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**Recession, Stimulus Package and Protection of Women
Gender in Covid-19 Pandemic Response in Bangladesh**

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Introduction

As Bangladesh had entered into the fourth stage of corona virus infection by the first week of April 2020, the massive community spread has begun and the infection curve raised sharply up, and the Government of Bangladesh had implemented a strict nationwide shut down. Public health care system had been appeared as thoroughly broken and had been completely collapsed during the outbreak of the pandemic. Due to this public health emergency about 13 million jobs went at risk in June 2020 which is approximately 20% of the domestic labor force (Citizen's Platform for SDG; Khan, 2020). During the extended lockdown, the Government has unveiled a massive stimulus package worth US\$8.573 billion (April 5, 2020) to mitigate the ravaging effect of global Covid-19 (corona virus) pandemic on the macroeconomic stability which is nearly 2.52% of the country's GDP. It targeted to revamp economic activities by boosting liquidity,

sustaining business operation and slashing unemployment. Nearly US\$3.5 billion bailout package has been available for the industries and service sectors and US\$2.53 billion has been provided for small and medium businesses at the concessional interest rate.

Prime minister Sheikh Hasina earlier had also allocated an emergency stimulus package worth about US\$590 million for export-oriented garment industries where the factory owners had been allowed an interest free loan from the scheme to keep their factories running. The final package unveiled for agriculture. The government had simultaneously taken up four programs under the work plan which are to be implemented in immediate, short and long phases to increase public expenditure through employment generation, introducing stimulus packages and widening safety net coverage. Affected industries and the service sector would receive working capital through banks as low-interest loans as the commercial banks would provide the amount as loans from their own funds to the concerned industries and enterprises on the basis of bank-client relations. (The Hindustan Business Line, April 5, 2020). Government have provided the subsidy for paying interest.

Research Problem and Method

I argue that these stimulus packages are, by design, not able to contribute preventing loss of livelihood, income and ensuring social security of the women significantly, especially, in the areas of the informal sector, self-employment and wage-work. I have started with the doubt that the stimulus package, an unprecedented macro-credit scheme, do not have leverage to mitigate the poverty and pauperization of women as the consequence of lockdown and economic downfall.

Women dual responsibility in marriage and market has restricted and shaped women's labor force participation. I assumed that, nature of these packages would be unable to reach out women for the existing systematic gender inequality, especially, access to ownership of property and business. It is obvious that, women have not been able to access to the benefit, primarily, for their gender-based hindrance in the banking channel (J. Jaim, 2020) and formal economy and secondly, their structural disadvantageous position in trade and commerce due to their limited mobility, access to education and domestic role as wife, mother and caregiver, everyday experience of sexual abuse in public and private space along with escalating risk of rape and murder including domestic violence. All the factors combined constantly keep women in a subordinate position and systematically prevent them to participate in trade, business, job, self-employment and other income-generating activities.

I have briefly examined the extent these stimulus packages and programs have been accessible to women as captured from ground level reality they are living in with qualitative method having remote conversation with 10 relevant women living in the capital city of Dhaka and Khulna including small entrepreneur, banker, garment sector activist, journalist and academician from April- December 2020. Taking the opportunity of online broadcasting trends this time, I have also attended the major webinar, research finding dissemination, presentation, dialogue and talks on impact of Covid-19 on women as an audience took place in Dhaka during this period for my data collection. I am illustrating the impact of this macro-economic policy adopted to restore the economy on women's life, consequential feminization of poverty and call for recognition of structural disadvantage of women in the formal economy in the context of pandemic mitigation.

Loss of livelihood, Neo-Poor, and Women

A new set of poor people has emerged during the shutdown business and income generating activities for the health risk of Covid-19 Pandemic. Thus, the country has experienced the emergence of the neo-poor, who used to be above the poverty line, has now been pushed down to the poverty. Many left city for high living expenses and returned to rural areas for agriculture-based activities. An estimation by a Dhaka-based think tank, Center for Policy Dialogue (CPD) indicates that poverty rate could be as high as 35%, (24.3% in 2016) as a result of Covid-19 and additional 17.5 million people could have fallen into poverty (Khan, 2020), that are called as "neo-poor" in recent analyses. About 54% in rural and 72% in urban slum household, the primary income earners were economically inactive in April 2020. A survey, conducted on 4-15 June 2020, showed that 70% of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprise (MSME) workers income has been at stake for the business were temporarily closed or partially open. Another survey by World Bank on 10 June-10 July 2020 reported job loss of about 68% respondents from Dhaka and Chittagong (Khan, November 5, 2020).

