COVID-19 as a Shadow Pandemic: Addressing COVID-19's Role in Increasing Women's Vulnerability Towards Gender Based Violence from The Perspective of Educated Youth in Dhaka

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Abstract

Gender based violence, particularly violence against women increases during any form of crisis. COVID 19 has its vast share of impact in increasing gender-based violence in Bangladesh too. Especially, since lockdown and home-quarantine have become the new norms in the country, the women stuck with abusive partners or even in cyberspace are continually becoming victims of a patriarchal system. In light of this reality, this paper aims to address the increased vulnerability and scope of violence against women in both online and offline modalities while explaining COVID-19 as a shadow pandemic. The study uses qualitative research method where the results are presented through thematic analysis where the study found how COVID-19 is working as a facilitator of women's vulnerability.

Keywords: COVID-19, Pandemic, Shadow pandemic, Gender based violence

Background of the Study

Does the virus see a gender? The answer is NO. Then why does it seem the way that COVID-19 is impacting people of a specific gender in a specific way?COVID-19 is hurting one gender more than the others by inflaming old fault lines of patriarchy, and social inequalities, in ways that have deeply rooted impact.

As the world is seeing lockdown as a form of COVID-19 restrictions, many people are gradually easing their lives to a never seen before adjustment. From the beginning of this pandemic, people have been trying to get used to a lifestyle that is referred by "the new normal" within a chaotic situation. The crisis started in December, 2019 (Yao, Qian, Zhu, Wang, 2020) and have caused havoc in personal, familial and social life of millions of people trapped within it. This "trap", for some people was being able to relive a good time with families and friends and

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self-healing activities while for others, this turned into a literal trap. I am referring to the women who fell victim of gender-based violence where COVID-19 lockdown played a vital role. Gender and power inequality breeds within faulty patriarchal systems and as a developing country where patriarchy is considered as the core of cultural beliefs, Bangladesh has a deep root of power abuse by the superior side of the coin. As a result, most of the Bangladeshi men believe it to be their patriarchal right to exercise offensive acts against women: like domestic maltreatment, sexual abuse, rape etc. Domestic and gender-based violence increases during any form of crisis; be it a natural disaster or political ones like wars and genocide. As the unsettling spikes of COVID-19 cases continued to grow, it took a form of a calamity where social structures started collapsing. Recent emerging data shows that since the outbreak of COVID-19, gender-based crimes, such as domestic violence, sexual harassment, cybercrime against women etc. peaked as domestic home makers were trapped inside the house, while men with deviant behaviour found a way to exercise the ever-established patriarchy in the name of violence, including inter-personal violence and sexual abuse. Reports have been made on how unmarried men, also in the name of exercising the power of patriarchy, have participated in gender-based crimes like cyber bullying and sexual harassment. Now, what could be the reasons behind it? Well, researchers said that the psychological effects of being locked down for a long time is diverse and hostile. Stress, anxiety, boredom, anger issues, uncertainty, too much free time, consumption of excessive media content impact human psyche and behaviour on a great scale. Moreover, the degrading economic condition in families can be considered as a responsible factor for gender-based violence, such as the unemployment during the lockdown. All these factors are need to be assessed as the pandemic is clearly breeding another pandemic from within.

Objective of the Study

UN Population Fund (UNFPA) has predicted that the rate of gender-based violence will increase and at least 15 million cases of domestic violence around the world will take place for every 3 months that the lockdown is extended (Ford, 2020). Intuitively, there is little doubt that in stressful times like COVID-19 pandemic, being confined indoors without access to peer groups, family and other support systems, the increased risk must raise concerns and be tackled strategically. 'A pandemic within a pandemic', shows how even if we find the cure and vaccine for COVID-19, the latter remains unaddressed to the extent it should be. Even though the United Nations created a Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (United Nations, 1993) recognizing violence against women and suggested actions, this was non-visionary in terms of

a crisis situation like COVID-19 pandemic. So it is obvious, why there is a massive gap in addressing the pandemic within the pandemic in order to introduce government policy and ensure its implementation.

