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Livelihood Transitions of Women Workers During COVID-19

The Case of Domestic Workers in Dhaka

BIGD RESEARCH BRIEF

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1. Introduction

COVID-19 posed an impossible trade-off between lives and livelihoods across the world, especially for economically vulnerable people with limited or no fallback option. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), 55% of the world's population do not have any form of social protection. Most informal workers in the Global South are in this group—they are generally poor, have weak or no social protection, and have

While Bangladesh is a signatory of the ILO Convention 189 on Decent Work for Domestic Workers, the country has not yet ratified it and is therefore not bound by its recommendations. In Bangladesh, domestic workers are excluded from the legal, regulatory, and policy frameworks.

Domestic work is one of the most common forms of informal work for poor women in developing countries. These workers generally come from poorer households; they have little assets, education, and skills, and hence a limited range of jobs to choose from (ILO, 2002). Their exclusion from the mainstream institutions, including banks, trade unions, and labour courts, exacerbates their disadvantage. Their circumstance does not allow them to accumulate the resources or gain the support necessary to move out of informal employment to better, formal jobs (Chen et al., 2004, 2005; De Soto, 1989, 2000; Hanagan, 2008; Samal, 2008; Von Braun & Gatzweiler, 2014). Due to the nature of work and informality, domestic work in Bangladesh, as in many other countries, is precarious. It continues nevertheless because it is often the only livelihood option for poor women and children.

COVID-19 crisis has hit the domestic workers hard. A large number of them lost employment immediately after the pandemic broke out, and even after 18 months, the majority of them remained unemployed (Rahman et al., 2021). Yet, they received very little public or policy attention.

A study of their situation, how it changed during COVID-19 and how they coped, can therefore provide important insights into what a crisis like this means to a group of workers with limited capacity to earn and save, informing a more inclusive approach to social protection in the future.

This policy brief sheds light on the COVID-19 experience of the domestic workers in the context of Bangladesh to bring attention to this extremely vulnerable occupational group.

had to cope with the crisis on their own. For these workers, their livelihoods *are* their lives. Domestic workers form one of the most vulnerable informal occupational groups in Bangladesh.

Estimates of the number of domestic workers in Bangladesh vary between two and four million, but it is generally agreed that the majority of them are women. The entire sector belongs to the informal economy and hence outside the purview of the country's labour legislation.

2. Brief Methodology

BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) and Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC) carried out rapid telephone surveys drawing on telephone contact databases from previous surveys. In this survey, a random sample of 12,000 households was drawn, evenly divided between urban slums and rural areas. Of this sample, 38% were classified as extremely poor, 18% moderately poor, 18% were the vulnerable non-poor, and 6% had monthly incomes above the median income (Rahman & Matin, 2020). The household head was interviewed in the survey and domestic workers formed a small percentage of the sample; of whom 76% were classified as poor and 60% extremely poor.¹

From the BIGD-PPRC survey database, we selected 30 female domestic workers aged 18+ years from Dhaka city. They were purposively selected to cover different age groups, current occupational statuses (domestic work, other paid work, unemployed) and locations (those who stayed in Dhaka or returned to villages). These were “untied” (live-out) domestic workers who worked for more than one employer and lived in their own accommodation. The research was carried out between January and February 2021 using semi-structured interviews.

We asked them to recall their lives and livelihoods before COVID-19 (Jan–Feb 2020), during the period of strict lockdown (Mar–Apr 2020), and afterwards. We also collected common background information and then information on migration, work and work-related transitions for both respondent and other household members, income, assets, social networks, and government support relating to COVID-19. We also had five key informant interviews (KIIs) with trade union leaders and

¹ By way of comparison, rickshaw pulling is an example of extremely poorly remunerated precarious work that is entirely dominated by a poverty estimate of 61%, with 37% classified as extremely poor.

non-governmental organization (NGO) staff working with domestic workers. We primarily used NVivo to organize the data and conduct basic analysis.

3. Findings

3.1. The Domestic Workers Were Extremely Vulnerable Even Before COVID-19

Poverty, death of the primary breadwinner, lack of paid work in the village, indebtedness, and river erosion were the major causes of migration to the city for the interviewed domestic workers. With no or low education and marketable skills, they had few employment options in the city. They ended up in domestic work as it was most easily accessible and less physically demanding than other options like day labour. Often, they found it through their community and family network.

