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

Established in 2002, ManusherJonno 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.

According to a report of UNICEF, COVID-19 has upended the lives of children and families across the globe. The report further stated that globally Children at heightened risk of abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence amidst intensifying containment measures. 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. Another report of WHO says that in many countries affected by COVID-19, records indicate an increase in reported cases of domestic violence, in particular child maltreatment and intimate partner violence against women.

Given report of global rise in domestic and other types of violence against women and children 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 victims of domestic violence. 170 child marriages occurred while 233 stopped by the partners and local leaders during May.

In this connection, the June report shows that 106 partner NGOs from 53 districts of the country 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 that 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 July gives the following picture:

**Objectives**
- To understand the extent of VAWG during this Pandemic
- Compare trends from last 4 months
- Provide counselling support
- Liaison with government for service
- Continue Advocacy at national level and raise awareness through media

- Quick telephone survey
- Total respondent: 63,968
- Survey area: 53 districts
- Data collected by 111 Partners of MJF
- Discussion with 119 Partners
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 4 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 63,968 women and children. The survey was conducted in 53 districts by 111 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. 63,968 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 34% of the total female and child victims/survivors had never been violated before the pandemic. 3899 women and children out of 11471 became new victims/survivors during the month of July. It was recorded that 20%(606) of the total child survivors
were new victims while 39% (3293) of the total female survivors had not been violated ever before the pandemic period. This percentage was higher in case of children during the month of June with 48% of all the child survivors and the percentage was lower (20%) of total female survivors had been new victims during the

**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. 98.8% (8389) out of a total of 8492 women were victims of domestic violence. 56, 19, 17 and 11 victims/survivors were victims of sexual harassment, rape/attempted rape, sexual harassment during receiving food/other support and murder respectively. This figure was relatively higher during the month of June (9693, 98.47%).

![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 July 2020.

There were different forms of domestic violence. Figure 3 portrays the distribution of survivors in different forms of domestic violence.
47% (4000) of the women who were victims of domestic violence faced mental torture during the month of June while 33% (2771), 18% (1546) and 2% (200) 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 July. 2979 children became victims of various types of violence during the reporting period while the number was 2896 during June. 63% (1887) of the child victims were victims of domestic torture. This number was 1764 in June. 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 July 2020.
66% (1979) of all the child survivors/victims were girls while 34% (1000) were boys. Figure 5 shows the distribution of girls and boys amongst the victims/survivors. Both the number and percentage of girls (1677, 58%) increased comparing to the month of June while the number and percentage of boys (1219, 42%) as victims decreased comparing to June data.

**Domestic violence:**

59% (1161) girls of all child survivors became victims of domestic violence/torture while it was 73% (726) for the boys. The distribution is shown through Figure 6. Data shows that number of boy victims decreased while number of girl children as victims increased during the month of July in comparison to June.

**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 insurgence in the form of violence against children at workplace. 692 children had been victims of such violence during the survey period while the number was only 292 during June.

Different economic activities have resumed since June and a number of children have joined 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 137% increase in the number of child victims from violence at work place. 74% (511) of the victims were girls while 26% (181) were girls. Percentage of girls and boys had been the other way round during June – 75% were boys and 25% were girls.

**Child marriage:**

One of the major areas of child rights violation had been early marriage. The situation worsened during the pandemic. Data collected by partner NGOs shows that 174 child marriages occurred during July while 161 child marriages could be stopped by the partner NGOs in support of other social and administrative bodies. Number of child marriages occurred during June was 462 while 207 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 lockdown 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.

**Rape and attempted rape:**

Survey data shows that incidents of rape and attempted rape were 6 and 13 respectively during the month of July. All of those survivors were girls. The numbers were a little higher during June, 9 and 99 respectively. Figure 8 portrays the number of rape and attempted rape survivors.

**Kidnap:**

MJF partners recorded 69 cases of kidnapping during the month of July while the number was only 10 in June 2020. Majority of the victims during July were boys while the kidnapping victims during June were all girls.

**Murder:**

Three girls were recorded as murdered by MJF partners during July while the number was 41 during June 2020. 23 girls and 18 boys were murdered in June.

**Sexual harassment during receiving food/other support:**

Similar to the violence incidents against women, three children (one girl and two boys) were sexually harassed while receiving food or other supports during the month of July. This number was twelve during June.
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 16226 supports of the abovementioned types had been provided by the partner organizations during July. 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:

- 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
- Survivor were not eager to disclose their identity
- Most women did not have access to cellular phone
• Husbands discourage their wives for giving information on torture
• Husband and other family members interrupted while communicating with women
• Mental and economical tortures occur but most of the victims do not complain against their family members
• A lot of transgender people lost their houses, job, asset and business due to Pressure of local influential, family member, Police, community people, doctors, community leaders etc.
• Victims are not complaining against their husbands worrying about their security
• Women became so frustrated with the battle of life because of Covid - 2019 so that they became very silent about their personal life
• Women are more likely to be abused by their families if they take any action against the tortures on them
• Victims were not interested to share information on torture to the PNGOs and were not co-operative
• Woman did not feel comfortable to give information over phone
• Due to restrictions in physical movement PNGOs had to rely only on online sources to receive calls and texts from survivors.
• Respondents could not be contacted in person due to social distancing
• In most cases, the respondents do not usually consider domestic violence as abuse unless they reach extreme level
• 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 recommendationsto the government and other actors to prevent domestic violence and child marriageas 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
• Government should give priority of women violence victims and survivors at their cash transfer and other support program
• MoWCA can create an option to test corona of violence victims who seek shelter and other support from OCC and other shelter home
• Adapting life skills and girl empowerment programmes through distance learning, using radio or online platforms should start without delay
• 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 on line schooling for all children
• Take measures to stop school drop out of adolescent girls