**COVID-19 and the Increase of Domestic Violence against Women:
The Bangladesh Perspective**

**By Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK)**

**INTRODUCTION**

Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) is a national legal aid and human rights organisation that works for the protection and promotion of human rights in Bangladesh, with special focus towards the disempowered, vulnerable and disadvantaged groups of the society, women and children, gender diverse population, persons with disabilities and every other vulnerable groups.

Amid this global health crisis, we witness gross violations of human rights. In line of such, amongst other forms of violence, violence against women, especially domestic violence, have taken a turn for the worst during this time period. True that such violence is no new emergence in Bangladesh amid COVID-19 but rather have been part of the Bangladeshi society for decades.

On 23 March 2020, the Government of Bangladesh declared a 10 day shutdown (to be treated as a public holiday with all of public, private, government and non-government organisations being closed *except for essential and healthcare facilities*) in from 26 March to 04 April,[[1]](#footnote-1) and stopping rail-water-air and road transportation;[[2]](#footnote-2) this shutdown was extended for multiple times[[3]](#footnote-3) till 31 May, following which the lockdown was lifted.

**Overall context of Domestic Violence in Bangladesh during COVID-19**

There has been a considerable increase in number of victims of domestic violence during this pandemic.

According to ASK documentation from 9 national dailies and own sources, in the month of April 2020, a total of 34 women have fallen victim to domestic violence of which 16 of them were murdered by their husband. In the following month of May, 55 women (61.76% increase from last month) have fallen victim to domestic violence of which 28 (75% increase from last month) of them were murdered by their husband. However, the information, as available and reported in the national newspaper dailies seldom shows the real picture as many incidents go unreported in news, as can been seen through the following survey conducted by Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF), a Non-Governmental Organisations in Bangladesh.

MJF conducted a survey on recording the violence against women and children during in the month of April.[[4]](#footnote-4) According to the survey, out of around 17,203 participants who were surveyed through the telephone, a total of 4,249 were victims of domestic violence: 848 were assaulted physically, 2,008 mentally, 85 sexually, and 1,308 financially by their husbands. Of the 456 children who were subjected to domestic violence, 33 children were married off. It is to be noted that in this survey, of the 64 districts, women and children of 27 selected districts and four city corporations were interviewed over phone by 24 associate organisations of MJF during the whole month of April. Thus, as the scope of this report was limited to only 27 selected districts, we can only make a rough guess regarding the remaining 37 districts on the month alone.

In the next month, MJF conducted the same telephonic survey for the month of May.[[5]](#footnote-5) This time a total of 53,340 participants from across 53 districts were surveyed. A total of 11,323 participants faced some forms of violence against women of which 11,025 were victims of domestic violence: 2,085 were assaulted physically, 4,947 mentally, 404 sexually, and 3,589 financially by their husbands. Of the 2,171 children who became victims of various types of violence, 1621 were victims of domestic violence.

In another report by Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, it has been noted that from March to May, a total of 480 were victims of violence against women and children. Of them 90 women and 166 children were victims of rape.[[6]](#footnote-6)

**Government Initiatives on Prevention and Protection from Domestic Violence**

With special focus on the concept and understanding of domestic violence, a law was enacted back in 2010 to prevent and protect victims of domestic violence, titled *Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act 2010* (a law different from the *Prevention of Oppression against Women and Children Act 2000*). However, the number of victims have hardly decreased in the slightest.

Under the law, as relief, the victims will merely receive information about the availability of services including medical and legal aid services, an interim protection order signed by a first-class magistrate and will be able to proceed with other reliefs such as divorce and maintenance from different forums; i.e. the law allows victims to seek a protective order against their spouse for as long as may be needed, ask him to leave the residence to the sole enjoyment of the victim and make him pay for the victim’s expenses related to the abuse, among other things.

It is to be noted there is a lack of criminalisation or penalisation for such cases of domestic violence as they are referred to as mere ‘abuse’;[[7]](#footnote-7) i.e. it does not provide for any punishment for the offense of the abuse but rather provides punishment for the breach of the Protection Order that may be given by the magistrate.

Besides the law, the government had specified national helpline numbers 109 and 10921 for violence against women and children which provides a 24 hour toll-free service. Between March 26 and April 12, the national emergency helpline received 769 calls related to violence against women, which is higher than usual.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Additionally, the national helpline number 333 was launched back in the year 2018 to provide information on its services and take complaints on social problems like child marriage and sexual harassment. On 5 April, the government launched the same number for providing humanitarian and food assistance as well as medical advice to the needy during the nationwide shutdown amid the coronavirus outbreak.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Besides, the government has not increased the number of days when an individual can refuge under the safe/shelter homes of the state. Although support and shelter homes have been open, their quality of services being in line with the health regulations are still questionable. Moreover, with the limited testing facilities in the victim support centres and shelter homes, their acceptance of victims is also quite low. Besides, the government has not introduced measures that clearly exempt women victims of domestic violence from restrictive measures to stay at home in isolation if they face domestic violence. Despite the reiteration on the importance emphasised by civil societies on this matter of concern, there have been little to no visible action/activity on the part of the government to prevent or protect such victims since lockdown measures have been introduced.

