Labor market and unpaid works implications of COVID-19 for Bangladeshi women

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Abstract
Crisis impacts are never gender-neutral, and COVID-19 is no exception. The pandemic has further exacerbated the gender and socioeconomic inequalities, therefore, crucial to undertake a gender impact analysis of COVID-19. This perspective paper highlights women’s vulnerability in the labor market and focused on the increasing unpaid workloads in the response to the COVID-19 outbreak. Focusing on various surveys, feminized sectors such as agriculture, garments have been hardest hit by the pandemic. Female workers have been rapidly lost their means to earn income and confined to homes. Beyond lost jobs and reduced working hours, the pandemic has also increased the time poverty of women. While pre-pandemic unpaid work burdens are well established as strong, the study indicates that burdens are escalated after-pandemic. Women balanced intensified unpaid care and domestic works simultaneously or make a tradeoff, without or minimal help from men. Such results suggest a gender-inclusive policy to minimize the effects of the pandemic, placing women at the center of focus.

KEYWORDS
labor market, time poverty, unpaid work, women

1 | INTRODUCTION

Evidence indicates that there have been gender aspects of a catastrophe outbreak such as famine, war, natural disaster, and disease (Bahn, Cohen, & van der MeulenRodgers, 2020; Boncori, 2020; Bradshaw, 2015). Women in times of crisis are always vulnerable and more affected than men (Quisumbing, Kumar, & Behrman, 2018), and the coronavirus pandemic is no exception (Bahn et al., 2020; McLaren, Wong, Nguyen, & Mahamadachchi, 2020). The
COVID-19 crisis has widened the economic inequalities; women are losing their livelihoods faster (UN Women, 2020a). One of the reasons is the sectors and types of work women engaged have been particularly hard-hit by the pandemic. For example, during the first month of the pandemic, informal workers that are mostly women in Asia and the Pacific lost an average of 22% of their income (UN Women, 2020a).

In Bangladesh, the outbreak triggered a big labor market shock on 26 March 2020 at the start of the lockdown. When gender gaps in the labor market are already immense due to wage disparities, unequal access to resources, unduly representation in informal employment, and social constraints in the lockdown have aggravated the discriminations (WTO, 2020). Travel restrictions have specifically impacted a greater proportion of women than men working in the manufacturing and service sectors (UN Women, 2020b). Economic necessities may force women to continue working from home and this further amplified the supply for unpaid labor hour at home (UN Women, 2020a).

Women are bearing the brunt of increases in unpaid work. In Bangladesh, pre-COVID-19, women on average three times more time than men on unpaid care and domestic work (BBS, 2018a). Usually, the woman bears the responsibility of preparing meals, house cleaning, household maintenance, washing clothes, fetching water, gathering wood, taking care of children, and the elderly due to the social and cultural norms (Seymour, 2016; Zaman, 1995). The COVID-19 outbreak has significantly increased the working hour for women as family members are now at home for the entire day. It is therefore essential to undertake a gender perspective on the impacts of COVID-19.

This perspective paper aims to describe the effects of the labor market on women and to analyze the unpaid workloads of women exacerbated in the COVID-19 disaster response. The study proposed policy suggestions for mitigating the COVID-19 and potential outbreaks of this nature with the examination of the economic impacts of women who typically earn less, have precarious employment, and drown in unpaid workload.

2 SOME STYLIZED FACTS IN THE LABOR MARKET BEFORE COVID-19

2.1 Trend and patterns of female employment

Bangladesh is one of the world's heavily populated countries with a total of 162.7 million people (BBS, 2019). Of the total population, 81.3 million are women and 81.4 million are men with a sex ratio of 100.2 (BBS, 2019). In the last 30 years, with several positive improvements, the rate of female participation rose from 25% in 1990 to 36% in 2019. Women contributing to economic development through their direct and indirect involvement in the three main sectors (Agriculture, industry and service) of the economy.

Based on development studies, economic growth is allied with a decline in female force in agriculture and an increase in nonagricultural activities (World Bank, 2011). Bangladesh has been experiencing the same trend of female workers over years. Since 1990, there has been a sharp rise in the female labor force in the manufacturing and service sectors (Figure 1). More women are working outside the home, more likely to cluster into certain industries and occupations. For example, more than 3.20 million women are employees in the garment industry which were four times higher than men employees (BBS, 2018a). Besides, they are playing a significant role in the service sector as a nurse, social worker or teacher, etc. As frontline health workers they occupied about 90.5% of Bangladeshi nursing professionals (BBS, 2018a).

