

Impact of COVID19 Pandemic in Bangladesh: A Perspective of Mental Health and Socio-Economic Status

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the global labor market has threatened millions of livelihoods globally including Bangladesh. The study attempts to analyze the emerged socio-economic crisis among street vendors' households in Bangladesh and to explore the psychological impacts among them during the COVID-19 pandemic. Following the qualitative approach, it was conducted in a total of 16 KIIs from street vendors. The study found that levels of depression and anxiety varied from individual to individual (i.e., street vendors), the households of street vendors with multiple breadwinners or minimum earnings were merely affected by psychological distress whereas the households with single breadwinners or no income had to suffer severe anxiety and depression. Mostly, COVID-19 infected street vendors went through severe mental depression in comparison to others. In conclusion, the paper suggests that policymakers and other respective authorities can effectively address the issues for ensuring the well-being of street vendors in upcoming pandemics.

Keywords: COVID-19; street vendor; socio-economic status; mental health; distress; Bangladesh.

Abstrak

Pandemi COVID-19 telah berdampak signifikan terhadap pasar tenaga kerja global yang telah mengancam jutaan mata pencaharian secara global termasuk Bangladesh. Studi ini mencoba menganalisis krisis sosial ekonomi yang muncul di antara rumah tangga PKL di Bangladesh dan mengeksplorasi dampak psikologis di antara mereka selama pandemi COVID-19. Dengan pendekatan kualitatif, dilakukan sebanyak 16 KII dari PKL. Studi ini menemukan bahwa tingkat depresi dan kecemasan bervariasi dari individu ke individu (yaitu, PKL), rumah tangga PKL dengan banyak pencari nafkah atau penghasilan minimum hanya dipengaruhi oleh tekanan psikologis sedangkan rumah tangga dengan pencari nafkah tunggal atau tidak ada pendapatan harus menderita kecemasan dan depresi yang parah. Sebagian besar, pedagang kaki lima yang terinfeksi COVID-19 mengalami depresi mental yang parah dibandingkan dengan yang lain. Sebagai kesimpulan, makalah ini menunjukkan bahwa pembuat kebijakan dan otoritas terkait lainnya dapat secara efektif mengatasi masalah untuk memastikan kesejahteraan pedagang kaki lima dalam pandemi yang akan datang.

Kata kunci: COVID-19; PKL; status sosial ekonomi; kesehatan mental; kesulitan; Bangladesh.

INTRODUCTION

The covid-19 pandemic has a significant impact on public health and socio-economic aspects of countries in the world (Bhuiyan et al., 2020; Nicola et al., 2020). Along with the socio-economic crisis, the pandemic has been recognized as a major reason for the deteriorating mental health conditions of individuals (World Health Organization (WHO), 2020; Poudell & Subedi, 2020). In December 2019, coronavirus was identified for the first time in Wuhan City, Hubei in China, started to spread quickly throughout the world (Wang et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2020). In Bangladesh, the first COVID-19 case was reported on 8 March 2020 (Daily star, 2020), and although initially the spread of COVID-19 virus was slow

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enough, a rapid increase in infection rate started in April (Satu, Howlader and Islam, 2020). After the detection of first COVID-19 case, Bangladesh also put the lockdown strategy on 26 March 2020, to ensure 'social distancing' ensuring 'home quarantine' to curb the 'spread' of the virus among its population (Bhuiyan et al., 2020; Jahid, 2020). The national lockdown was eased at the beginning of June 2020 that has caused a growing caseloads within the country (Ruszczuk et al., 2020). The incidences of death due to COVID-19 have increased dramatically around the world. In Bangladesh, till now, over 532,916 people were infected by the COVID-19, causing more than 8055 deaths (As of 26 January 2021; Worldometer, 2021).