Most of the respondents were either sole or main earners of their households and were widowed, separated, or abandoned. Male members of the respondents who were secondary earners generally worked as rickshaw pullers and other forms of daily labour, such as waiters, house painters, street vendors, masons, shopkeepers, van pullers, and garment workers. They lived in low-income neighbourhoods. Despite poor housing conditions, rents were extremely high, accounting for an estimated 50–70% of the domestic workers' incomes. Their monthly income ranged from BDT 1,800 to BDT 6,000, depending on the number of houses they worked and the rates paid per task, which also varied by the neighbourhood they worked in.

Low income, lack of legal protection and voice, and their marginal social status mean that these domestic workers had a financially insecure life even before the pandemic.

3.2. Impact of COVID-19 on Domestic Workers

The lockdown hurled them from a life of routine insecurity to one of extreme uncertainty, as described by the interviewed domestic workers. They were, quite probably, the first groups of workers to lose jobs—almost everyone in our study had lost their jobs within a day after the lockdown was announced. Their work demanded working in close proximity to their employers' families—handling food they consumed and objects they used and performing care work, e.g., bathing and feeding children and elderly—they lived in cramped conditions in slums, and many worked for multiple families. Thus, their employers became fearful of them as a possible source of COVID-19, and terminated them immediately.

“They said, ‘No, we will not hire anyone. We can’t open the gate because outsiders might be carrying the virus. You may carry the virus because you go to work at others’ houses.’ And I replied, ‘Everyone is saying this. But how will I survive [if nobody hires me]? How will I get by? How will I pay the house rent?’”

—Fatema (34), widow, main earner

And the termination was abrupt. When they turned up for work as usual, their employers simply told them not to report for work from the next day. Some of the employers assured them that they would be rehired when the lockdown was ended in 10 days, but the lockdown went on for over two months, and many did not hear from their employers even after that. Some were fired even before the lockdown began because their employers decided to leave the city for their own safety. The majority did not hear from their employers during the lockdown. They did not receive any offers of assistance or indication about resuming employment. In some cases, employers were willing to continue their employment, but, fearing the virus, their building authorities forbade it.

Domestic workers were the main breadwinners for most of the households in our sample, even where there were other earners. Their job loss meant a complete or substantial loss of income for at least two-thirds of our respondents. Because the lockdown had been declared at the end of the month (25 March), most workers were able to collect a whole month's salary. Some, however, did not get what they were owed. One employer, a salaried government servant, pleaded hardship.

“They paid half my salary because they claimed that they were in a difficult situation as there was a cut down on salaries of government employees too.”

—Morium Begum (30), married, main earner

The job loss was more devastating for older women; they feared that they would not be re-hired because of their age. The majority of domestic workers remained unemployed for at least two months of the lockdown, some for a more extended period.

3.3. Survival Strategies During the Lockdown

Questions of food and rent posed a significant dilemma to the workers: whether to go back to the village or remain in the city. In the village, they would not have to pay rent, they could afford food as it was cheaper, and they could even forage for food if they had to. But keeping accommodation in the city was essential for any future resumption of employment. Weighing these considerations, 11 of

the 30 women in our study decided to return to their village.

But, some of those who returned to the village continued to pay rent for their city dwelling with the hope that their employer may call them back to work. The majority of the workers remained in the city with the same hope, though some stayed back because they had lost their village homes to river erosion or flood. Clearly, they knew that few job opportunities were available in the village.

“Yes, the house rent was too high, but what else could I have done? Had I gone back to the village, sooner or later, I would have to return. Staying here gave us the hope that we could get by even if it became difficult. But there was no employment in the village.”

—Firoza Begum (40), widow, main earner

With the loss of their jobs, the workers had to find ways of stretching whatever resources they had. Few of them had small savings as they had other earning members in the household. But most were sole earners and had no savings. Food was the most immediate concern. On one hand, their income dropped; on the other, food prices increased due to disrupted supplies. Most started having one meal a day instead of two or three, simplified their diet—rice with lentils or vegetables or sometimes just salt—prioritized children’s food needs, purchased old or rotten vegetables at a lower price, and brought groceries on credit. Those who migrated to their village gathered wild greens and tried fishing.

