Assessing the Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Vulnerable Populations in Bangladesh

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Abstract

COVID-19 has affected all classes of people over the world in many ways. In major cases, the impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable group of people is overlooked though they are the major part of the society. Thus, this paper aims at investigating the impacts of COVID-19 on vulnerable people in Bangladesh intensively. Using literature review and case studies, this paper finds some interesting findings. The daily income of poor classes of people like day laborers, Rickshaw pullers, transport workers and so on reduced by 64.37 percent during COVID-19 situation. On the other hand, about 3.7 million new poor emerged amid this pandemic. Amid this pandemic, about 50 percent of women-led enterprises are laying off 76-100 percent of their workers while about 2.14 million garment workers were laid off. More effective policies should be taken to tackle the adverse impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on vulnerable populations than what is already taken by the government and NGOs.

Keywords: COVID-19; vulnerable populations; Bangladesh

1. Introduction

Emerging from China's Wuhan province in late 2019, COVID-19 (the SARS-COV-2 Novel Coronavirus) has swept through the world and wreaked its havoc on 220 countries by affecting and killing 156,749,120 and 3,271,443 people respectively till May 07, 2021 (Worldometer, 7 May 2021 and Concern Wide, 2020). Bangladesh recorded its first COVID-19 case on March 08, 2020 and turned into one of the worst hit country by registering 769,160 confirmed cases and 11,796 fatalities as of 07 May 2021 (Worldometer, 7 May 2021 and Kumar and Pinky, 2020).

The shocks and stresses of the COVID-19 pandemic are not limited to health; it has also had a serious impact on every sphere of life from socio-economic, religious, cultural, and educational to political aspects (Bhuiyan et al, 2020). The rapid spread of the virus has put life and livelihood of people from all walks of life in jeopardy (Rahman et al., 2020). The pandemic has not just affected any individuals but the society and the global population as a whole. The vulnerable group with low to no social security also bore the brunt of COVID-19 induced socio-economic losses.

The marginalised population, in the biggest economy of South Asia- India, has suffered a great deal of losses. During the lockdown from March to May 2020, the vulnerable populations: migrant workers went jobless, street vendors, farmers, fishermen and low-wage earners also suffered from food insecurity. The daily wage earners in the city almost starved and went back to their villages out of starvation and no shelter (Akriti et al., 2021). The similar problems were faced by the foreign low-wage earners in Singapore. They were under strict lockdown for months due to living in crammed dormitories and experiencing a surge of COVID-19 cases. They experienced the highest number of cases and job losses. The lower-paying jobs which saw a decrease of 138,800 (Mint, 22 March 2021). Elsewhere, in the United States, low-wage workers especially the African Americans and Hispanics have also been disproportionately affected by infections, deaths, job loss and some other inequalities. Likewise, China, from where the pandemic began, has also experienced serious economic blow and massive unemployment of migrant workers, impeding their deprivation from social security protection (Che et al., 2020).

Even Bangladeshi vulnerable group of people were of no exception. Due to lockdown and other measures to curb the spread of the virus, almost 20 million workers in the informal sector such as the agriculture, export-oriented readymade garments and other labour-intensive service providers e.g., rickshaw pullers, construction workers, day labourer and owners of small grocery shops and so on lost their jobs in Bangladesh. According to Rahman et al. (2020), out of 60.8 million working people both in formal and informal settings, 10 million workers are day labourers and 27 million are self-employed with small businesses. These two groups of people went jobless and were left with zero earnings. Readymade Garments (RMG) workers were also hit hard by the COVID-19 crisis. Even though being the second largest exporter, Bangladesh RMG sector was severely injured by COVID-19 (Gautam and Gautam, 2021 and Hossain, 2021). Due to halt and cancellation of orders, more than 350,000 workers lost employment (Russell, 28 January 2021). It has also created an unprecedented situation for farmers, vegetable and fruits vendors. They sold their products at a low price which incurred them great losses. Besides these sectors, Bangladesh also recorded 15-month lowest remittance in March 2020 (Gautam and Gautam, 2021).

However, despite some studies have shed light on the negative impact of COVID-19 on individual group of people living on the edge, no study has explored the severity of consequences on them in Bangladesh through a holistic lens. In light of the preceding context, this is the first article which aims at exploring this gap explicitly using holistic approach and the core contribution of this paper is to assess the magnitude of the impact of COVID-19 on the socio-economic, religious, educational and cultural conditions of vulnerable group in Bangladesh.