The covid-19 pandemic has caused significant disruptions to the global labor market, trade in terms of unemployment and under-employment for informal workers (FAO, 2020; Bhuiyan, 2020). The sudden impacts on informal workers livelihoods got severe and, in many cases, it caused a permanent loss of income (WIEGO, 2020c). ILO estimated that there was an increase of 5.3 million ("low" scenario) and 24.7 million ("high" scenario) people became unemployment during the COVID-19 crisis (ILO, 2020). In Nepal, the lockdown has affected traders, especially people with small shops, the poor, and the marginalized people (Poudel & Subedi, 2020). Local governments of India imposed the lockdown demolishing the street vending infrastructures (WIEGO, 2020c). The Lockdowns have thrown about two-billion informal workers into trouble all over the world and it has mostly affected the street vendors (WIEGO, 2020b). Street vendors were reported to face a 90 percent drop in their income due to the reduced public gathering in places e.g., México City, Accra, Los Angeles, and New York City (WIEGO, 2020b).

Eventually, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about various psychological (e.g., increased stress, anxiety, depression, with suicide) as well as economic instabilities among the general public around the globe (Poudell & Subedi, 2020; Brooks et al., 2020; Polizzi, Lynn and Perry, 2020). In Nepal, the induced impacts of economic recession and social isolation like unemployment, poverty, and anxiety led individuals to commit suicide (Poudell & Subedi, 2020). Studies respectively in China, India, and France found severe psychological impacts among the surveyed participants throughout the pandemic period (Wang et al., 2020; Husky, Kovess-Masfety and Swendsen, 2020; Varshney et al., 2020). Similarly, Bangladesh has been equally affected by the COVID-19 crisis. The economic disruption instigated by COVID-19 has threatened millions of livelihoods in Bangladesh. As a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, many people have lost their jobs and income (REACH, 2020). In Bangladesh, around 86.2% of the total employed population is working in the informal employment sectors (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), 2017). Street vendors are self-employed workers within the informal sector; defined as traders who sell goods, food, and provide services to the public without permanent or fixed premises, mostly can be found in roadsides, railway stations, floating markets, parks or in other public places (Bhowmik, 2005; Saha, 2011).

The COVID-19 pandemic would be expected to affect the socio-economic and mental health status among street vendors in many countries including Bangladesh. The government-imposed lockdown during the pandemic has multi-faceted impacts. Depending on the type of goods were sold by the street vendors, traders' incomes across the board were reported to get negatively affected from the beginning of lockdown (REACH, 2020). There are approximately 2.5 million street vendors in Bangladesh. Following several hawkers' associations, it is estimated that around 2.5 lakh hawkers run the business on the capital's (i.e., Dhaka city) footpaths (Repon, Rezwana and Alam, 2015; Daily Star, 2014). Was every street vendor of Bangladesh equally affected by the contagion (i.e., COVID-19)? The study attempts to explore the effects of COVID-19 on street vendors of Bangladesh. Mainly, the objective of the study is two-fold: one

is to analyze the emerged socio-economic crisis upon the families of street vendors in Bangladesh and another one is to observe the impact on their mental health conditions during the COVID-19 crisis.

RESEARCH METHOD

The study has followed the qualitative approach to collect and analyze data. It has used both primary and secondary data sources to explore the objectives. Open-ended questionnaires were used to collect primary data which allowed participants to express their opinions. As a qualitative research tool, the Key Informant Interview (KII) was used to collect primary data for the study. The selected study area was Dhaka city, Bangladesh. Including four female respondents, in total 16 KIIs were conducted from street vendors in different occupations. All the interviews were conducted from 15th January to 7th February 2021. All the KIIs were taken via face-to-face conversations maintaining health concerns and ethical issues. Mainly, the interviews were taken in the native language (Bengali) and were transcribed into English for analyzing the data, and consents were taken while recording the interviews. Here, ethical approval has not been necessary because the data were property anonymized and also informed consents were obtained from respondents at the time of data collection.

For secondary sources of data and literature review, the study has conducted desk research and reviewed journals, reports, articles, national newspapers, and other forms of publications.