3.4. Available Formal and Informal Support

Rent was the largest expenditure for the domestic workers. We found that many landlords permitted delayed rent payments. In many cases, landlords let them retain their rooms on the understanding that they would come back after the lockdown. Those who have been living in a place for an extended period felt that they had a special relationship with the landlord and received more sympathy.

“The house owner hasn’t complained about it because we have been living here for many years. Since we are old tenants and have been living here for more than four or five years, the house owner doesn’t make a ruckus about it [paying the due rent].”

—Rubina (25), separated, sole earner

However, some faced abuse and threats from landlords to seize their belongings.

A small number of workers borrowed money from close families, but the majority tried to avoid getting

into debt. Moreover, they were not hopeful about getting a loan.

“Nobody would have agreed to lend me money. Had I asked them to lend me money, they would have thought something like, ‘She doesn’t earn enough, how would she pay me back?’ No, nobody lent us any money. You see, nobody cares about whether we are starving.”

—Shefali Begum (35), married, main earner

Many had a trusted relationship with neighbourhood stores and had been buying from them on credit in the past; they are now able to do so during the lockdown as well.

Several workers had received formal support from the government: rice, lentils, onion, soap, etc. Contact with the local party leader proved to be the most valuable social capital to access government support; only those who lived in the locality for long period had it. National ID card was required to access those support which excluded many because they did not have ID cards.

“Sister, everyone received some sort of support, but we didn’t receive anything at all because we couldn’t show any NID card. We don’t have them. Everyone who was able to show [submit] their NID cards received support.”

—Shefali Begum (35), married, main earner

A few had called their employers to ask for help. Some were successful. They would be called to the residence gates and given money or food. Others did not feel they could ask for help, nor did their employers reach out to them.

Neighbours could sometimes provide support. Those with food to spare would send some over. Sometimes the workers would receive food from neighbours in exchange for doing chores around the house. As one worker described her experience,

“I would go to my neighbours and say, ‘Sister, if you have dirty dishes, let me help you wash them.’ I helped them with their dirty dishes, and they gave me some food. Or I might visit someone’s house, and she would say, ‘Will you help me cut these fish?’ So I would cut the fish for her, and she offered me some snacks. This helped me to survive those two months.”

—Hanifa Bibi (40), separated, sole earner

A few received support from NGOs for a period of time, including sanitation and hygiene products, and received small cash transfers from BRAC linked to the purchase of groceries from local stores. Others had received informal support from employers, relatives, or affluent persons of the community, while some received money from their village. But some workers said that they had not received any support from anyone. They expressed that the domestic workers were treated by their government, in terms of receiving any support, as poor people, not as working citizens.

3.5. Continued Vulnerability Post-Lockdown

Whatever relief and informal support were available from the government ended when the lockdown was

In our study, nine out of 30 domestic workers could return to their old jobs, although most now worked in fewer homes than before and hence earned less money than before. Seven got new jobs 3/4 months after the onset of the lockdown, and four domestic workers got jobs 5/6 months later. Eight workers were still without jobs when we interviewed them in January 2021, of whom five were sole earners in their households. Of the remaining two, one had started selling food, while Firoza (50), sole earner, who had resorted to begging during the lockdown, now switched to waste picking.

Domestic workers continued to face high rates of unemployment and those who returned to work had a reduced number of homes for several reasons. First, employers remained cautious of the virus. Second, employers who had been hard hit economically and had not yet recovered financially could not afford to employ them. Third, family members of the employers had continued to stay at home and do the housework themselves. Finally, employers bought labour-saving devices like vacuum cleaners, washing machines, and blenders.

We find that survival needs remained the most urgent priority of the domestic workers in the post-lockdown period. They continued to cut down on the number of meals and other food-related expenses and buy low quality and rotten vegetables long after the lockdown was lifted. Households with children or elderly people reported the greatest stress with food. Levels of deprivation reduced somewhat for those who started earning again. Workers were also expected to pay for the provisions they had taken on credit from local shops, and further credit was refused until they had done so.

“I go to the market at night when vegetables are almost sold out, and all that is left are mostly the ones that are rotten or defected. I bought those vegetables for less.”

—Ayesha (40), sole earner

lifted. Furthermore, the lockdown had depleted all their savings and channels of support, though many domestic workers had still remained unemployed.

A small number of domestic workers continued to look for work during the lockdown with little success. Those who had stayed back in the city or came back after the lockdown immediately began their search for work once lockdown was lifted. However, a few remained in the village, particularly those who were older because they were not confident about finding jobs.