Loss of job, income and livelihood has become a growing concern generally for the entire nation across differentiated by formal and informal sectors and by class, gender, ethnicity, rural and urban population. It hit hardest on the informal sectors, small and medium sized enterprises during this health emergency where 51.7 million people are engaged. Both men (25%) and women (17%) in informal sectors lost jobs. Women are among the most vulnerable group in this economic disaster. Though job loss of women are mostly under-reported, reduction of earning/wages (38%) has been reported by UN Women. In the UN Women's survey report on "Covid-19 Bangladesh: Rapid Gender Analysis" (May 2020) shows that, Covid-19 has

significant impact on livelihoods of women and transgender people. 91.8% of the total employment of women is in the informal sector includes owners and workers in MSME, domestic workers, daily laborers, street vendors, cleaners and sex worker who rapidly lost their income. Thousands of migrant workers including returnee migrants from overseas have lost their jobs with no hope for reemployed any soon. 93% women in rural areas, used to in informal employment and in urban areas it was 87.3% (LFS, BBS 2016-17). Earning of these women are at stake during the countrywide lockdown.

Mass job loss among readymade garments (RMG) worker, SME, domestic help, daily laborer, cleaner etc. have raised up what are generally feminized workforces. RMG is the largest exported oriented industry where 65% employees are women (around 3 million) one quarter of whom got laid off in declining export order in global market. As the industries shut down, most of the workers have not yet received their due wages. The low wage barely met their livelihood expenses and left them without any saving in emergency. This laid off female workers, including single mothers, pregnant and lactating women, left alone without any benefit or support from the factory owners. Sexual and domestic abuse are also in rise at home and outside. A survey by Rabbani et al. on RMG workers during 30 June-13 July 2020, reported that 77% of the respondents found it difficult to feed all members of their households.

Among the most vulnerable includes thousands of indigenous (*adibasi*) women engaged informal and SME sectors as beauty parlor. 10,00,000 *adibasi* women in beauty industry are now unemployed (Anam, June 20, 2020) Webinar, Manusher Jonye Foundation, Shaheen Anam). Another group of 150,000 sex workers facing food crisis and social stigma having no access to social services.

Covid-19 lockdown has hit hard on the women's business as well. A significant number of small entrepreneurs have missed their periodical sales, lost their business capital, and will never be able to recover this damage by themselves and at risk of forcing out of market and pushed back to home. The new generation of women, trying to get out of their economic dependency on male counterparts, are now facing a new challenge pushing them back to dependent status. These are the urban and rural women of middle to low-income background, many are divorced, widowed, single parent, have been paving a new horizon toward self-reliance and have begun to support family, especially to sending children in better schooling and better healthcare, to expending on home improvement, upgrading into a healthier and relatively stable family life, are now facing a relapse.

The Nature of the Stimulus Packages and Structural Disadvantage for Women

Few leading economists (e.g., Anu Mohammad, Maha Mirza, 2020) assessing the possible outcome of the stimulus package as creating limited scope showed how policy to support people in crisis could have been widened and designed reach out at the margins. The packages appear to be biasing the heavy industry owner, Garments factory owner and the rich investors at the top rather than unemployed, garments workers, informal sector workers, small farmers, women, or indigenous people. On a different tone, Fahmida Khatun, the executive director of Center for Policy Dialogue (CPD), stated that the big and large industries are the top beneficial of the stimulus packages and still it was beneficial for economic recovery (CPD, December 27, 2020). Thus, she indicates, in spite of the havoc, Bangladesh has experienced 5% increase in GDP growth in 2020.

The contribution of women's work and participation in formal economy is hidden, but huge. We have only few studies indicating the unseen ice-burg of women's work. The nature of the stimulus packages is based on boosting of formal economy in mostly in formal sectors via banking channel that is inaccessible for women by design. The stimulus packages has built upon the boosting of macro-economy that categorically marginalized women as economic subject. Women rarely have bank accounts or receive bank loan and can operate independently without support from their male family members (J. Jaim, 2020).

The structural disadvantage of women in labor market, employment, financial ventures has been shaped by the normative role of women primarily as homemaker, wife and mother. Participating in formal economic activities women bear the double-burden of unpaid domestic and care work with the labor for market. As the culturally prescribed role of caregiver bestowed upon women in the families and in nursing and health service, women are more exposed to corona infection through their gender role and obviously are getting less medical attention and care. In spite of the evidence of male as more prone to corona infection, as medical anthropologist Paul Farmer (2020) indicates Corona infection as another care-giver disease, women as caregivers are likely to be more vulnerable in the pandemic through the care-giver role. Domestic violence has been escalated during the indefinite lockdown in the country. Rather than challenging and playing any transformative role, the packages are likely to reproduce and intensify the existing gender inequality and feminization of poverty maintaining the status quo and discriminatory gender norms and a male dominated economy.