Table 1. Personal data of informants of Street vendors in Dhaka city (n=16)

No	Name(Anonymous)	Sex	Age	Family members	Occupation
1	Sulaiman Seikh	Male	40	4	Jhalmuri (Spicy Snack) Seller
2	Mokter Hossain	Male	18	5	Street seller (Tea, Cigarettes)
3	Nurjahan Begum	Female	45	5	Vegetable seller
4	Momin Ahmed	Male	30	6	Fruit seller
5	Al Amin	Male	34	3	Vegetable seller
6	Imtiaz	Male	48	5	Tea seller
7	Rubel	Male	44	4	Tea seller
8	Fatema	Female	35	3	Cosmetics/Churi Seller
9	Omar Faruk	Male	35	5	Watch seller
10	Zillurrahman	Male	36	5	Fuchka seller
11	Sheik Shahin	Male	28	4	Vegetable
12	Zulekha Begum	female	50	5	Tea Dealer
13	Haron	Male	45	4	Cobbler
14	Kamal Hossain	Male	35	4	Jhalmuri (Spicy Snack) Seller
15	Shahinur	Female	50	3	Meal seller
16	Abdus Salam	Male	38	5	Jhalmuri (Spicy Snack) Seller

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

The study found that street vendors in Bangladesh have faced various socio-economic crises and mental pressure during the COVID-19 lockdown. The study also found different perspectives while analyzing their interviews in terms of varied struggles. The interviews are providing evidence to support the statement that the COVID-19 pandemic has not affected every street vendor with a uniform socio-economic shock. Rather, some of the street vendors could effectively handle the crisis. But we found a similarity among almost all our respondents (i.e., street vendors) that more or less each of them had to go

through psychiatric pressures (e.g., restlessness, anxiety, stress, trauma, etc.) throughout the pandemic situation.

Impacts on the Socio-Economic Status of Street Vendors during Pandemic

From the very beginning, the government of Bangladesh banned traveling and imposed restrictions on people's movement to stop the spread of the infectious COVID-19 virus. Consequently, the income of street vendors faced a sharp decline. Those (i.e., street vendors) could dare to come out denying the lockdown for selling their goods, rarely found a customer to buy as the fear of spreading COVID-19 virus made people cautious about their health risks. As the street vendors were mostly the only breadwinners in their families, such a shock in their daily income lingered their sufferings. They rarely could afford their daily necessities as well as of their families.

A street vendor said –

“Before the pandemic, I used to earn BDT 800-1000 per day, and using the money I could somehow manage to run my family. From the beginning of the lockdown, I am not earning enough money to even manage our daily food. Till now, I am hustling [Imtiaz, Age 48, Tea seller]”.

While intervening a female street vendor, she talked about her struggles. She mentioned–

“Before the ‘Lockdown’, almost every month I could add around BDT 2000-3000 to my savings after meeting all our family expenditures which seems impossible now. My husband is a cycle mechanic. Due to the lockdown, he was also earning very little. I had to start managing all our family expenditures mostly from my savings, but it is being tough to tougher day-by-day [Nurjahan Begum, Age-45, Vegetable seller]”.

The main reason for losing the income of street vendors was the strict restrictions on people's movement. On one hand, the vendors could not come out for selling their goods. On the other hand, even if they could manage to come out carrying their commodities, they rarely found any buyers to purchase their goods. A vendor Mokter Hossain stated –

“I used to earn around BDT 300-400 regularly before the pandemic. Due to the police surveillance and other restrictions throughout the lockdown, I was bound to stay at home instead of selling tea on the roads. My father's tiny income somehow managed our daily expenses. The owner of the slum was kind enough to curtail our house rent in half for the first three months of lockdown. But when he [the owner] started asking for full rent, my family had to go through stress to manage the consumption expenditures [Mokter Hossain, Age 18, Street (Tea) seller]”.

Another street vendor mentioned that:

“I used to earn BDT 1500-2000 per day during normal situations. As the pandemic started, people stopped coming out of their homes, and I rarely could find buyers in-a-day. It also happened that I could not sell even a kilogram of fruits after roaming an entire day. Facing such financial losses, I went back to my hometown because life in Dhaka city is costly if you do not earn [Momin Ahmed, Age 30, Fruit seller]”.