The PPRC/BIGD study found that domestic workers not only reported the highest rates of job loss during the lockdown, but they were least likely to be re-employed when the lockdown was lifted.

The domestic workers also faced enormous pressure to pay off the deferred rent along with their current rent after the lockdown was lifted. They moved into lower-priced, lower-quality homes within the vicinity, opted to share accommodation, or moved in with their relatives. Some workers took their children out of school and sent them to work. A number of domestic workers who had migrated back to the village switched their children to religious education.

A number of themes emerged as workers talked about their experience of COVID-19 and their future. For many, religion was a major source of strength; some held out the hope that they would soon find a job. But most women were anxious, the older ones in particular. A major source of their anxiety was that they knew that many potential employers had turned to labour-saving technologies during the lockdown. Another unexpected challenge these workers were facing was that many more women were now seeking domestic work, particularly those who lost jobs in the garment industry.

4. Existing Policy Conundrum

Domestic workers are not recognized by Bangladesh's national labour legislation. While the 2006 Labour Law provides detailed guidelines for the workers-employers relations and refers to the need to develop skills in the informal economy, informal workers, including domestic workers, are explicitly excluded. It means that domestic workers

do not have access to social security, skills training, or the right to take their grievances to labour courts (Ahmed, 2012).

Thus, domestic workers must rely on employers' generosity in times of crisis, like their own or a family member's illness. In some cases, employers pay them advance wages for their medical expenses (Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies [BILS], 2015). Often, workers are either sent home to their families or dismissed from work if they fell ill. Domestic workers are explicitly excluded from the provision for paid maternity leave and are likely to be sacked if they get pregnant (Women in Informal

Employment: Globalizing and Organizing [WIEGO], 2020). The vast majority of domestic workers are not organized and do not have the bargaining power or collective support to negotiate improved working conditions (WIEGO, 2020).

However, we can see some slow progress in recent years. One major victory at the international level, the result of the coordinated effort of domestic workers organizations in different countries, is the adoption of the Convention Concerning Decent Work for Domestic Workers (C189) at the 100th International Labor Conference (ILC) in Geneva in June 2011.

The key provisions of the Convention Concerning Decent Work for Domestic Workers (C189) require governments to provide domestic workers with the same basic labour rights as those available to other workers, to protect them from violence and abuse, to regulate private employment agencies that recruit and employ domestic workers, and to prevent child labour in domestic work. The accompanying Domestic Workers Recommendation (No. 201) provides member states with non-binding guidance for strengthening protections for domestic workers and ensuring conditions of a decent job. However, while Bangladesh is one of the signatory states of the convention, it has not yet ratified it and is therefore yet to abide by its recommendations (ILO, 2011).

Within the country, the National Domestic Women Workers Union (NDWWU) was set up as an unregistered, member-based trade union in 2000 (Ghosh, 2021). It claims to have close to 20,000 members and is affiliated with the International Domestic Workers' Federation (IDWF), established in 2013. Together with BILS, NDWWU formed the Domestic Workers Rights Network (DWRN) in 2006,

with BILS acting as its secretariat. The DWRN consists of members of various trade unions, worker groups, civil society organizations, lawyers, and human rights activists. Its goal is to assist in the mobilization of domestic workers and ensure their inclusion in policy change affecting their working and living conditions (WIEGO, 2020).

The DWRN made notable progress in 2015 when the government approved the Domestic Workers' Protection and Welfare Policy (DWPWP). The policy was hailed as a milestone for extending legal recognition to those in domestic service. It has 16 provisions, with clearly specified responsibilities for the employers, the workers, and the government. However, it remains a symbolic victory as it has no legal backing and there are limited means of enforcement (Ministry of Labour and Employment [MoLE], 2015).

The primary outcome of the policy has been to increase awareness about conditions in domestic work and public shaming of abusive employers—although this is to a few cases of serious physical abuse (Ghosh, 2021).

5. Policy Recommendations

The 8th five-year plan of Bangladesh (2021) adopted specific stimulus packages for formal sector workers, but domestic workers, along with other informal workers, were to be addressed through the horizontal expansion of a safety net program consisting of a one-time cash transfer of BDT 2,500 to five million informal workers. This had not been implemented in September 2020 (WIEGO, 2020). In any case, it is restricted to vulnerable citizens living below the poverty line in the 100 most poverty-stricken sub-districts. The budget for social

protection increased to 2% of GDP from 1.2%, but the percentage of poor increased during COVID-19 by an estimated 24.5 million (Rahman et al., 2021). Given this context, we consider three broad areas where coordinated action by the state, civil society, and international organizations could improve the future for domestic workers.

