Violence against Women and Children: COVID 19
A Telephone Survey: Initiative of Manusher Jonno Foundation
Survey period: June 2020
Background

Established in 2002, Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF), is one of the largest national grant making organisations in Bangladesh disbursing funds and providing capacity building support for human rights and governance work in Bangladesh. With massive experiences of handling partnership with more than four hundred PNGOs for the last 18 years, MJF has been striving to build capacities of poor and marginalised people in Bangladesh to demand basic services and raise voice against rights violation. The organisation is dedicated to mainstreaming gender and disability in its operation in terms of participation, capacity and programmatic focus. Policy advocacy is another feature of MJF’s work and it has been directly involved in some of the most progressive and pro-poor laws and policies enacted over the last 10 years in Bangladesh.

It has been seen that gender perspective is overlooked during natural disaster, public health emergencies, conflicts situation or any other emergency. Women, girls and other vulnerable/marginalized socially excluded women face discrimination, inequalities and exploitation. Furthermore they are vulnerable to sexual violence/ abuse and torture. The same is true during the present Pandemic and is worsening existing inequalities and discrimination against them. Domestic Violence against women and girls is rooted in unequal power relations in families, their undervaluation and non recognition of their contribution. COVID 19 pandemic has affected everyone and various steps has been taken to prevent further spread of the virus such as health hygiene awareness, lockdown etc.

The pandemic has exacerbated gender inequality, risks of violence for women and children. Safety of the children especially, of the girl children at their domestic sphere had been threatened in particular. It was also supported by the UN data which revealed that the rate of child marriage has
increased by 20% globally putting millions of girls at risk of unwanted pregnancy and other health risks.

Given report of global rise in domestic violence MJF has been doing telephone surveys since April 2020 to find the trend of violence against women and children in Bangladesh during lockdown. The first survey was done in April and presented on May 6 which revealed that a total of 4,249 women and 456 children have become victims of domestic violence in the ongoing lockdown during the month of April. Of these, 1,672 women and 424 children had never been abused before. The second survey was for the month of May 2020 and presented on 10th June. 108 partner NGOs, during the month, spoke to 53,340 respondents and found 13,494 incidences of violence with 4,160 reporting that they had not experienced violence before. 97.4% (11,025) out of a total of 11,323 women were victims of domestic violence. 170 child marriages occurred while 233 stopped by the partners and local leaders during May.

The current survey was conducted during the month of June with support from 106 partner NGOs from 53 districts of the country. The partner NGOs could contact 57,704 women and children through telephone and found 9,844 women and 2,896 children as victims/survivors of various types of violence. An increase in significant number of child marriage had been found during this month while percentage of domestic violence on children had also increased during June comparing to the data of May.

The survey for the Month of June gives the following picture:

**Quick telephone survey**
- Total respondent: 57,704
- Survey area: 53 districts
- Data collected by 106 Partners of MJF
- Discussion with 119 Partners

**Objectives**
- To understand the extent of VAWG during this Pandemic
- Compare trends from last 3 months
- Provide counselling support
- Liaison with government for service
- Continue Advocacy at national level and raise awareness through media
**Objective**

Major objectives of the survey were to:

- Understand the extent of Domestic Violence, violence against children and child marriage during this pandemic
- Compare trends from last 3 months
- Provide counseling support
- Liaison with government for service
- Continue Advocacy at national level and raise awareness through media

**Methodology**

Quick telephone/mobile communication with female and children of catchment areas of the partner NGOs of MJF was the approach for this survey. Sample size was 57,704 women and children. The survey was conducted in 53 districts by 106 partner NGOs of MJF’s “Excluded People’s Rights” project funded by Department for International Development (DFID), “Women’s Voice and Leadership- Bangladesh (WVLB)” project funded by Global Affairs, Canada and “Strengthening civil society and public institutions to address combating gender based violence and build community resilience to climate change” project funded by The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida).

**Major finding of the survey**

Women and children, amid various challenges, managed to provide the partners with information on different forms of violations they faced during the COVID-19 period. 57,704 respondents responded to calls. Figure 1 shows the distribution of respondents.

In case of children, staff members of partner organisations mostly contacted with group members. Parents and local community leaders were also communicated with to collect information.