The study found that the COVID-19 infected families were the worst sufferer. They faced a severe socio-economic crisis during the lockdown period in comparison to others. On one hand, they lost their income sources; on the other hand, it increased their burden with excessive medical expenditures and risked the lives of other family members. Al Amin (an interviewee) stated that:

“This pandemic has completely broken down us both economically and mentally. I have never gone through such hardship before. My income went down during the pandemic, and I faced difficulty in paying my rental costs. I couldn’t even buy milk for my baby. Besides, my wife was COVID-19 positive. Maintaining quarantine was a big challenge for us. I can’t narrate that situation (crying) [Al Amin, Age 34, Vegetable seller]”.

However, some street vendors overcame and effectively managed the crisis moment during the lockdown situation. Mostly, those households (i.e., street vendors) who had multiple breadwinners in a family or who had enough savings at the moment rarely faced any socio-economic crisis. As a street vendor mentioned that:

“Before the pandemic, I could save BDT 3000 to 3500 for other expenses like food and accessories monthly. My husband is a day-laborer in the village. My son also earns by working hard in a car fixing shop. I went back to the village when the lockdown was imposed. I couldn’t earn, it’s true. But, during COVID days, my husband and son worked in the paddy fields. So, we could pass our days eating meals, Alhamdulillah. We struggled all the time. But truth is that COVID showed something different that we never experienced before. There was no family crisis [Zulekha Begum, Age 50, Tea Dealer]”.

Street vendors who have assets (i.e., houses, the share of agricultural lands) easily moved to villages when lockdown started. Though they lost their previous income sources in Dhaka, they found new income sources in their villages and started working as day laborers in paddy fields and agricultural lands. Someone with savings, invested and started farming in the village to finance their family. As Kamal Hossain said that:

“Before the lockdown, I could earn BDT 600/700 in a day by selling hand-made food. After staying one month in Dhaka during the lockdown, I decided to go back to my village. I was running out of my income. Being blank, I was at home. I joined the day-laborers though I found it difficult for me as it sought physical strength. I vomited the first two days due to the extreme heat. Gradually, I could cope-up with the situation [Kamal Hossain, Age 35, Jhalmuri (Spicy Snack) Seller]”.

On the other hand, the homeless street vendors have suffered more socio-economic crises than other street vendors who had savings or productive assets in the village. As productive assets helped them to afford family expenditures with household rents, child-rearing costs, and other incremental costs, Abdus Salam stated that:

“I could earn daily on average BDT 500-600 before the COVID-19 pandemic. During the lockdown, I could not earn due to police restrictions. My elder daughter had been working in a shopping mall also lost the job. We have no house in the village to return to. The first month, I managed all of my family expenditures from savings. Very soon, I ran out of my savings and was bound to borrow money to bear family expenditures. I could not pay the house rent during this situation. My little daughter was also dropped out of school because I could not pay their school fees on time. I had to face many obstacles [Abdus Salam, Age 38, Jhalmuri (Spicy Snack) seller]”.

Effects on Street Vendor’s Mental Health Status Due to the Pandemic

The mental health conditions of street vendors were adversely affected because of the socio-economic crisis during the pandemic. The study found that economic crisis (i.e., losing income sources or the decline in income) led them to severe mental health deterioration. Though levels of depression and anxiety varied from individual to individual (i.e., street vendors), the street vendors with no income have suffered severe anxiety and depression rather than others (i.e., who had). Furthermore, the households of street vendors with multiple breadwinners were merely affected by mental health consequences whereas

the households with single breadwinners had suffered severe anxiety and depression. In a family with a single breadwinner, the family members had to face several difficulties to afford daily expenditures with food costs during the lockdown period. A respondent mentioned that:

“I am the only earning person in my family. I have three kids along with my wife. With that low income, I can hardly run my family and pay my house rent. When I get failed to meet my little kid’s desires, it feels like what’s the benefit of the living [Imtiaz, Age 48, Tea seller]”.