2. Methodology

This is mainly a literature based paper, hence, no primary data is used here. Rather, secondary data are used that collected from different journal articles, newspaper articles, reports, books, and so on. Basically, different literature collected from journal articles, newspaper reports are used to chalk out the impact of impacts of COVID-19 on vulnerable people. Besides, case studies collected from newspaper are also used to trace out the actual practical scenario of COVID-19 impacts in individual level. This study has not used any statistical or econometric methods but simple descriptive analysis along with some tabular, graphical and pictorial presentation.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Case Study

As soon as the country went into lockdown, termed as General Holiday by the government, the vulnerable populations started experiencing different socio-economic challenges. These challenges are presented with some of case studies.

Case 1

Md. Saiful Islam, a bus driver used to earn Tk.600 per day from driving a bus on Dhaka-Sherpur route. He lost his work during the lockdown. He could not pay his house rent since a last few months, and that is why he took loan of around Tk.80,000 to maintain his family (Parvin, 01 May 2021).

Figure 1: Road Transport Workers' Federation Brought out a Protest in Favour of Resumption of Public Transports on Road on May 02, 2021

Source: Banik Barta (02 May 2021).

Case 2

In Thanapara area of Kushtia, day labourers from different areas flock together for seeking work. They work for Tk.500 per day. However, during this lockdown the number of workers increased from 100 to 300. They were sitting with their vans and equipment without work. Mojibur Rahman, worker from Baradi upazila said, “I dug soil and sand and now I have lost my work. I have been looking for work for the last one week but I have not found any work. Everything is closed due to lockdown. My family is suffering a lot. There is no rice in house.” They were sitting without maintaining social distance and masks (Pankouri News, 03 May 2021).

Figure 2: Day Labourers Waiting for Work in Rajshahi on May Day

Source: Amader Shomoy (01 May 2021)

Case 3

Sumaiya Akter, a former garment worker turns into a sex worker due to losing job at a garment factory. She lost her job during the pandemic. She is the mother of two children. She lost her mother at a very young age and got married to a man who left her with children. She said: “We cannot earn much from this profession. If I earn Tk.300, I have to give Tk.200 to broker and hotel bill. For whole night, I get Tk.1000 from that amount the hotel brokers

charge Tk.600. We do not get clients every day. Women of mid-age cannot earn much in this profession. This profession demands young and beautiful women” (The Daily Ittefaq, 26 January, 2021).

Figure 3: A garments worker turns into a sex worker

Source: The Daily Ittefaq (26 January, 2021)

Case 4

Shima Begum from Mohammadpur, Dhaka used to work as a part-time domestic worker in three households adjacent to her residence. She used to earn Tk.5000 to pay the rent of a small room of their house. Due to COVID-19 lockdown, it has become difficult for her to survive with her husband’s reduced income. She said: “Now I cannot afford basic expenses like food and clothing of my family. My two children had to leave school because it is not possible for me to pay fees. Today, I cooked only rice and very low-price vegetable. With only a lesser income of my husband, I cannot manage fish or any other expensive food with the rest of the money after paying the rent” (Hossain, 2021).

Case 5

A slum dweller from Chattogram explained how “We cannot light on our stove for several days. We are eating bread flour. As there is no family income, we are prioritising flour

because it is cheaper. At present it is Tk.30/kilogram of flour and Tk.50/kilogram of rice”. A squatter from the same area reported how “I used to eat fish and meat every week, now I am eating mashed potatoes, fried potatoes, and thin pulses. When the lockdown extended, I started reducing the family expenses. Whereas before I used to spend Tk.20, now I spend Tk.5” (Concern Wide, 2020).

Case 6

A slum dweller in Chattogram observed, “It was forbidden to sell anything other than daily necessities, so we did not go out to sell fruits for fear of the army-police. At present there is no food in the house, so without caring for our lives we have started to sell fruits outside for the last seven days” (Concern Wide, 2020).

Case 7

A 32-year-old rickshaw puller Rohim Rahman (pseudonym) said: “I usually earn at least Tk.500 from pulling a rickshaw for three hours in town. But now I earn only Tk.130 between 9am and 12am on Friday. Whereas I have to pay Tk.120 rent of rickshaw a day, and Tk.180 more for three meals a day. Most importantly, at least Tk.15000–20000 has to be sent to my family every month in Rangpur. If I cannot send the money, my five-member family will face tremendous hardship. God knows how I will run my family” (Ahmed and Sifat, 2020).

