Professor Mizan R Khan,**  
Deputy Director,  
International Centre  
for Climate Change  
and Development  
(ICCCAD)

In my opinion, organisations working in the field of women's empowerment should also focus on educating women because many have not been able to break out of centuries-old problematic mindsets. Even educated mothers are biased towards their sons, making their daughters feel like second-class citizens.

Better management and governance can be achieved through accountability since the country is now full of corruption.



**Shaheen Anam,**  
Executive Director,  
MJF

Women living in the coastal areas of Bangladesh already face a host of challenges. The pandemic has increased these challenges which include more work burden, decreased income, domestic violence, and early marriage. MJF survey found huge increase in domestic violence all over the country during the lockdown which saw a slight decline since the lockdown ended and the men went back to work.

Early marriage has long-term impacts on the health of girls. There is no SRHR support for unwanted pregnancies. These adolescent girls do not get to attend schools adding to their vulnerabilities. We must ensure that the victims of early marriage can rejoin education. Even after the pandemic ends, the negative impacts of it will remain. Therefore, we must act now. Evidence suggests that, if we do not take steps to tackle these adverse effects from now, we will lose the gains we have made in education and women's empowerment and go back to the early nineties.



**Dr A Atiq Rahman,**  
Executive Director,  
Bangladesh Centre  
for Advanced Studies  
(BCAS)

Climate change is a complex global system, but its impact can be directly contextualised locally in Bangladesh. The pandemic is another complex phenomenon. When these two are brought together, the complexity multiplies, and the most significant impact is on the poverty-stricken, vulnerable people. In extreme events, the average does not matter—the extremes of the complex system matter.

Embankments keep breaking down in different areas. These breakdowns cause more

harm than floods and cyclones. Women are the worst-affected by this issue. The reasons why embankments break are that they are not built properly, there is no maintenance, they are cut down for saltwater in the South, or they have rats living inside them. The locals should be taught to exterminate rats from the holes they make in the embankments.

People are taken to shelters, but I say bring the shelters to the people. This means each school, college, madrasah, temple, and mosque should be made into shelters. If the shelters are close to the women's houses, they will be more willing to go to them. The women should be asked to design these shelters themselves with their convenience in mind. We have had great success in reducing mortality during cyclones but not morbidity. Both of these aspects should be in focus, especially for women and children.

The central government and the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief (MoDMR) are doing their part. But, unfortunately, hard-to-reach populations do not receive support. Local NGOs have to be empowered to ensure this support reaches all people. Providing financial support to hard-to-reach groups is challenging. If these people could be provided with phones, mobile transactions can be used. NGOs can help in this regard as well.



**Dr Abul Hossain,**  
Project Director,  
Ministry of Women  
and Children Affairs  
(MoWCA)

Cyclones and other natural disasters have been occurring every year in Bangladesh. Due to flooding and waterlogging, people migrate from those areas. When people move to another location, they become even more vulnerable. Even shelters, when crowded, can lead to hygiene and security issues. The problem is that, during times of disaster, the district and Upazila administration and law enforcement become occupied with other work and their priorities change. They reduce their focus on supporting women and children.

Job losses cause extreme frustration, which men, who are usually the breadwinners in Bangladesh, take out on their family members. This has caused domestic violence to increase. During economic hardship, families think about marrying off their young daughters to ensure security. They also try to send their children off to work, causing them to become detached from their families, leading to an even more vulnerable state.

During the pandemic, we have been working on making essential support services available online. We are also working with district administration, local government representatives, law enforcement, and NGOs to try to reduce the rate of violence and child marriage. Recently, we arranged some online training facilities. One course is self-reliant training for women. The women taking the course are crafting products at home and selling them through online platforms. If they can earn an income of even 5,000 to 10,000 taka, that is significant.

In the long term, we must find the economic value of aspects that do not get recognition, such as unpaid care work. Temporary shelters are created in union offices, schools, colleges, and madrasahs during times of crisis. Monitoring teams should be stationed there to ensure humanitarian violations such as child marriage do not occur. The women should also take advantage of the national helpline for violence against women and girls.



**Shamsuddoza Sajen,**  
Commercial  
Supplements  
Editor, The Daily Star  
& Moderator of the  
session

The lockdown resulting due to COVID-19 led to a spike in domestic violence against women and female children in various regions of Bangladesh. Cyclone Amphan struck Bangladesh in May of this year and this resulted in increased violence against women residing in the climate-vulnerable areas.

According to a study conducted by United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), during this lockdown, cases relating to dowry-related violence have increased by 10 percent. Similarly, a study by the United Nations Women in the Amphan-affected regions shows that GBV has increased almost 65 percent. Of this 65 percent, 17 percent of the respondents have said that extreme violence, like rape, has also spiked. Our discussion today focused on a similar study conducted by MJF and Inspira Advisory and Consulting.