

Violence against Women and Girls during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Coronavirus infection is a major threat to the global community with confirmed cases and death estimated on 30-06-2021, at 18,27,67,902 and 39,56,737 respectively. The first outbreak of coronavirus infection occurred in Wuhan, Hubei province in China. this virus has a high mutation rate and its massive transmission infects people very quickly. Severe acute respiratory syndrome is a major complication that occurs to the patient suffering from coronavirus infection. About 219 countries have been affected by this deadly virus resulting in an escalation in the number of cases. World Health Organization (WHO) has declared COVID-19 as a pandemic because of its significant spread throughout the world.

Like many other parts of the world, violence against women and girls in Bangladesh increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. The human rights and legal services program of BRAC, a major non-governmental organization in Bangladesh, documented a nearly 70 percent increase in reported incidents of violence against women and girls in March and April 2020 compared to the same time last year. In April, a man livestreamed himself on Facebook while he hacked his wife to death with a machete. In May, a man reportedly struck his wife over the head with a brick, ultimately killing her, because she didn't get cold water from the refrigerator during iftar. At the same time, access to legal recourse and urgent protection measures were cut short, bringing into sharp relief the faults of an already failing system.

On March 26, 2020, the government declared a nationwide "general holiday"-essentially a nationwide lockdown to stop the spread of COVID-19 that was

extended until May 31, 2020. A study surveying 2,174 women towards the end of this lockdown, published in The Lancet in August, found that during this time women experienced an increase in emotional, sexual, and physical violence. In fact, more than half of those who reported physical violence, such as being slapped or having something thrown at them, said that this violence increased since the onset of the lockdown. For some, this domestic violence was new. Manusher Jonno Foundation, for instance, surveyed 17,203 women and children in April, and found that of the 4,705 women and children who reported incidents of domestic violence that month, nearly half said this was the first time.

Even as the already high level of violence against women and girls increased during the pandemic, government policies made it even more difficult for survivors to access urgent support and legal redress by temporarily shutting down court services for victims of gender-based violence, closing already-limited shelters, and by turning away survivors at police stations.

The Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST) reported that most callers to their hotline said that they were trapped, unable to escape violence at home because they could not travel to a friend or relative's home during the lockdown, and there were no accessible government shelters as an alternative. In one example, BLAST documented a case in which a woman left her home on April 25, 2020, because she said her in-laws were physically abusing her. But when she got to the nearest police station in Gazipur, they had nowhere to bring her. She slept in the police station until her brother arrived from Barishal, a district about 250 kilometers away to pick her up. ASK reported that women and girls seeking to file domestic violence complaints with police were turned away with officers refusing to accept General Diary complaints (Police reports) or provide any assistance.

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