It is interesting to note that in its National Preparedness and Response Plan for COVID-19, the Government of Bangladesh, committed to the following activity, amongst others, in regards to violence against women:

Develop messaging on positive copying mechanisms, including those that can mitigate against increases in domestic violence and violence against children including messaging targeted at men, to overcome stigma and barriers to promptly accessing healthcare.

However, although promising and commendable, such activity is yet to be adopted/made visible for the people by the Government.

*No new, effective or good practice was adopted to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence or combat other gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic by Governments.*

**Civil Societies Initiatives on Prevention and Protection from Domestic Violence**

Many civil society and non-governmental organisations have their own helplines to provide their aid and support to the vulnerable communities around Bangladesh. Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) set up 3 additional helpline services to reach greater public to provide them with legal assistance during this time.[[10]](#footnote-10)

From 1March to 25 March (prior to lockdown) a total of 491 disempowered and poor persons gained access to formal and informal justice through legal advice, mediation, litigation, shelter and psychosocial counselling support were provided by ASK.

From 26 March to 30 May (during lockdown) a total of 758 disempowered and poor persons gained access to formal and informal justice through legal advice, mediation, litigation, psychosocial counselling support and awareness raising support on COVID-19 were provided by ASK. The number of calls during this pandemic seeking legal aid and assistance regarding domestic violence were also high.

However, a factor that that needs special consideration is that most victims may not voluntarily reach out to share their concerns and complaints during the lockdown period where they are almost always living in close quarters with their abuser/spouse.

With regards to the shelter home support services, unfortunately, due to the unavailability of spacious, resource heavy health-care facilities, with non-favourable healthy/sanitary environment in the shelter homes of NGO and other non-governmental bodies, as well as the weak, slow and low number of testing facilities for the virus, many such shelter homes did not accept more victims of domestic violence during lockdown. This was done so as to promote staying home but more importantly, prevent the proliferation of the infection into the shelter homes. Many organisations were unable to improve the healthcare facilities or such preventive mechanism when the country went under lockdown, which resulted in the victims not being able to receive any forms of alternative shelter in case of closed or insufficient capacity in the state-owned shelter homes.

With regards to the activity of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) of Bangladesh on this issue of domestic violence, the Chairperson addressed it and raised her concern on the increasing rate of violence against women as well as children on 20 May 2020. On this day, the Chairperson met with the Thematic Committee on Rights of Women and Children in an online discussion meeting where she shared her concern and the committee discussed on the necessity of a strict directive to be given by the government on the effective role of all the relevant persons in stopping such violence.[[11]](#footnote-11)

**Access to Justice (with special focus on Instances of Domestic Violence)**

The general holiday, the pseudo lockdown, began on 26 March. Since then, the Courts of Bangladesh have also been under lockdown, which created a big obstacle for ensuring the access to justice for anyone. During this time period, the courts of Bangladesh succeeded in launching virtual court system. However, these virtual courts were only used to hear bail cases in order to reduce the overcrowding of the prison amid COVID-19. The lower courts were only operating in limited capacity and did not focus on issuing any protection orders against domestic violence. Thus, although protection orders were available, they were not accessible in the context of COVID-1, which stood as an unwelcoming barrier for the women’s access to justice considering the increased victims of domestic violence during this health emergency.

Although the legal court proceedings were put in halt for the time being, from then to 3 June, as many as 197 cases had been filed in Women and Child Repression Act in Dhaka metropolitan alone. Of the cases, 64 were rape cases, 51 were cases filed over dowry, 36 were cases of abduction and seven were cases of physical violence.[[12]](#footnote-12)

**Access to Health Services (with special focus on reproductive health)**

All essential healthcare services and institutes have remained open during this pandemic in Bangladesh in order to ensure the health rights of the people of Bangladesh. With the aim of making people aware of the exact number and statistics surrounding the coronavirus in Bangladesh, the Government of Bangladesh has set up a website with updated information on the current pandemic in Bangladesh.[[13]](#footnote-13) Besides, it has also set up a public health emergency control room at Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR)[[14]](#footnote-14) and besides its general helplines, it established four COVID-19-specific hotlines.[[15]](#footnote-15) Additionally, the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh also introduced multiple helpline numbers during this time.[[16]](#footnote-16)

However, there have been multiple allegations against the health care facilities during this time. Allegations against hospitals arose for refusing admission to suspected patients.[[17]](#footnote-17) Many patients have died after being moved from one hospital to next on being denying admission from one hospital to another. Furthermore, there have been multiple allegations of doctors even refusing to treat general/regular suffering from cold, fever or otherwise.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Despite the fact that hotline numbers and helpline numbers have increased, allegation regarding lack of operation and connectivity of the IEDCR hotline number have also increased,[[19]](#footnote-19) even with the hotline numbers of the national health portal, IEDCR, specialist health line, etc., being in operation.