30-year-old fruit seller Momin Ahmed stated that:

“I had to face huge losses and went back to my hometown. But there was no work for me to do. After few months I returned here but the income is still very low. I have aged parents and 3 younger brothers in the village. Now, I find it hard to send money for my parent’s medicine and my younger brother’s educational expenses. I don’t know how long this situation will persist. I can’t bear this any longer. It has severely put me in anxiety and depression [Momin Ahmed, Age 30, Fruit seller]”.

The study found that the street vendors who moved to the village during the lockdown period re-engendering new income sources (e.g., daily labors in paddy fields and farming) supported their household’s expenditures during the pandemic situation. Unpaid house rents and having no income were mentioned as reasons for escalating mental pressure and depression among respondents. They (e.g., street vendors who were house owners or who moved to the village) were less affected by anxiety and depression than others (who did not have their own house or who stayed in Dhaka city). As Nurjahan Begum told that:

“Before Covid-19, I was able to sell almost every day, and the rate of earning was quite good. I didn’t have to pay rent as I am local in Dhaka. For this reason, at the time of lockdown, we didn’t have to face many difficulties. As my sales were quite good, I felt relief from the tension of money. The income has become stable like before. Now, the fear of corona no longer exists [Nurjahan Begum, Age 45, Vegetable seller]”.

The study found that COVID-19 infected households of Street vendors went through severe mental depression than others. Even, some street vendors were desired to die during lockdown because they had to face serious difficulties to deal with the mental pressures due to the downturn in their income. As Mokter mentioned that:

“One of my neighbors, a man from the slum where I live, wanted to commit suicide; he used to sell tea with us, and he had a family of 5 members [Mokter Hossain, Age 18, Street (Tea) seller]”.

Another street vendor said that:

“My income went down during the pandemic, and I couldn’t pay my rental costs. Besides, my wife got corona positive. I couldn’t even buy milk for my baby. I can’t narrate the situation (crying). I wish to go back to my past days. It is better to die than to fight with such scarcities [Al Amin, Age 34, Vegetable seller]”.

Discussion

The main objective of this study is to explore the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on the socio-economic and mental health status of the street vendors in Bangladesh. Data were collected from street vendors including female street vendors for the study. A study on the economic impacts of street vendors in Cox’s Bazar district of Bangladesh reported that the lockdown period led to a direct negative effect on their income, and loss of income directly impacts their daily consumptions (REACH, 2020). This study

similarly found that the income levels of street vendors had declined sharply during the lockdown. As a consequence, they had to face many difficulties in supporting the daily expenditures of their families. As Banna (2020) stated that during the lockdown period, people suddenly have fallen into an economic crisis in many countries around the world including Bangladesh. Another study showed that in Ghana, street vendors had to suffer because of reducing customers' demands to purchase from them in fear of contagion; in Peru, this fear had led to the stigmatization of informal market and street vendors during the lockdown period (WIEGO, 2020a). As WIEGO (2020a), this study found that people rarely purchased foods or other products from street vendors in fear of covid-19 infection.

From Latin America to India, many street vendors expressed fears over their inability to feed their families during the lockdown (WIEGO, 2020b; Banerji, 2020). A study on street vendors in India mentioned that street vendors were affected by the economic recession during lockdown; like Vinod (street vendor) could not afford to pay his children's school tuition fees, and for Devi (street vendor), having two meals a day had become a big challenge during the lockdown (Banerji, 2020). Similarly, the study found that the street vendors who faced severe socio-economic crises couldn't afford their family expenditures including household rents, children's school fees, and other incremental costs. Apart from this, the findings also showed that every street vendor did not go through the same economic crisis. Street vendors who had physical assets in the village, or had enough savings, or had multiple income earners in their family suffered less socio-economic crisis than other street vendors (i.e., who did not have savings or physical assets or multiple-income earners in the family were affected in severe economic crisis). Furthermore, the study found that Covid-19 infected street vendor's families were adversely affected in economic crisis, and they also were highly prone to severe mental depression than others. In a study, Banerji (2020) stated that the pandemic increased financial shattered among street vendors which led them to mental breakdown, distress, and anxiety.

