

More women are falling through the cracks now. Time to take control.



SYEDA TASFIA TASNEEM

THERE is mounting evidence from around the world that the Covid-19 pandemic has not been gender-neutral. In the developing world, women are bearing the brunt of the secondary effects of the

pandemic—both economically and socially. In Bangladesh, like the rest of the world, women are more likely to be employed in the informal sector, making them more vulnerable to job losses and income shocks. Women, as healthcare workers and primary caregivers at home, have also been at the forefront of the battle against Covid-19.

According to World Economic Forum's *Global Gender Gap Report 2021*, the overall gender gap in Bangladesh has widened by 0.7 percent compared to the previous year. The remarkable progress that Bangladesh had achieved over the past decades in ensuring gender parity in education, health and overall women's empowerment has been threatened by the pandemic fallout. This is alarming, because the inability to provide opportunities to and ensure rights of women and girls will inevitably slow down economic development. At the same time, it will hinder Bangladesh's pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Current evidence from around the world suggests that although men and women are equally likely to be infected by Covid-19, men are at higher risks of dying. However, the emergency healthcare measures adopted in response to the pandemic often cause a diversion of resources from areas such as reproductive and sexual healthcare, depriving women of vital support and potentially leading to higher maternal and neonatal deaths. This requires urgent attention, because disruptions in maternal and child healthcare services could reverse decades of progress while putting millions of lives at risk.

Due to the prevalence of high inequality in the intra-household allocation of resources, women in Bangladesh are more likely to experience food insecurity. According to the South Asian Network on Economic Modeling's (Sanem) nationwide household survey conducted in 2020, as a result of the pandemic, the average per capita food expenditure declined by 30 percent, 15 percent and 2 percent in extremely poor, moderately

poor and vulnerable poor households, respectively. This reduction in food expenditure can further exacerbate the pre-existing gender differences in food insecurity, and result in poor health and decreased nutritional intake for women.

A major cause for concern in most developing countries, including Bangladesh, is the failure to ensure equal access to safe and effective Covid-19 vaccines. According to the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), out of the 5.8 million people who received the first dose of the vaccine during the first vaccination campaign that ran from February 7 to April 26, only 38 percent recipients were females. This clearly depicts that even vaccine uptake exhibits gender differences, which can lead to a profound setback for ensuring women's rights. In many cases, women's ability to access vaccines is limited due to limited mobility, restricted access to resources, lack of decision-making power, and lack of technological know-how. Hence it is crucial that the authorities responsible for vaccine management and distribution consider ways to overcome gender-related barriers to enabling access for women.

In Bangladesh, the government proactively ordered the closing of all educational institutions on March 17, 2020, which exerted varying degrees of impact on education and student development. The transition to digital learning platforms was fraught with many difficulties, since we did not have much prior experience in distance learning. The

online. The gender gap in the use of digital technology is particularly prominent in the country. According to a Sanem study on gender and youth inclusiveness in technology, the percentage of female youth who have used the internet at least once in their lifetimes is only 24 percent at the urban level and 14 percent at the rural level. A recent study published in the *GSDMA Mobile Gender Gap Report 2021* showed that only 19 percent of women in Bangladesh use mobile internet, as opposed to 33 percent

women are engaged in informal, insecure and low-wage employment and in industries such as hospitality, travel, textile manufacturing, and retail, most of which have been severely affected by the pandemic. According to the Sanem employment and migration survey conducted in 2021, 16.1 percent of female wage earners lost their jobs, as opposed to 7.1 percent of male workers. Several studies also found that women entrepreneurs faced severe challenges in accessing the fiscal stimulus

quarters of the total unpaid work globally. Similarly, a Sanem study conducted in 2019 found that working women spend almost 2.4 times more hours performing unpaid domestic work compared to working men in Bangladesh, while unemployed women spend 3.75 times more hours in unpaid domestic work compared to unemployed men. The struggle to balance between family and work responsibilities has been aggravated by the pandemic, discouraging women from participating in paid labour and worsening gender inequalities across the country.