**New victims**

Data from June survey shows that 26% of the total female and child victims/survivors had never been violated before the pandemic. 3332 women and children out of 12740 became new victims/survivors during the month of June. It was recorded that 48% (1376) of the total child survivors were new victims while 20% (1956) of the total female survivors had not been violated ever before the pandemic. This percentage was higher during the month of May with 61% of all the child survivors and 25% of total female survivors had been new victims.
Violence against Women:

Domestic violence was the major form of violence against women. However, there were other forms of violence such as rape, attempted rape, sexual harassment and murder. A number of incidents of harassment was recorded where women were sexually harassed while receiving food or other type of reliefs during this pandemic. Figure 2 shows the types of violence against women and their distribution in number. 98% (9693) out of a total of 9844 women were victims of domestic violence. 97, 35, 14 and 5 victims/survivors were victims of sexual harassment, rape, murder and sexual harassment during receiving food/other support, rape/attempted respectively. This figure was relatively lower during the month of May while the percentage of domestic violence (97.4%) had been in a little lower side.

![Figure 2: Types of violence against women](image)

Domestic violence:

Domestic violence, amid this lockdown situation, had been the prominent form of violence against women during the month of June 2020.

There were different forms of domestic violence. Figure 3 portrays the distribution of survivors in different forms of domestic violence.

![Figure 3: Distribution of survivors in different forms of domestic violence](image)
48% (4622) of the women who were victims of domestic violence faced mental torture during the month of June while 31% (3009), 19% (1839) and 2% (223) women were victims of economic, physical and sexual torture respectively.

**Violence against children:**

Similar to the female members of households, children also became victims of different types of violence during the month of June. 2896 children became victims of various types of violence during the reporting period while the number was 2171 during May. 61% (1764) of the child victims were victims of domestic torture. This number was 1621 in May. Other forms of violence were Child marriage, violence at workplace, kidnap, rape, murder, attempted rape and sexual harassment during receiving food/other support. Figure 4 shows the distribution of types of violence amongst children during June 2020.

![Figure 4: Distribution of child survivors in different forms of violence](image)

58% (1677) of all the child survivors/victims were girls while 42% (1219) were boys. Figure 5 shows the distribution of girls and boys amongst the victims/survivors. Though the percentage of girls (68%) was higher during the month of May, but the number of victims (1477) was lower while both number and percentage of boy victims were lower during that period.

![Figure 5: Gender distribution of child survivors](image)
Domestic violence:

![Figure 6: Gender distribution of child survivors/victims of domestic violence](image)

54% (947) girls of all child survivors became victims of domestic violence/torture while it was 46% (817) for the boys. The distribution is shown through Figure 6. Data shows that number of boy victims became higher while number of girl children as victims decreased during the month of June in comparison to May.

Child marriage:

One of the major areas of child rights violation had been early marriage. The situation worsened during the pandemic and it is getting higher in every month. Data collected by partner NGOs shows that 462 child marriages occurred during June while only 207 child marriage could be stopped by the partner NGOs in support of other social and administrative bodies. This number is 272% higher than May. Number of child marriage occurred during May was only 170 while 233 child marriages could be stopped during that period.

It was found by the survey that parents had been involved in most cases of this violation of child rights while in some cases grandparents, local elites and close relatives were responsible for the child marriages that occurred during June. Parents and guardians of the victims suggested that reducing family burden during the lock down period had been the major reason for getting their offspring married in a minor age. Poverty, social insecurity and social pressure had been amongst other reasons.

The global scenario of child marriage is also predicted to become higher by 20% during this pandemic as suggested by UN data. Major reasons for increase of child marriage during June in comparison to May as found are:

- Deepening poverty caused by the loss of regular jobs both in formal and informal sectors, closure of educational institutions, loss of livelihoods are likely to drive many families to marry off their daughters early, which has significant impact on economy
- Traditional attitude and social norms provoke parents and they choose their daughters to marry off as negative coping strategy to reduce the number of family members and alleviate economic hardship
- Parents using pandemic as opportunity to marry off their underage daughters, because the pandemic is disrupting the collaborative effort of community, NGOs, and the government to prevent child marriage
- Other negative impacts like increase of child labour, long-term school closure and reproductive health care crisis also leave girls increasingly vulnerable
Violence at workplace:

Lock down was eased and a lot of factories, both formal and informal, opened up during the month of June. Date from the survey shows the negative correlation of this economic insurgency in the form of violence against children at work place. 292 children had been victims of such violence during the survey period while the number was only 67 during May.