The lockdown restrictions caused increasing economic instability among general people and psychological illnesses such as sadness, worries, fear, anger, annoyance, frustration, guilt, helplessness, loneliness, and nervousness (Mukhtar, 2020; Bhuiyan et al., 2020). Kawohl & Nordt (2020) also said that financial losses and unemployment had escalated people's mental health problems during the pandemic. Similarly, the study found that economic crisis (i.e., losing income sources, the decline of income) led them to severe mental health problems. The street vendors who had minimum earnings or had multiple breadwinners in the family or had own-house in Dhaka city were merely affected by the mental health problems (i.e., anxiety, distress, and depression) during the pandemic. But the single breadwinner families had to suffer severe anxiety and depression because they faced many difficulties to afford their daily expenditures than families with multiple breadwinners. Additionally, it found that the street vendors who moved to the village during the lockdown period, re-engendered new income sources (e.g., daily labors in paddy fields and farming) which contributed to maintaining their household's expenditures during the period. Unpaid house rents and having no income were mentioned as the main reason for increasing mental pressure and depression among respondents. Several studies stated that poor economic status, lower education level, and unemployment worked as significant risk factors of mental disorders during the pandemic period (Gao et al., 2020; Lei et al., 2020). Previous studies stated that the sudden economic recession had led needy individuals to commit suicide (Goldman-Mellor, Saxton and Catalano, 2010; Oyesanya, Lopez-Morinigo and Dutta, 2015). The study found that some street vendors wished to die during lockdown due to the economic downturn. Even, one of the respondents' neighbors tried to commit suicide during the crisis moment. Following the findings, it can be stated that the street vendors with

inheritance or physical assets (productive lands) in the villages have suffered less psychological distress during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Limitations

Though the paper has made notable contributions and can be used by policymakers to address the crisis during Covid-19, it has some limitations. The study used a qualitative approach; the findings cannot be generalized to the other cities' populations in Bangladesh. We only covered a particular area to conduct the study. We also faced some sort of restrictions and especially while conducting face-to-face interviews during the lockdown period. We got fewer responses from respondents, and the possible reasons would be the voluntary nature of the interview and the open-ended questionnaire of the study. Finally, certain responses might be overestimated or underestimated due to subjectivity and perception of interviews.

CONCLUSION

The covid-19 pandemic has become the cause of deteriorating mental health conditions of people. The socio-economic status of people has also impacted adversely. The study initially attempted to understand how the pandemic has affected the livelihoods of low-income groups of people (i.e., street vendors). This study showed that more or less every street vendor had to go through various difficulties such as loss of work, income declination, being unable to pay house rent, incompetent to provide children's tuition fees, getting corona virus-infected, being unable to afford daily necessities and so on due to the pandemic situation. Many street vendors went through severe mental pressures and economic crises that some of the respondents even wished to die than facing those difficulties. Also, the study found that the lives of every respondent's psychological health were not affected uniformly rather it varied and often depended on other several factors such as numbers of breadwinner within the family, having inherited cultivable lands in their villages, having owned any home in the villages, and getting COVID-19 infected or not. It found that families (i.e., street vendors) with having their own home in the villages, with multiple breadwinners and inherited cultivable lands have faced less stress and anxiety during the lockdown period even with a minimum income. Infection of COVID-19 among family members and maintaining quarantine were crucial factors to intensify their (i.e., street vendors) stresses. Though the lockdown strategy has been eased now, the income of the street vendors hasn't increased that much and the mental pressure and socio-economic crisis still exist. Despite having some limitations, the study has immensely contributed to the area of research by addressing the issues that can help the policymakers or other concerned authorities while drafting policies for ensuring the well-being of street vendors in a post-COVID-19; new-normal world.

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