First, women's employment needs to be promoted across the economy. Greater investment to provide high-quality health, education, and childcare services, and ensuring women's equal access and participation are necessary for promoting women's greater, higher-quality economic participation. Overseas migration can expand the opportunities for domestic work, but the government would need to better regulate the process and ensure that migrant workers are treated with dignity.

Second, the government must strengthen and implement existing policies. Domestic workers must be brought under the coverage of social protection, at least as committed by the government during the COVID-19 period. The Domestic Worker Protection and Welfare Policy 2015 must be implemented. Many countries, including South Africa and Brazil, have introduced a minimum wage for domestic workers—an hourly minimum wage could be considered for Bangladesh. This might be difficult to enforce, but it would have an initial symbolic significance that all workers merit some minimum level of material recognition and, in the longer run, it would provide a basic principle around which domestic workers could organize. Signing a convention does not mean ratifying, and while ratifying, it does not mean respecting it. Nevertheless, Bangladesh's failure to ratify the ILO Code 189 on the rights of domestic workers gives a clear signal about the value it gives to these workers. Ratification is essential if a group of workers who constitute the most vulnerable and devalued population in the economy are to be extended a minimal degree of recognition—and, as

with minimum wage legislation, a platform around which to organize for implementation.

And critical to these efforts is to promote the organization of domestic workers. The National Domestic Workers Union is a promising start. But it is seriously under-resourced. This is where we might think about the possibility of attracting international funders interested in promoting the solidarity and strength of informal workers. We might also think of ways to build its networks with other unions in the country.

Third, demand for more professional forms of paid work. But this would require proper training. We need to think of ways to formalize and professionalize domestic service which would allow employers to confidently recruit domestic workers and provide domestic workers with secure employment at times of crisis, along with protection of rights against sudden dismissals. The legislative architecture discussed here would help the formalization process.

“Hello Task” is a digital platform for on-demand domestic worker service in Dhaka, which began in 2017. Through “Hello Task,” the domestic workers receive training from the partner organizations of this agency, such as BRAC and Oxfam. The training includes teaching them the operation of digital apps and digital financial services, operation of household electronic gadgets, and professionalism. The agency provides the workers with contracts, uniforms, and identity cards. Supporting and mainstreaming such initiatives could be an effective way of bringing domestic workers into the formal sector.

6. Concluding Remarks

This policy brief focuses on a group of workers who were extremely vulnerable in normal times, were the first to lose their jobs, did not earn enough to have savings to fall back on, and were largely outside the government's social protection schemes. These workers also found it more difficult than many others to be re-employed when the lockdown was lifted for many reasons, some of which are long term, e.g., purchasing of labour-saving appliances by their employers.

Household's human capital played the most vital role in weathering the crisis. Those with able-bodied (and responsible) male earners, were more favourably positioned than the rest. But, most were the main or sole earner of their households.

Government relief for the urban poor reached some of the domestic workers. But lack of NID cards and contacts with influential community members made accessing it very difficult and impossible for some. Social capital in various forms also emerged as a critical source of assistance. Those who had relationships with their employers or knew the neighbourhood grocery shop owners were able to

benefit from the occasional assistance or credit. The sympathy of landlords, during the lockdown at least, reduced the pressure to pay rent, but, of course, the rent accumulated which they had to pay later. For those who had a home to return to, their village homes embodied a certain degree of security.

But domestic workers had almost no symbolic capital. That is, they did not have status or respect that would lead others to provide reliable support in times of crisis. They relied on the kindness and charity of those around them for which they expressed a great deal of gratitude, but it depended on the whims of others. Symbolic capital of garments workers at least kept them in the limelight of media, national, political, or international focus. But domestic workers were almost invisible in the public discourse during COVID-19 even though they were one of the worst-hit occupational groups.

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Supported by the UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), the Covid Collective is based at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). The Collective brings together the expertise of, UK and Southern based research partner organisations and offers a rapid social science research response to inform decision-making on some of the most pressing Covid-19 related development challenges.

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