Different economic activities have resumed during June and a number of children have started to join their work places. This is one of the reasons for increase of violence at work place. People had been out of economic activities for such a long time which instigated them to send their sons and daughters to work. On the other hand, due to the down fall of economy, the factory owners especially, of the informal sector took the opportunity of employing children in low wage (comparing to the wages of adult workers). All of these summed up in the form of 436% increase in the number of child victims from violence at work place. 75% (218) of the victims were boys while 25% (74) were girls. During May 51% were boys while 49% were girls.

Rape and attempted rape:

Survey data shows that number of attempted rape increased by 550% during June in comparison to May. On the other hand, number of rape incidents decreased in June. There had been 19 rape incidents in May while it was 9 in June. All of those survivors were girls. 99 cases (86 girls and 13 boys) of attempted rape had been recorded during June while it was only 18 in May. Figure 8 portrays the gender distribution of attempted rape survivors.

Kidnap:

MJF partners recorded 10 cases of kidnapping during the month of June while the number was 21 in May 2020. All of the victims were girls.

Murder:

41 children were recorded as murdered by MJF partners during June while the number was 13 during May 2020. 23 girls and 18 boys were murdered in June.
Sexual harassment during receiving food/other support:

Similar to the violence incidents against women, twelve girls were sexually harassed while receiving food or other supports. This number was only three during May.

Support services for the survivors:

The most common requirement for survivors/victims is support service, which is inadequate and absent in some areas due to maintaining physical and social distancing. MJF partners tried to provide different types of support to the women and child survivors amidst the lockdown. The support services included medical, legal, mediation/salish, counseling, linkage with different service providers and follow up communications with the survivors. In total 13312 supports of the abovementioned types had been provided by the partner organizations. Distribution of support for women and children are projected through Figure 9.

Distribution of different types of support for the female and children victims are projected through Figures 10 and 11.
Limitations and Challenges

Data collection was not easy during this period due to a number of factors. The husbands were at home due to lockdown and the children were also stuck in houses as their schools are closed. As a result, the partners faced a number of challenges that led to the limitations of the survey. Some of the challenges are:

- Survivors were not willing to share information over phone due to insecurity
- Husband and other family members were trying to interfere
- Most women did not have access to cellular phone
- Respondents could not be contacted in person due to social distancing
- Generally women are hesitant to share own problems rather feel comfortable to talk about others
- In most cases, the respondents do not usually consider domestic violence as abuse unless they reach extreme level
- Husband and other family members interrupted while communicating with women
- As most of the survivors were poor, they expected different types of supports like food, livelihood, loan, relief etc. instead of other services and supports
- A lot of transgender people lost their house and job
- It was difficult for the women to manage time to talk due to care work and domestic work responsibility /over burden
- In some areas (like the hilly areas) respondents are not habituated in communicating through mobile phone
- Lack of awareness of the respondents regarding different forms of domestic violence especially, mental and economic torture
- Attending mediation/salish sessions by the staff members or group members of the partners was difficult in most cases

Recommendations

Based on the finding of the survey, MJF is placing following recommendations to the government and other actors to prevent domestic violence and child marriage as well as protect the survivors and provide them with proper support:

- Need to revisit the National plan of Action to end Child Marriage and need re-plan immediately considering present COVID crisis including making required budgetary provisions
- Strong coordinated effort should start without any delay, MOWCA must call meeting with all level of stakeholders both at nation and local level
- Adapting life skills and girl empowerment programmes through distance learning, using radio or online platforms should start without delay
- Present protection structures are disrupted, so need to identify alternative referral pathways which CSO platform can propose and or work jointly with multi stakeholders
- Increase awareness raising initiatives all over the country to reduce DVAW and to prevent child marriage through religious institution and other public institutions for which MJF has already submitted letter to the relevant Ministries
• Government should issue special circular to the local govt. and local administration to take immediate measures to address DVAW and any attempt of arranging child marriage
• Government should make the list of existing DVAW Enforcement Officers and District Legal Aid Officers public so that female survivors and vulnerable girls may seek prompt support including legal counseling from them
• Steps for online schooling for all children
• Take measures to stop school drop out of adolescent girls