Figure 4: Police has turned the rickshaws upside down for driving them on the street

Source: Prothom Alo

3.2 Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic on Vulnerable Populations

Impacts on Day Labors, Rickshaw Pullers, and Farmers

Rickshaw pullers, day laborers, transport workers, domestic workers, construction laborers, restaurant and convention workers, municipal cleaners are one of the major groups of vulnerable populations (Shammi et al, 2020; Islam and Jahangir, 2020) who are about 32 percent of the country's total population (Ahmed et al., 2017). Although they usually live below the poverty line, their daily income reduced by 64.37 percent during COVID-19 situation (Sarwar et al, 2020). The farm sector comprises a large share of seasonal workers and almost all of them (95.4 percent) are small-scale marginal farmers and employed informally, and they are viable to price loss as crop, livestock, and fisheries sector has suffered significantly (ILO, 2020).

Figure 5: Laborers have no work to survive

Source: The Daily Star (18 April 2021)

Impacts on Slum Dwellers and Urban Poor

About 2.6 million slum dwellers are living in a congested pattern of housing with poor wash facilities in Bangladesh (NAWG, 2020, Hasan et al., 2021) who have been identified as reservoirs for the spread of COVID-19 (World Bank, 2020). Barkat et al. (2020) found that 'New Poor' emerged as a new socio-economic class, burdened with work or business loss, decreased household income, uncertainty about children's schooling, food insecurity, domestic abuse, and the possibility of forced migration.

Figure 6: The emergence of 'new poor' in urban low-income settlements due to COVID-19

Source: Authors adapted from Barkat et al. (2020)

In Bangladesh, 70 percent of the population survives on handouts, their earning have decreased by nearly 80 percent since the coronavirus outbreak (Kamruzzaman, 2020), severe poverty has increased by 60 percent, with 14 percent of people having no food at home and 5 percent of poor families only being able to eat once a day during the lockdown (BRAC, 2020). About 87 percent of the country's poor are facing a food and nutrition crisis and the livelihoods of 98 percent of the poor in the country have been seriously harmed as a result of income loss caused by coronavirus pandemic (bdnews24.com, July 2020).

Figure 7: Coping Strategy with Income Loss among Rural Households amid Pandemic

Source: Authors adapted from Genoni et al (2020)

Despite achieving national food grain self-sufficiency through the use of high-yielding seeds and appropriate technology, the country's food prices remain high, whereas a sharp drop in jobs and a reduction in buying power among the poorest people. The rate of inflation in September 2020 was 5.97 percent (Ahmed et al, 2020).

Figure 8: Impacts of COVID-19 Lockdown on Urban Poor

Impacts on Small and Medium Entrepreneurs

In the urban informal sector, 5.19 million self-employed people live in precarious situations (Islam, 2020). The pandemic's job losses are wreaking havoc on SMEs with the expected loss of revenue by 66 percent during the pandemic, and CDP and BILS reported that 50 percent of women-led enterprises are laying off 76-100 percent of their workers (The Daily Star, 18 April 2021).

Impacts on Garments and Others Small Industries' Workers

There are about 4 million garments workers in Bangladesh of which 3.20 million are women employees nationally (Haq, 2020 and BBS, 2018). ILO (2020) reported that about 2.14 million garment workers were laid off during this pandemic and the majority of them are women.

Impacts on Women, Children, Handicraft and Elderly People

Gender inequality in terms of earning income, sharing household chores, caring children and so on have evoked and increased amid lockdown (UN Women, 2020). About 16000 cases of gender-based violence and femicides have been reported in Bangladesh and its rate is increasing rapidly (Antara, 24 November 2020). Women are getting pregnant more and they are at risk of maternal mortality due to reducing the access to have the reproductive health care facilities amid this pandemic (UNPF, 2020). According to a report by NAWG (2020), 25 percent women have stopped coming to the health care center amid this pandemic and 49% of women and children did not received health and nutrition services that may surge a possibility of 43% maternal mortality.

Closing of school amid COVID-19 pandemic has affected about 42 million children in Bangladesh due to limited access to remote learning through digital technology (Chowdhury, 2020). Besides, the abused and neglecting of children, especially street children, has been increased and even they have no enough scope of child laboring because of COVID-19.

