**Briefing Note on caste discrimination during Covid-19 situation in Bangladesh**

The whole world has been experiencing the devastating nature of corona virus which was first identified in China in December, 2019. Gradually coronavirus pandemic has spread all over the world. According to World Health Organization (WHO), this virus has so far spread in more than 216 countries/areas/territories and affected 7,805,148 people all over the world. WHO has also confirmed death of 431,192 people due to Covid-19 outbreak. Though more than 4 million people so far recovered from this devastating coronavirus attack, the scientist and researchers all over the world yet to successful in finding out any curative solution to covid-19 patients.

However, the first case of Covid-19 was identified in Bangladesh on March 8, 2020. The Institution of Epidemiology Disease Control and Research (IEDCR) first got the existence of coronavirus in three persons. Two of them are male who returned from Italy in the last week of February, 2020. According to IEDCR another female was affected by one of the two affected persons who are husband and wife. However, the first death due to coronavirus outbreak was occurred in Bangladesh on 18 March, 2020. A senior citizen died. According to IEDCR total 90,619 people in Bangladesh so far affected by coronavirus. Among them 1,209 died and 34,027 recovered. According to the health experts all over the world, the corona situation may worsen in Bangladesh especially in densely population areas. Covid-19 infection is more acute in the urban areas than the rural. The infection and death rate is more in the urban areas than the rural areas. More than 70% of the total infection and death occurred in Dhaka. Despite more than two months of shut down and general holidays declared by the government started from 25 March, 2020, the it was difficult to reduce the number of infection. Under this circumstances, Bangladesh government has decided to go for lock down in few selected urban areas which fall under the red zones.

Dhaka, the capital is a densely populated city in Bangladesh which has more than 21 million people. More than 23, 334 people (source: Aljazeera) living in per square kilometer in Dhaka city. Though Bangladesh government has already taken some initiatives to protect people from coronavirus by shutting down educational institutions, government and non-government organizations, supermarkets and restricting public transportation all over Bangladesh, the country is in great danger of community spreading of this virus because people from the lower income groups are still on the street for their livelihood and many people still aren’t maintaining social distancing and personal hygiene. Another big issue which is intensifying the risk of coronavirus outbreak is lack of enough Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for the doctors, nurse and other people who are providing health services to the affected.

It is important to mention that like the people serving in health sectors, the cleaners are also at high risk of corona infection. About 11,683 people (Female-5785, Male-5898) from 2,623 Dalit cleaner’s families currently live in Dhaka city. The cleaners in Dhaka city mainly work in different government, non-government and private institutions like shopping mall, super shop, super markets, etc. Many of them work on day wages basis. However, two months of shut down by Bangladesh government could not stop spread of coronavirus. It is reported that so far 15 people from Dalit community in Dhaka city got affected by Covid-19. Total 4 of them so far died and 11 of them recovered.

Covid-19 outbreak has brought out the real scenario of health sector to the mass people. Despite getting three months of time after the first case in China, Bangladesh government didn’t take any mentionable initiative to stop spread of this virus in the country. Even many doctors died due to lack of proper Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). These deaths have created a fearful atmosphere among the doctors to deal with Covid-19 patient. Though many doctors are still providing treatment support to the Covid-19 patient, there are also many cases of exception. Many Covid-19 positive patient are reported to die without any treatment. Even the hospitals denied to get them admitted.

It this situation, where people with social status, dignity and money are denied to get admission to the hospital, we can easily assume how situation will go with the Covid-19 affected Dalit community.

26,550 Dalits from 5,900 families in Dhaka city are in vulnerable to Covid-19 infection due to their occupation, lack of PPE and maintenance of social distancing during home quarantine. They are also vulnerable due to lack of job opportunity and scarcity of food. Because most of them work as day wages basis.

1. **Health hazard of Dalit cleaners at work place:**

As mentioned earlier, the City Corporations and Municipalities all over Bangladesh have engaged the cleaners to ensure proper sanitization of the cities. After Covid-19 was identified in Bangladesh, Dhaka City Corporations provided hand gloves and musk to the cleaners. Despite being at high risk of getting affected by coronavirus, many cleaners of Dhaka city especially who have been working to other sectors were found without proper protective equipment. As Covid-19 is a highly transmitted disease, there is high risk for the cleaners to be infected.

1. **Health hazards of Dalit cleaners at their residence:**

Corona infection has been increasing rapidly day by day. Mass people including Dalits have been denied of getting general treatment under the current situation in Bangladesh. There are lack of hospitals to treat Covid-19 patient. There are also scarcity of doctors and nurses in the hospitals. The hospitals lack oxygen cylinder, ventilators and ICU. The treatment of Covid-19 patients are being hindered in the hospitals due to lake of Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) for the doctors and nurses. Moreover, tendency of avoiding general patients among the doctors and nurses is also observed. The Dalit cleaners have been working in the City Corporation, municipalities, markets, shopping malls, etc. risking their lives. They haven’t been provided with safety materials like mask, apron, gumboot, hand gloves, etc. for their health protection. As a result, many of them got affected by Covid-19 and few of them died.

Dalit colonies in Dhaka city is highly populated. It is important to mention that the scarcity of space is so acute in colonies that three generations live in just one room. Each cleaner’s family comprises of 6-8 members who live in a room measuring 100-120 square feet. So it may prove dangerous for them to maintain the rule of home quarantine if any of them gets affected by coronavirus as it is highly contagious in nature. Dalit cleaners living in different colonies of Dhaka City Corporation are at high risk of coronavirus infection.

1. **Financial insecurity of Dalit cleaners in Dhaka city:**

It is mentioned earlier that many cleaners in Dhaka city work on daily wages basis. Many of them have already lose their jobs due to coronavirus outbreak. In this situation, if the country goes for lockdown for a long time they will lose their jobs and will suffer from extreme financial crisis. Moreover, constant price hike of daily necessities in the local market will add to their sufferings. In this situation, they will suffer extreme scarcity of food and will have to strive for days. Many people from this community are engaged in small business like shoe repairing, tea stall and small grocery shops. But due to government declaration of shutting down of all offices, they have become jobless. As a result, they remain vulnerable both in health and food security.

Though the Prime Minister during her remarks to the whole nation on 25 March, 2020 said that her government has allocated 5,000 crore taka as stimulus package for the export-oriented industries, it is not going to bring benefit to the cleaners of Dhaka city who are engaged in non-government and private sectors.