The increase of unpaid care work and domestic work in confinement of home has added in women's pre-Covid-19 average which is 3.43 times higher than men (BBS Gender Statistics, 2018). The nationwide closure of all the educational institutions and the whole family staying home created additional and constant duty of unpaid care and chores. As the healthcare system broke-down, the care for Covid-19 and non-Covid-19 patient, elderly and childcare have rest upon the unpaid work of women providing emotional care, home management, cooking, cleaning and others where men have been providing the physical labor for the sick and elderly. The average number of hours spent on unpaid domestic and care work in a week disaggregated by sex in Bangladesh is 24 hours for women and 7 hours for men. Lockdown and social distancing have resulted in increased burden of unpaid care work and household chores. A survey conducted by UN Women suggests little to no shift in re-distribution of domestic work as a result of the confinement.

Center for Policy Dialogue (CPD), a Dhaka-based leading research and advocacy organization, has presented series of analysis of the impact of stimulus packages on the economy with recommendation has showed that a stimulus package 20 thousand *crore taka* (Bangladeshi currency, 1 *crore*=\$117,612.10) where only 5% has allocated for women as loan. Women will receive 1 thousand *crore taka*. Besides, this loan, women will also receive further 3 thousand *crore taka* in form of loan through the NGOs. In the ground level reality, they are not receiving the loan allocated for women reported in a CPD dialogue.

Fahmida Khatun (CPD, 2020) presented the discriminatory attitude toward rural women in loan in agriculture. While women entrepreneurship has been promoted at by the Government's bank

loan policy, these service is not all available in the country sides, as a result the rural women are not able to access the financial support (Center for Policy Dialogue, October 14, 2020). The attitude of the banks toward the women entrepreneur is not congenial and supporting and often do not want to recognize women as capable of running a business and shows lack of confidence toward businesswomen. Other than banking channel, SME foundation also facilitating disbursement process. The estimation of women entrepreneurs received loan under credit wholesale program disbursed *taka* 92 crore through 12 banks and financial institutions by the SME foundation in last 11 years is 512 in comparison to 1345 male.

At the end of the year, implementation of stimulus packages targeted for SMEs, farmers and small traders is surprisingly low while large industry and service sector got faster disbursement. The formal institutional structure established long-term network with the banking channel, as well as power and favoritism of the bank officials toward the big investors made a favorable situation for them. Many micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME) (76%) were just not aware of the packages while a number of concerns (24%) failed to access for lack of information, awareness, difficulty in application procedure, and over all weak establishment. Bankers also ignored the small and medium enterprises (SME) for not having confidence on them. The extended deadline for implementing stimulus for SME to November 30, 2020 was useful for some concerns. The policy of Bangladesh Bank, the country's central bank, providing collateral for SME has been detrimental. In agricultural sector, only 45% of the stimulus package has been implemented till October 2020 (Khan 2020).

Women's Reality as Lived in the Pandemic

Raihana sultana, a female assistant vice president of a leading private bank has never personally experienced any female entrepreneur as recipient of any large loan while operating her long banking career. She only knew a women who received *taka 2 crore* bank loan. While having conversation with a new generation woman entrepreneur, Taslima Miji, owner of a *deshi* leather brand Gootipa, stated that, it is difficult to measure the loss of women entrepreneurs because of the nature of women's work and their contribution in economy. Women's work and income have not been acknowledged in formal economy and Gross Domestic Products (GDP). Women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh have been engaging mostly in the Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) and it is very rare for women to run any heavy and large-scale corporation as the owner, thus the recipients of the large loans through the banking channel are invariably male. Women's engagement in SME has been expanding recently as women's need for work-life balance and nature of business ownership, investment and finance. She also expressed her view in national TV talk show "How damaging is Covid-19 pandemic for women entrepreneurs?" (DBC News, April 20, 2020).

