

# Intersectional Pandemics in Bangladesh

## *The Effects of COVID-19 on Girls*

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Girls and women are the first victims of any calamity, pandemic, or disaster in developing countries like Bangladesh. As it is, they are very often denied health care, are forced to endure child marriage and early motherhood, and are frequently subjected to violence. Given this unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic they are now suffering immensely. COVID-19 threatens girls' rights in countries around the world and will have far-reaching impacts on their health and wellbeing, education, and protection. Self-isolation has increased the rates of gender-based violence. Early marriage and pregnancy are among the drastic effects of school closures and many parents have married off their underage daughters or sold them off to rich families as domestic workers to reduce their economic burden.

### **The Plight of Ready-made Garment (RMG) Workers in Bangladesh**

These workers are females from very poor families. Their leaving their own villages was a matter of survival and these poorly paid workers gradually made this manufacturing sector the backbone of the country's economy. Their living standards were gradually improving compared to how they were ten years ago. Their children were going to school, elderly parents were being taken care of, and families were solvent. These workers played a key role in reducing child marriage and early pregnancy and ensured at least a minimum degree of social dignity for girls and young women in their communities. Now all this has been destroyed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

A line chief of a garment factory in Bangladesh was asked, "Why have you declared the factory open in this crisis time when the virus is spreading so rapidly?" He said in reply, "If we do not show the world that the facto-



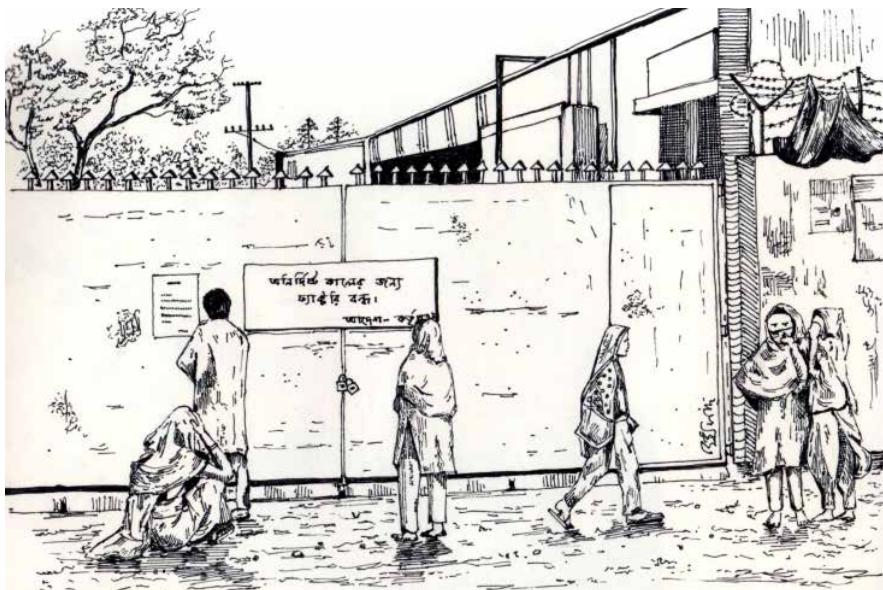
ry is ready to start work, the order will go to another country.” After this announcement was made thousands of workers who went back to their villages when lockdown was declared tried to return to work under the extraordinary conditions of there being no available transport. Suffering from hunger and insecurity, they travelled hundreds of miles on foot to rescue their jobs and to be paid the salary still owing to them. Many of them were then fired or forced to resign to get this money. Some were permitted to start work despite this pandemic thus putting their lives at risk in what amounted to being chained up with no protective measures in place and no physical distancing being maintained.

## **Girls are Forced to Leave School**

It took many years to make our male dominated society understand that girls have rights and to demonstrate the necessity of their being educated but the COVID-19 pandemic has created another pandemic for girls and young women through which many of our achievements in relation to girls’ rights and women’s empowerment have been lost; we have to start working again to regain these.

This pandemic is resulting in girls having to drop out of school which means that they are now disconnected from social networks and supports. Having girls at home is leading to increased levels of domestic violence against them and this is, in turn, leading to higher levels of intimate partner violence being perpetrated against young women. More girls than ever are being forced into child marriage and subsequent early pregnancy that prevents them from taking up income generating opportunities. Age-related and other complications of pregnancy and childbirth are leading to increased death rates. However, even though our girls and young women are facing many barriers to education and health and wellbeing along with suffering much oppression, we believe in their power to bring about a brighter future.

Figure 1: Factories are Closed: The Misery Begins



Artist: Monon Mahfuz

Factories are closed! Workers are standing in front of the gate thinking about how this job had saved them from extreme poverty and hunger. Now they are again at risk. Thousands of girls and young women who had lost their jobs because of the shut-down of factories explained, “We are not going to die of the corona pandemic. Rather, will die of hunger and violence.”