There are over 100,000 people aged 65 years and above in the rural areas of 32 districts in Bangladesh who are more susceptible because of their low immunity to fight against the disease (NAWG, 2020 and Mowla et al, 2020).

Impacts on Employees of Private Sector

World Bank (2020) predicted that the regional growth of GDP in Bangladesh was projected to rebound to -5.2 percent in 2020. Workers of informal job sector are the worst victim of this loss. Particularly women were laid off six times more than men amid the coronavirus recession in Bangladesh. Women may be disproportionately affected by COVID-19 because of: overt or indirect discrimination during the workforce restructuring; women being over-represented in COVID-19-affected sectors; and women predominating in COVID-19 affected sectors such as tourism, hospitality, and agriculture (IFC, 2020). IFC (2020) recommended six actions for the private sector amid this pandemic that are shown in the following figure.

Figure 9: The six recommended actions for the private sector

Source: IFC, (2020)

Impacts on Rohingya Refugees

More than 70% of Rohingya refugee women have experienced domestic violence amid COVID-19 pandemic (Banik et al., 2020). Islam and Yunus (2020) revealed that Rohingya refugees are at high risk of COVID-19 in Bangladesh. During the lockdown, there were found several challenges in the Rohingya refugee camps such as inadequate health facilities, limited health workers, limited hospital beds Homaira et al., 2020). Islam et al., (2020) recommend recruiting more trained health professionals and installing digital health service points or booths for receiving advice from the expert doctors through video or teleconferencing.

Impact on Migrant Workers

COVID-19 affects 13 million migrant workers in Bangladesh and their 30 million dependents (Karim et al, 2020). Although a 67% fall in employment in 2020 compared to its previous year, an annual 18.5% rise of remittances has been recorded despite (BMET website). OKUP reported that about 40% of migrant workers abroad have lost their job. About 25% of the

migrant families have no food at home and are suffering from extreme hunger and food shortages (OKUP, 2020).

4. Policies Taken by Governments and NGOs

4.1 Government Policies for Vulnerable Populations

COVID-19 induced suffering and hardship create manifold adversities particularly among the people who find it difficult to make ends meet. Thus, to weather the storm the government announced and undertook policies, such as incentive packages to offset the COVID-19 shock in various sectors. Those policies are presented as follows.

- i. In the wake of the first wave of COVID-19 humanitarian crisis the government announced seven stimulus package worth of Tk.1.011 trillion (Dhaka Tribune, 5 April 2020 and Kumar and Pinky, 2020).
- ii. The Government of Bangladesh (GoB) allocated Tk.912 million in cash transfers, Tk.309 million cash transfers for baby food and 201,817 metric tonne food grain aid as a response to the COVID-19 crisis between March and June 2020 through the Gratuitous Relief (GR) programme, (MoDMR, 2020 and Hebbar et al. 2020).
- iii. The government adapted the special Open Market Sale (OMS) to tackle the first wave of COVID-19 crisis between April and June 2020 in urban areas. Nearly 84000 metric tonnes of rice were sold to over 2 million recipients (Hebbar, et al. 2020).
- iv. To reduce the liquidity crisis and to ensure money safety, vulnerable populations were given cash incentive by Tk.2500 to 5 million recipients across the country. (Hebbar et al., 2020).
- v. As the export-oriented Readymade Garments (RMG), leather and footwear industries were the hardest hit in this corona crisis, the Ministry of Labour and Employment provided a transfer of Tk.3000 per month for up to three months to 1 million workers who laid off from factories registered under trade union (MoLD, 2020).
- vi. The government has launched a national hotline, 333, for providing humanitarian assistance and food to the needy during the nationwide shutdown amid the coronavirus outbreak (The Daily Star, 7 April 2020).

- vii. The government has formed a Tk.7000 million fund for rehabilitation and re-employment of jobless migrant workers who have returned home after losing their jobs in their host countries. Government also has earmarked nearly Tk.100 million as emergency food and other assistance for the vulnerable expatriate Bangladeshi workers. The ministry also has decided that the family of each expatriate Bangladesh worker, who has passed away due to COVID-19 infection, will get Tk.0.3 million as soon as possible (Dhaka Tribune, 24 August 2020).
- viii. In the wake of the second wave of corona crisis the government decided to give vulnerable group of people one-time cash support of Tk.5,000 each (Byron and Habib, 2020).