In addition to sectoral composition, women are migrating to improve the socioeconomic status of the family, despite social and cultural barriers. The share of the international female migrant has been increased from 1.5% in 1990 to 15% in 2019 (BMET, 2020). The remittance sends by them from around the world contribute to improving the country's balance of payments status, rising foreign exchange reserves, and raising national savings.
2.2 | Female status in employment

In Bangladesh, female participation in the informal sector has gradually risen from 84.4% to 91.9% between 2000 and 2016 (BBS, 2018a; Rahman & Islam, 2013). The majority of women remain in vulnerable employment if considered the types of work they are engaged in. Based on ILO (2009), vulnerability is the proportion of own-account work and unpaid family labor to total employment, and about 67.7% of women are engaged in vulnerable employment (BBS, 2018b). Although the proportion of unpaid family workers has reduced over the decades, still 28% of employed women’s works are grossly undervalued (Figure 2). In contrast, the number of women in wage and salaried employment has increased from 24% in 2005 to 32% in 2016 with a persistent gender wage gap. Female workers earn 84% of male workers’ wages and 54% of the monthly salaries of men (Rahman & Islam, 2013).

Women as unpaid family workers are engaged mostly in agricultural activities and devoted a substantial time. The study found that rural women, on average, spend around 3.1 h per day on farm activities (Zaman, 1995) in addition to their household responsibilities. Following this, they spent an average of 484.4 min per day on their regular reproductive work including household chores and caregiving (Komatsu, Malapit, & Theis, 2016).

Grounded on the picture of female labor market statistics, the women participation rate has been increased, but in terms of the job, standards remain stuck on less productive and low return sectors. They are more likely to be salary and unpaid family workers and to have less mobility between the formal and informal sectors. Nevertheless, either employed in the formal or informal market, women bear a higher share of household tasks. Like any other shock, the COVID-19 pandemic is aggravating women’s vulnerabilities than any group in society.

3 | THE PANDEMIC AND THE LABOR MARKET IMPACTS ON WOMEN

3.1 | Women in the labor market after COVID-19

In developing countries like Bangladesh, women are likely to be hit the hardest by the COVID-19 outbreak than men. Women employed in different sectors such as the garment sector, small and medium-sized enterprises, domestic workers, seasonal laborers, and so on have already started to lose the job which is increasing their economic insecurity. UN Women survey (2020b) findings show that many women have lost their jobs, or their working hours were reduced (83% of formal employees, 49% of informal employees). In this line, during the initial closures of ready-made garments about 2,138,778 garment workers have been dismissed, the majority of whom are
women (ILO, 2020). COVID-19 disproportionately affected women migrant workers who were employed in the service sectors. Moreover, in many contexts, around 400,000 migrants returned from different countries after losing their jobs (UNDP, 2020).

The reduction in wage employment opportunities in farm and agro-processing industries leading women to a greater risk of income insecurity. A survey of the 2675 respondents by BRAC (2020) found that 50% of day labor in agricultural sectors reported their incomes reduced to zero and people involved in agriculture experienced 65% loss of income in the current month. Maximum agro-processing industries are close where women were working in value chains, get fired as social distancing is not possible (FAO, 2020). Some agro-processing industries changed operating policy to cope with the pandemic, allowing male workers only, and women are now curbed to the house.

Domestic workers in the country are particularly at risk. While the need for caregiving and cleaning services has increased, lockdowns and quarantine measures made pre-pandemic working arrangements difficult to sustain and resulted in a loss of income and jobs for the majority of women (UN Women, 2020a). Women on the frontline are sacrificing health for economic security. Frontline health workers such as nurses, community health workers are more exposed to infection, working long hours, and often under or unpaid (UN Women, 2020b).

Therefore, with plunging economic activity, women are more vulnerable to layoffs and loss of livelihoods during the lockdown.