As seen during other major economic, political and health crises, reduced access to justice and essential services as a result of the Covid crisis were associated with a rise in cases of gender-based violence around the world. Several studies in Bangladesh conducted during the pandemic confirmed the same. In the first 10 months of 2020 alone, Brac's Human Rights and Legal Aid Clinics reported to have received over 25,000 complaints of gender-based violence from across the country. While data is a crucial tool to understand and analyse the impact of pandemics such as Covid on gender-based violence, collecting data is difficult due to the victims' reluctance to report domestic violence, lack of awareness regarding human rights, and the inability to ensure privacy and safety of victims.

Despite the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on the lives and livelihoods of women, they have been conspicuously absent from the policy discourse surrounding recovery plans. Gender-blind policies which fail to sufficiently address the challenges and vulnerabilities facing women will not be able to initiate an inclusive and sustainable recovery process. Developing targeted policies and initiatives to help women overcome the existing structural loopholes, and enhancing their participation in Covid recovery process and decision-making are imperative to ensure sustainable recovery. To enable better understanding of on-the-ground realities, it is crucial that women are included at all levels of decision-making. It is important to realise that women are a vital force in the post-pandemic recovery process. If the emerging gender gaps in education and employment are not addressed in time, the country will be deprived of half of its human potential.

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Bangladesh needs to address the emerging gender gap in education, employment and healthcare sectors caused by Covid.

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

According to a WEF report in 2021, the overall gender gap in Bangladesh has widened by 0.7 percent compared to the previous year.

of men. Moreover, internet penetration among women in Bangladesh is also lower than India and Pakistan, where 30 percent and 21 percent of the female populations use mobile internet, respectively.

Evidence from past epidemics suggests that sustained school closures widen gender gaps in education by increasing female dropout rates, incidences of child marriages and unanticipated pregnancies. Even before the pandemic, Bangladesh was among the top 10 countries in the world having the highest rate of child marriage, with over 38 million child brides who were married before the age of 18. According to a Unicef study, 10 million more girls globally are at risk of becoming child brides over the next decade as a result of the pandemic.

In addition to the health and education related challenges, the Covid outbreak has had a major economic toll on women. This is because a high proportion of working

packages announced by the government for micro, small and medium enterprises.

Women looking to re-enter the workforce will also face the need to adapt to the emerging automation and digitisation trends that have transformed jobs and, in many cases, continuing employment may require the ability to telecommute. As men have greater access to digital devices and the internet and are more likely to be preferred for jobs that require remote work, women will be at a disadvantage and will face the need to reskill or change occupations. This essentially means that the pandemic's disproportionate impact on women's jobs and incomes will persist in the future and have long-term implications.

Simultaneously, pandemic induced quarantine and stay-at-home measures have caused the burden of domestic and unpaid care work to explode. According to International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates, women perform over three

Public space, Covid, and the right to recreation



DEBRA EFROGMSON

AS the Covid pandemic drags on and schools and universities continue to remain closed, children and youth in particular are tired of being cooped up at home. Serious as they are, it is not just the loss of livelihoods

and education that affect us; we need to have social contact, relaxation, and recreation.

Realising this basic human need—and taking into account a significant reduction in travel as many people work remotely and learn again to cook for themselves—many cities around the world are dedicating road space that was formerly reserved for the automobiles to cycling, walking, or outdoor play. Rue de Tivoli, a major boulevard in Paris, has thus been repurposed and is now lively with people safely getting their exercise—and fun—outdoors. Other cities around the world have seen a surge in pop-up bicycle lanes and have widened their footpaths.

And what have we done in Dhaka? Parks and fields have been shut down, and all our car-free day programmes such as in Uttara and on Manik Mia Avenue have been stopped. Prior to Covid, the first Friday of every month, from 8am to 11am, one side of Manik Mia Avenue would transform into a lively space where young children played games under the watchful eyes of their parents, while the youth played football,

volleyball and cricket, or rode bicycles or roller skates. A similar scene occurred in Uttara every Friday morning, and on a small street at Mohammadi Housing Society in Mohammadpur one Saturday a month. Streets were transformed from being dominated by motor vehicles to places where young people could actively enjoy themselves, the sound of laughter and shouts echoing, people standing outside chatting with friends and strangers. Liveable, lively streets.