As in my empirical observation in my field reveals, facing the financial hardship and loss of income, middle to lower middle class educated women has become visibly active from home based during pandemic mandatory home stay. Numerous female led startups have slowly proliferated as online business and e-commerce where people have started to sell products and services from home, converting their individual skill and traditional family crafts into marketable products with small investment typically from the family and friends. These business has just

become in trend for few years and many are not yet formally registered start-ups. Home delivery service has been expanded and chosen by increasing number of people for shutdown of marketplaces and avoiding crowd. Facebook based online stores offering flexibility in shopping experience with small investment without spending for a commercial space and utilities. Home has become center of new business trends using the residential space and avoiding commuting outside home. Many women are quitting their formal jobs and earning better than their job that involve childcare support. *“I opened my Facebook page, Zewar — By Aditi's Studio selling saris and other ladies' outfits since I quit my school job, because it is a profitable venture. I'm now earning three times than my previous profession,” said the former teacher at an English medium school in Dhaka. “Apart from the low rate of investment, the greater benefit is that I can now give time to my children, which was almost beyond my imagination when I was a schoolteacher”- she explained.*

In spite of disadvantaged situation and many challenges, women have been emerging in SME, especially in ready, processed and home-made food, clothing, *saree*, decorative items, handcrafts, beauty, jewelry and fashion industry usually made by few individual with a small support team in urban areas and homestead-based agriculture-based business in rural areas. The growing trend among the middle and lower middle class educated women running online business from home-base has been widespread in the city and suburb areas having nationwide internet access, especially via cellular phone. Many of them launch season-based merchandises for the large religious, cultural and national festivities as *Eid-ul-Fitr*, *Eid-ul-Adha*, *durga puja*, *pohela falgun*, *pohela boushak*, and *bijoy dibos*. Many boutiques have invested small and medium amount of and prepared for these seasonal business. These merchandises dominate the products concomitant to women's life at home, mostly in boutique. Women's home-based

business usually serves as a supporting income for the male breadwinner's income and stands as the main income when in the cases of death, illness and loss of income of the male-breadwinner and in female-headed households. Many of such ventures run without any formal and proper business establishment with trade-license, income tax return and bank accounts. Many runs informally in cash transaction only.

The consumers are showing a very cautious behavior in buying services and products other than essential items, and all festivities and celebration has almost come into a standstill. These small and informal women entrepreneurs could not sell their usual products, and many will never recover their loss of investment in raw materials. The psychosocial emotional shock of death, infection and income loss of the family, depression of long confinement and social distancing never can be measured in any tangible framework. Miji said, no stimulus package can make-up this loss of women's business. The damage of economic and psychosocial well-being is also immeasurable.

A fitness center owner, Sadia Arman, for example, has gone through a total shut down, having hardship to pay the utility bills for her establishment faced a huge deficit in her business. She could not get any access to the stimulus package just because the process was difficult to follow for her and she could not find anyone can come to her aid. A Khulna-based small enterprise, *bonbibi* providing cruise and tourism service in the Sundarban area, have shifted to trading seasonal mango from Rajshahi to Dhaka and transporting local fish from Khulna to Dhaka to survive this situation.

Conclusion

I have not got an opportunity to find a real-life women entrepreneur who have received the stimulus package, though there are some data available on women getting the benefit. Perhaps, for my social distancing and managing life myself in Pandemic multi-tasking as a caregiver, homemaker and anthropologist playing double burden has impeded me to meet such one.

Stimulus Packages in Bangladesh has been intended for the large industries keeping the small and medium sectors at margin. These have left limited impact for employment generation, especially for women. Access to these packages for women as entrepreneur was particularly difficult. The conditions and technical process have not been easy for women to access. The nature of the packages has not let small firms and agriculture sectors have protection and be benefitted from. Lenders were biased to the big investors and skeptical for women's initiative. This have not been designed with proper attention for the marginal and vulnerable population, women have been only symbolically included (Khan 2020). Ministry of Trade and Commerce, Ministry of Women and Children Welfare, SME Foundation are the institutional authorities planning for women's economic activities have been dominated by male dominated bureaucratic attitude. Though Government initiated some safety net measures, the capacity and reach of such initiative were very limited. Impact of social safety net measures for protecting employment as Income Generating Activities (IGA) for Women at Upazila Level, Micro-credit for Women Self-employment, Special assistance fund for women development & women entrepreneurs, Women's Skill Based Training for Livelihood, Training and rehabilitation of the disabled, widows, orphans, destitute, helpless, backward and the ultra-poor, Investment Component for Vulnerable

Group Development Program (ICVGD) have been insufficient to respond this calamity (Khan, 2020).

The nature of women's access to economic activity could have been recognized in planning of the stimulus packages aiming boosting of pandemic economy. Government should have measures to protect the women in small and medium enterprises and informal business monitoring access of loan to women and easy disbursement in the banks via Bangladesh Central bank. Women need protection from the imported items in the market and promotion of *deshi* products through tax exemption, discouraging imported consumer goods in favor of local products. Economic recovery plan must consider the gendered nature of the market integrate policy strategies to support women in the center of the framework, not at the margin.

Understanding women's role in economy could be the key to boost economy from inside out.

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