4.2 NGOs Policies for Vulnerable Populations

To contain Covid-19 havoc many Non-government Organizations (NGOs) and voluntary organizations came up with different policies and strategies to ease the situation. NGOs spent about Tk.1.56 billion, which is 10 per cent for immediate corona response (The Financial Express, 9 June 2020). The policies and strategies taken by NGOs and voluntary organizations are presented below.

- i. During the first wave, BRAC started reaching out to 100,000 sufferers, particularly the poor and jobless families with a support of USD 18 or Tk.1500 (The Daily Star, 18 April 2020). BRAC also came up with the policies of distributing food grain door to door (Shams, 01 September 2020).
- ii. BRAC modified microfinance responding policies for rural clients in the lockdown period. The default clients will not be classified as a defaulter and their borrower status will not change. Moreover, the clients do not have to pay any installments for the lockdown period (Shams, 5 May 2020).
- iii. World Vision Bangladesh provided about Tk.65 million as cash grant to support 18684 most vulnerable families during the pandemic across the country (World Vision, 5 July 2020). World Vision also donated 843,640 hygiene kits to 12,330 households and 636,112 masks to 17,117 vulnerable populations (World Vision, 5 July 2020).

- iv. Bidyanondo's food distribution was limited within the Dhaka city, they distributed food grains and cooked meal assistance at least 2000 people daily, in Chittagong, Rangpur and Rajshahi (Baktiar, 2020; and Kumar and Pinky, 2020). Bidyanondo Foundation sent 5000 PPE in hospitals and healthcare complexes of different upazilas (Antata, 8 May 2020).
- v. WaterAid came up with hygiene policies by disinfecting 5 slums, 125 latrines and 40 community toilet. They also distributed leaflets and practicing hand washing in 67 slums, 53 courtyard sessions, 14312 households, and so on (WaterAid, 5 May 2020).
- vi. Ovibashi Kurmi Unnoyan Program (OKUP) provided food package of Tk.3000 for 1177 migrant families, and direct cash transfer of Tk.3060 for 1025 returnees (OKUP, 2020).
- vii. Other organizations like Amal Foundation, Avijatrik Foundation, Mission Save Bangladesh, and so on are helping in COVID-19 relief efforts. The organization has distributed food assistance to over a thousand underprivileged families in five districts- Narayanganj, Bogura, Cox's Bazar, Faridpur, and Dhaka (Samaddar, 2020).

5. Conclusions

Investigating the impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable people in Bangladesh was the principal research objective. In achieving this objective, no primary data and statistical methods are used but secondary data collected from various journal articles, newspaper reports, books, and so on. Several shocking findings are found from this study.

The daily income of poor classes of people like day laborers, Rickshaw pullers, transport workers and so on reduced by 64.37 percent during COVID-19 situation (Sarwar et al, 2020). On the other hand, about 3.7 million 'new poor' emerged amid this pandemic (Barkat et al., 2020). Amid this pandemic, about 50 percent of women-led enterprises are laying off 76-100 percent of their workers (The Daily Star, 18 April 2021) while about 2.14 million garment workers were laid off (ILO, 2020).

Although the government of Bangladesh and several NGOs and other private organizations have taken different initiatives to reduce the severity of the impacts, these were not good

enough for them. Giving more hands is crying need to reduce hardship of COVID-19 and improve their socio-economic and mental conditions. In this regard, considering the country's current coronavirus condition this paper suggests some policies that may be effective to reduce hardship of COVID-19: (i) unlock the country and reopen all working sectors (ii) follow the COVID-19 guidelines strictly and vaccinate all classes of people (iii) ensure to reach government and NGOs support to real vulnerable populations (iv) implement government's stimulus package fruitfully. Since this study is fully based on literature, the findings may not represent the actual scenario of the whole country. Thus, this study suggests researchers to carry out an in-depth research on this issue excluding the limitations.

Ethical Consideration

This paper is performed without the direct involvement of human participants but from the secondary sources following the ethical standards with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Conflict of Interests

Authors of this paper declare no conflict of interest.

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Authors' Contributions

BK firstly conceived the idea, collected literature, and made an outline of this paper, and wrote abstract, methodology and conclusions. On other hand, RSK wrote the first draft of introduction and case study while RAP and NMW wrote impact and policy parts, respectively. Next, BK reviewed, edited and organized the full paper finally and the final version is checked by all authors before submission.

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