Children and young people are resilient and creative. Some climb over boundary walls to access fields when the gate is locked. Others take over streets at quiet times to play cricket or football. They are almost exclusively male and they know that their behaviour is frowned upon. Children should be encouraged to play outdoors rather than prevented, and girls should feel equally welcomed.

What if, instead of trying to protect

During Covid, and well into the future, we need to acknowledge and prioritise the need people have for open public spaces, such as parks and fields, and ensure that those spaces are not destroyed in the name of "development".



File photo of children playing on a car-free Manik Mia Avenue in Dhaka before Covid-19 stuck Bangladesh.

PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

people by trapping them indoors, we tried to understand better the way Covid is spread? Enclosed indoor spaces can be dangerous, especially when they lack sufficient ventilation. Being outdoors, especially if not in a crowd, is quite safe. For people in cramped homes, it can be safer to spend time outdoors than inside, and exercising in a park or on a street is vastly safer than exercising in a gym.

It is relatively simple to address the social and psychological needs of young people by allowing them access to open spaces outdoors. And while I am focusing on young people, the need for recreation and social interaction is true for all ages.

During Covid, and well into the future, we need to acknowledge and prioritise the need people have for open public spaces, such as parks and fields, and ensure that those spaces are not destroyed in the name of "development". During Covid, and beyond, we can repurpose the most abundant public space—our streets—either temporarily (a few hours a week) or permanently into a true public space, no longer dominated by the

private vehicles. On a more modest scale, we can convert some parking spaces, temporarily or permanently, into small parks, once again returning some of our public space to public use.

Where would all the cars go, then? Truthfully, we'd be better off with far fewer of them. Yes, some people will be inconvenienced. They may have to learn to adjust their routine to stay closer to home or, like the majority in the city, rely on other forms of transport. In return, we could provide opportunities for physical and mental health, nay, happiness, to many.

Our lives have changed in so many ways due to Covid—why not voluntarily embrace a change that would permanently reduce congestion, pollution, and deadly crashes while making Dhaka more liveable? Let's liberate more of our public space for public use and relegate the automobile, rather than our children and youth, to lower priority.

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QUOTABLE Quote



AGNÈS VARDA (1928–2019) French film director

The first feminist gesture is to say: "OK, they're looking at me. But I'm looking at them." The act of deciding to look, of deciding that the world is not defined by how people see me, but how I see them.

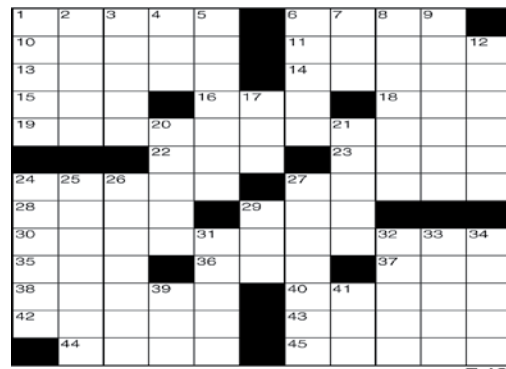
CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Paint-spilling sound
- 6 Served perfectly
- 10 Partly: Prefix
- 11 Tricks
- 13 To the time that
- 14 Float along
- 15 Play division
- 16 Spike of film
- 18 Knight's title
- 19 Stephen King book
- 22 Gallery fill
- 23 Mid-March day
- 24 Anarchic events
- 27 Sanctify
- 28 Land unit
- 29 Snapshot
- 30 Stephen King

DOWN

- 1 Hunker down
- 2 Party drink
- 3 Coffee bar order
- 4 "Do— say!"
- 5 Boat steers
- 6 Said further
- 7 Nasty dog
- 8 Series unit
- 9 Gives the meaning of
- 12 Emphasis
- 17 Have lunch
- 20 Out of style
- 21 Nada
- 24 Betrays
- 25 Crane of Sleepy Hollow
- 26 Pizzeria herb
- 27 Two-piece suits
- 29 Old hand
- 31 Accumulate
- 32 Similar
- 33 Bile producer
- 34 Nourishes
- 39 "The Simpsons" bartender
- 41 "Roses — red"



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS



BETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT



WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinon@gmail.com.