Nazia, sank to the ground after seeing the notice on the locked gate that read: “Factory is closed for an indefinite period.” She just sat on the road and thought about her two daughters, the older one, Chandni, in grade six and the younger, Safina, in grade three. She is the only breadwinner in the family. Her drug addict husband comes home only to grab food and snatch money for drugs and gambling. She also has to support her elderly parents who live in their village. She thinks to herself, “How will I manage all this? What will happen to my daughters? Will they also, like me, be forced into the miserable life of being married at the age of 13, enduring early pregnancy, suffering severe poverty, and being hungry day after day?”

Nazia moved to this city to survive and getting this factory job was like a gift from God. She dreamed of sending her daughters to secondary school

so that they could become factory officers or perhaps even doctors in the future. She wonders, “What will happen to us now?”

**Figure 2: Intimate Partner and Family Violence: The Misery Continues**



Artist: Monon Mahfuz

Nazia had rushed to many places trying to get some relief food for herself and her daughters but could not get any since she was not a permanent resident of this area. Her meagre savings and the rice, potatoes, and pulse she had received from a local NGO had enabled her and her daughters to survive the last month, but she has nothing left. She is now jobless, and her pale and hungry listless daughters are staring at her. There is nothing left at home to cook, no savings and no way to borrow from neighbors since everyone is now jobless and hungry.

Suddenly her husband, who has never taken any responsibility for his family, is demanding food. Nazia and her girls all know that a hungry man is an angry man. This common saying gives men the right to hurt women and girls. He beats her brutally to cool down his anger. He screams, “Why didn’t you cook food? Why did you lose your job? Why do you belong to a poor family who cannot give dowry whenever required? Why have you given birth to two daughters but not to a son?

There is no one to rescue her and her daughters in this lockdown situation. All the offices and shelters where she could ask for help against this

domestic violence are closed. Her small daughters are trembling with fear and trying to rescue her even as they seek shelter from their father's violence. Nazia cannot save her daughters from their father's violence; he beats them as well.

**Figure 3: Child Marriage: A Cruel Solution to Poverty**



Artist: Monon Mahfuz

Is this the only solution available to Nazia? She sees a 12-year-old girl passing her playmates with a man, her husband, who is 35. She is appalled that any society could look to child marriage as a solution to the poverty of the child's family and as a way of saving them from the pandemic of hunger. Her neighbors had said to Nazia, "Do not wait for school. It will not reopen. If you sell Chandni to a rich man you and Safina will eat for a long time, and Chandi will no longer be hungry. Also, your husband will then stop beating you all." Soon after the pandemic started, Nazia heard Chandni telling a friend, "I am twelve years of age and I am not afraid of the Coronavirus disease. Rather, I am afraid that my family will arrange a marriage for me. This would be much worse than any pandemic for me." Nazia cannot do this, but what other choice does she have?

**Figure 4:** Child Labor: Another Solution to Poverty



Artist: Monon Mahfuz

Safina, at nine years of age, was a brilliant student in grade three. She was awarded an extra scholarship along with free tuition in the government school because of her excellent test results. Her best friend, Munira, was forced to leave school and was engaged by a rich family to serve as their house maid. Nazia was approached by a woman who wanted to employ Safina. She said that she would give Safina good food and would give money to Nazia every month for Safina's labor. But Nazia knows that this would mean Safina having to leave her books, school bag, and school uniform behind along with all her dreams. She cannot do this to Safina but what else can she do? Her girls are wasting away in front of her; they are so very hungry. Of what use will all this suffering be if their malnourishment leads to illness or if they die of starvation?

**Figure 5:** Sexual Violence against Women: The Shadow Pandemic



Artist: Monon Mahfuz

As mentioned above, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced many girls to leave school; they become helpless victims. Women, young and older, are now jobless; without any income they, too, become victims who no longer have recourse to the support structures that were in place before COVID-19 struck. Lockdown means that they cannot escape their homes, and this makes them even more vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence. Chandni and Safina are witnesses to the sexual violence suffered by their mother. They have seen this happen in other families.

What is Nazia to do? Would Chandni be safer in a marriage to an older man or would he abuse her sexually and allow his friends to do so? She has heard of such appalling situations. Would Safina be better off cleaning floors and washing clothes in that rich woman's house or would the boys and men in that family rape her? Nazia knows first-hand what sexual violence entails and cannot bear the thought of her daughters being subjected to it.

**Figure 6:** Believe in Girl Power



Artist: Monon Mahfuz

We cannot allow this vulnerability to be the last word. Our girls and young women have proven their power and resilience in the past. Although the COVID-19 pandemic and its subsequent effects have pushed them back into the past, they can still resist and fight back to secure their position in this male dominated society. Girls have struggled for their education, they have fought for jobs, they have endured violence in many different forms, and they have achieved remarkable milestones in the recent past. Now, too, girl power will conquer these pandemics and girls will once again establish their rights. This girl is the symbol representing the under-served girls and young women of developing countries like Bangladesh.

The world is waiting for a new pandemic-free day when we can work together to prevent violence. The girls and women of Bangladesh are now jobless and helpless, but their inner strength and commitment still exist. They will resume their dignity, come back to reopen factories, create new jobs, protect each other, and work towards gender equity.



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