According to a recent survey conducted by UN Women in April 2020, 61% of women in Bangladesh reported being unable to seek medical care when they needed it, and only 1% of women reported being covered by health insurance.[[20]](#footnote-20) Women and adolescent girls’ access to sexual and reproductive health services have also been heavily affected by the COVID-19-induced lockdown and reallocation of health care resources. Moreover, according to their report on COVID-19 Bangladesh’ Rapid Gender Analysis, 43% of health workers reported higher risks of maternal death in the current lockdown situation given the reduced access to antenatal care and life-saving comprehensive obstetric and new-born care. Moreover, besides the fact that many private and public hospital refused admission of patient assessing multiple factor, making many non-infected persons suffering greatly, due to the lack of transportation options during the lockdown, pregnant women and women with gynaecological issues were not in a position to go to clinics/hospitals.

**Post Lock-down Scenario**

The lockdown measures were imposed till 30 May 2020. The country reopened offices and resumed public transport services on a limited scale on 31 May. However, days into the lifting, the rate of coronavirus fatalities started rising. With the public transports and all government and private offices resuming, Health Minister Zahid Maleque, on 1 June, disclosed the decision of dividing the whole country into red, green and yellow zones to control the infection and death rates from COVID-19 more effectively. He said the classification would be based on the ratio of COVID-19 infections in different areas of the country. The government has taken the necessary preparations to bring hotspots (red zone) under lockdown and will declare closure in those areas to prevent entry and exit. Any area in the country will be designated a Red Zone and go under lockdown if 40 out of 100,000 local residents of that area test positive for COVID-19 for a temporary period. An area having three to 19 cases in every 100,000 of the population will be categorized as “Yellow Zone” and “Green Zones” will be declared in areas with cases fewer than that of Yellow Zones.

According to ASK documentation, in the month of June 2020, a total of 70 women have fallen victim to domestic violence of which 21 of them were murdered by their husband, 9 by his family members and 10 by her own family member.

While these developments on reintroducing strict lockdown measure temporarily in areas with are ‘Red Zone’ are commendable in the sense of reducing the proliferation of the infection, but such will result in further imprisoning the victims of domestic violence in their home as no exception to the rule has yet been announced. No special measurements or initiatives have been yet taken by the government during this period of zonal lockdown to counter domestic violence or provide any remedy for them. This zonal lockdown has been comparatively much stricter than previous lockdowns, and thus, it is more restrictive in preventing the victims from leaving their place of residence to seek relief or assistance.

1. https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2020/03/23/govt-offices-to-remain-closed-till-april-4 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://tbsnews.net/coronavirus-chronicle/coronavirus-bangladesh/bangladesh-prepares-lockdown-60595 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 4 April, 25 April, 5 May, 16 May. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Violence against Women and Children: COVID 19 A Telephone Survey- Initiative of Manusher Jonno Foundation, Survey period: April 2020 <http://www.manusherjonno.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Brief%20Survey%20report%20April%202020.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Violence against Women and Children: COVID 19 A Telephone Survey- Initiative of Manusher Jonno Foundation, Survey period: May 2020 <http://www.manusherjonno.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Final%20Report%20of%20Telephone%20Survey%20on%20VAW%20May%202020%20-%209%20June.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. http://www.dainikamadershomoy.com/post/261279 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. According to the law, domestic violence means *physical abuse, psychological abuse, sexual abuse* or *economic abuse* against a woman or a child of a family by any other person of that family with whom victim is, or has been, in family relationship. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. https://tbsnews.net/panorama/domestic-violence-silent-epidemic-thrives-amid-shutdown-71953. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. https://www.thedailystar.net/dial-national-hotline-333-for-food-assistance-1890553 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. General: +88 01724 415 677; New Helplines: +88 01730 450 756; +88 01714 025; +88 01756 185 717.

6 Partner-NGOs numbers were also distributed: +88 01722 405 080; +88 01830 737 400; +88 01792 893 451; +88 01735 128 708; +88 01719 574 672; +88 01728 011 663 (Total 10 Numbers) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. NHRC Notice, 23 May 2020. http://www.nhrc.org.bd/sites/default/files/files/nhrc.portal.gov.bd/notices/b735c00a\_31bf\_4110\_b487\_24c8a64eb6aa/2020-05-23-14-36-33a76e8939341e3e9e85a20cacc5a760.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. https://en.prothomalo.com/opinion/editorial/atrocities-on-women-children-go-unabated [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. https://corona.gov.bd/ [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. https://www.iedcr.gov.bd/ [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. +8801937000011, +8801937110011, +8801927711784, +8801927711785. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. +8801401184551, +8801401184554, +8801401184555, +8801401184556, +8801401184559, +8801401184560, +8801401184563, +8801401184568, +8801401184560, +8801927711784, +8801927711785, +8801937000011, +8801937110011. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/bengali/covid-preparation-03182020175331.html [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/article/1645618/ [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/dhaka/2020/03/19/coronavirus-hotline-numbers-haphazard [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. https://data.unwomen.org/resources/surveys-showcovid-19-has-gendered-effects-asia-and-pacific [↑](#footnote-ref-20)