

OF UNSUNG SHEROES

How barely protected women caregivers, from doctors to cleaners, braved the pandemic while remaining unknown to most

MOUDUD AHMMED SUJAN

Dr Farhana Wahab still cannot believe how scary those days were when the coronavirus pandemic hit the country in March last year.

A consultant at the Kuwait-Bangladesh Friendship Government Hospital, Dr Farhana tested Covid-19 positive twice, had to stay away from her two children for days, and even refrained from disclosing that she had been infected with the virus to protect her family from possible backlash from

treatment at other hospitals, Farhana said she was not wearing necessary protective gear.

"I understood the kid was dying. I had no time to think about personal protection. When the mother broke down in tears I could not resist myself and immediately admitted her to the ICU. Seeing the girl, I was thinking about my own kids," Dr Farhana told The Daily Star recently.

The little girl died on April 25. "The memory of the child still haunts me," Farhana said.

at that time. But I, like all my other colleagues, continued to fulfill our duties," said Farhana.

She also said that after testing Covid-19 positive, she did not let it be known to her landlord fearing that her family might be evicted.

"Those were really tough days when many hospitals refused to treat patients in fear of Covid-19, resulting in many unexpected deaths. But nowadays, we have overcome the fear. We are now performing our duties staying at home," Farhana said.

Dr Farhana's is one of the many untold stories of how female healthcare workers—from cleaners to nurses to doctors—are tackling the Covid-19 health emergency that has so far claimed 8,450 lives in the country, and over 2.5 million across the world.

So far, a total of 10 female doctors—out of 131 doctors—have died of Covid-19 while 2,892 (male and female) have been infected, according to Bangladesh Medical Association (BMA).

The number of casualties among female nurses is 13 out of a total of 18, according to the Bangladesh Nurses Association (BNA). Besides, more than 5,000 nurses have so far been infected.

Despite having many pressing daily family issues, these extraordinary women remained in isolation in hotels and performed their duties for months to treat coronavirus patients in the hospitals.

"Usually we stay in an isolated room for 14 days after returning from 10-day-long hospital duties. When our children ask us, 'Mom, can I touch you?' it is a heart-wrenching moment for us," said Dr Tabinda Anjum Aziz, a senior consultant at the KBFG Hospital.

The government reported the first three Covid-19 positive cases in the country on March 8 last year.

Two of those three patients—an Italian immigrant and his wife—were admitted to KBFG Hospital on February 26, according to hospital authorities.

The third patient was admitted to the Evercare Hospital on March 6. The patient died on March 18—the first casualty in the country.

At the very beginning, some healthcare workers panicked over the unknown killer virus—first detected in the Chinese city of Wuhan in December 2019—and stopped serving patients in hospitals and private chambers.

But despite the fear of this uncertainty, many female doctors, nurses and other healthcare professionals—along with their male counterparts—served the patients as true frontline warriors in isolation units in different public hospitals in particular.

For Anna Chakroborthy, a senior staff nurse at the KBFG Hospital, the experience was of both fear and pride.

"My husband asked me, if I die, what will happen to our 12-year-old son? I consoled him saying that my job is to serve the patients. If I turn my back, then I am a coward. If I die, I will die a martyr," Anna reminisced.

Initially, there were 37 nurses at the KBFG Hospital, which was declared the country's first dedicated Covid hospital on February 6.

"I served 12 hours every day. I caught a cold because I was taking a shower three to four times each day after my ICU duties. Because I was wearing a mask continuously, a scar developed on my face which has not healed yet. You ask any nurse of the hospital, they will tell you similar stories," Anna said.

For nurses and doctors who were lactating mothers, the situation was tougher.

"I had to return home every day

after hospital duty to take care of my seven-month-old baby. In those days, I just prayed to the Almighty to keep my baby safe," said Nahida Rahman, a senior staff of KBFG Hospital.

Farzana Akter, a nurse at Dhaka's Evercare Hospital, said when the pandemic began wreaking havoc since April last year, many of them broke down in tears watching people die around them.

"But after a while, we resumed our duties. My mother and elder brother always encourage me," said Farzana Akter.

Mohammad Kamal Hossain Patwary, president of BNA, told The Daily Star, "There was panic in the first month. However, our nurses continued treating the patients, taking care of them as though they were their family members."

From the beginning of the Covid-19 outbreak until the vaccine inoculation, women have been at the forefront with their male colleagues in every aspect of the healthcare system, said Patwary.

Runu Veronica Costa, senior staff nurse at Kurmitola General Hospital, was the first person in Bangladesh to get the Covid-19 vaccine shot on January 26.

Prof Nasima Sultana, the Additional Director General (administration) of the health directorate, was also one of those persons who volunteered to take the vaccine shot on that day to inspire others.

"Irrespective of gender, we all have worked whole-heartedly. If you ask me to tell you something about the female workforce in the health sector, I would say that it is impossible to imagine the success of the health sector without female staffers—from cleaners to doctors," Prof Nasima Sultana told The Daily Star.



her landlords.

All her energy was focused on treating the helpless patients who contracted the deadly virus at the country's first Covid-19 dedicated hospital.

Farhana first tested positive on April 23 last year.

Four days earlier, she came in close contact with a critically ill six-year-old Covid-19 positive girl.

When the mother of the girl brought her to the hospital after being rejected

A mother of two daughters herself, the 40-year-old dermatologist said that she had to stay at a hotel alone for days after hospital duty at that time.

"I did not see my kids for 22 days at one go at that time. Those days were quite unbearable," said the doctor.

"One early morning of April last year, my kids were crying over the phone to me. They said, mom, we had a nightmare last night that you died of Covid-19. I cannot explain how I felt

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