3.2 Women in unpaid work burden after COVID-19

Countrywide lockdown and social distancing have increased women's burden of unpaid care and domestic work (Figure 3). According to the BRAC survey (2020), about 55% of surveyed women faced additional domestic work stress and 58% reported increased unpaid care work. School's closure and family members returning home, home quarantine, and so on further exacerbate unpaid workloads. For example, as of March 17, more than 36.0 million students (including 17.0 million in primary school) were restricted to homes by school closures (Uddin, 2020). The responsibility of caring for them came on women's and girls' shoulders due to social norms.
Since the crisis began, women's working hours have changed dramatically. More bodies at home, means more people to feed and care for. Often they have encountered increased care burden (Thomason & Macias-Alonso, 2020). In the societal norms, women are in charge of the physical care of sick members, especially older people who are at greater risk of falling severel ill if affected by COVID-19 (Power, 2020). Additionally, gaps in the basic services such as safe water, sanitation, and so on amplified women’s care works during the outbreaks (UN Women, 2020a). The reason, in the rural context, women are usually responsible to collect water and firewood from a public place.

Under such circumstances, women in farm households have less time for agricultural activities with increased domestic chores and care obligations (Koning, Anderson, & Bin-Humam, 2020), but contrary evidence shows that countrywide suspension of transport generates labor shortages during the Boro harvesting cycle (Mamun, 2020) filled up by a female member of the family. After harvesting, women often conduct all post-harvest tasks as unpaid family labor, increasing their time poverty (Pandey et al., 2010; Theis et al., 2019).

Women’s limited work opportunities in outside have multiplied the unpaid workload inside the house since the spread of COVID-19. However, sharing some responsibilities of men like children’s education or playing with children (10% as opposed to women’s 5%) is noticeable but women’s household chores have not necessarily decreased (UN Women, 2020b). Under the recent pandemic circumstances, the UN women report also state that cleaning (38%) is the most time-consuming work done by women for safety measures then cooking (25%). Female-headed households and single mothers (widowed/divorced female) are more likely to spend more time on unpaid care and domestic work during this period.

Discriminatory social norms where a major source of persisting gender inequalities there the current COVID-19 crisis worsens the situation. Women irrespective of employment status, balance the double work burden related to paid and unpaid activities by undertaking different activities simultaneously or making tradeoff with leisure which makes them time poor (Arora, 2015). Considering the hours consecrated, they have less time for rest and personal care: suffered from time poverty. As evidence, about 89% of women in BRAC’s survey (2020) conveyed not to have any leisure time from the beginning of the pandemic. Moreover, men’s minimal contribution to domestic work during the pandemic made them more time poor.
CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic is a major shock in the labor market due to lockdowns and restrictions of movement. With declining economic activity, women are particularly vulnerable to layoffs and loss of livelihoods. Incomes of women working in the informal sector have declined dramatically. Women over-represented in many industries are hardest hit by low wages and tenuous jobs. They are vulnerable not just to the direct impact of economic insecurity, but also indirect impacts of social norms around the gendered distribution of work at home. Because of safety and measures, families are more likely to be at home, and this has exposed, as well as intensified, the existing workload of women. Many women are forced to work longer hours, balancing household duties with productive work and enduring time poverty.

The study recommends further research involving observation and measurement to understand the direct and indirect effect of women's well-being in the COVID-19 crisis. However, it is more than essential to formulate policy by addressing the gender impacts of this crisis. This can be achieved by designing socioeconomic plans with a focus on women at the center. With helping those in the formal economy, initiatives are required to support informal female workers to escape informality. Encouragement of home-based alternative livelihood opportunities, for example, handicraft, sewing for women and promote market linkages with local administrations will drive better outcomes for all. Increasing women's engagement in technological advancements can significantly reduce the work stress, given their multiple roles in the household and the farm during the crisis. In agriculture, more access to labor-saving and women-friendly technology will reduce the ongoing women's vulnerability.

Policies and programs should aim to influence the attitude of men in the family toward women and help in unpaid care and domestic work to reduce the burden on women, make it more equitable. Moreover, changing the women's perception of themselves can play an important role to uplift their self-esteem and to improve their image in the family and society at large. This can be done through community-based education programs, social and behavior change communication and, awareness creation through mass media or other means of information sharing. With increasing social awareness, it is high time to recognize the women's "invisible work," including the women's unaccounted contribution to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declared no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

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