The term "shadow pandemic" has been used to refer this ever-growing maltreatment of women as it is increasing in proportion with the increase in COVID-19 cases which imply lockdown jurisdiction, making the form of abuse easier for the abuser. To answer the whys behind this phenomenon, this paper seeks to assess the increased scope of violence against women in both online and offline modalities while explaining COVID-19 as a shadow pandemic.

Conceptual Framework

According to Baxton and Jack (2008), a conceptual framework shows the relationships between variables in a study. In this study, the dynamics of gender-based violence and power practice in the setting of a pandemic is being assessed. So, the conceptual frameworks will provide an idea of why and to what extent does gender-based violence take place during a time of crisis; a global pandemic. As mentioned earlier, the origin of the concept, patriarchy, has its ties with religious and mythological grounds. But modern perspectives explain the role of patriarchy in gender-based violence more empirically and the reasons behind are well analysed. According to feminist theory, sexual violence acts as a function of social control in patriarchal societies. It is a bondage for women that is used to restrict women and exhibit the patriarchal powers inherited by men (Baron, Straus, 1987). Feminists argue that domestic violence is a result of gender inequalities of patriarchal societies and is used as a weapon to showcase masculine powers. In such societies, men sustain their privilege to enforce their sexual rights through use of violence, including rape. Feminist theory also relates rape to gender based preconceived attitudes (Burt, 1980). This perspective shows how gender norms facilitate sexual violence against women. "Men are supposed to be aggressive, dominant and women are born to serve men's sexual needs" - views like these are the major reasons behind why rape is still a debated issue when it comes to criminological analysis. Another theory that exposes social exploitation of women is the cultural spill over theory given by Baron and Straus. According to the theory, support for any gender-based violence may not be limited only within cultural beliefs and attitudes. There must be other cultural elements that facilitates the legitimization of the heinous act from society's view (Baron and Straus, 1987). Such as validated portrayal of men who abuse women in media, objectifying women, social judgement etc. Additional support for this theory comes from modern nation studies which show implicit cultural support for killing inherent in wars are reflected in higher rates of homicide (Archer

and Gartner, 1983; Jensen and Baxter, 1985).Social disorganization theory explains how crime and deviance reflect conditions that disorganize the integrity of communities weakening the power of social norms through which, the society is kept on check and balance. It shows how geographical mobility for any reason or any crisis (including pandemic) is also associated with gender violence (Crutchfield&Wadsworth, 1982). Researchers predict that social disorganization increases cultural support for violence against women. Patterns of this disorganization contributes to the normative support for violence. Another arguable theory of this shadow pandemic is the biosocial theory which is founded on the premise that, socio cultural factors play vital role in influencing violence against women. E.g. prevalence and savagery of wartime rape. The primary idea revolves around two notions, a savagery sex drive and a drive to possess and control.

Now, how are these concepts related to COVID-19? Since the pandemic has started and spread across globally within months, sitting at home, doing nothing has become a new norm. And from a cultural perspective, this has brought a shift in lifestyle, this has enhanced the scope of practising misogyny. While misogynist men scroll through social media and read newspapers, women are expected to work in domestic chores more than before. They are to keep their husbands and in laws satisfied. And this adds growing branches to the already existing patriarchal power practice. According to routine activity theory, people decides to commit crime when there is a potential victim and an absence of capable guardian. During COVID-19, finding a potential victim without a capable guardian has become extremely easy as there are mandatory physical distance happening between people. Abusive men may act as the opportunist here. Besides, due to excessive media consumption; especially those showing lust, aggression, rage and explicit contents; people are subconsciously becoming influenced and habituated to problematic behaviour towards their spouses even if they were not before. Thus, the concepts of social control, patriarchy, media aggression, routine activity etc. can be referred to while relating a pandemic to the bigger pandemic.

Methodology

The study has been designed with a qualitative research method. Apart from taking in depth interviews, conceptual review and theory discussions have been conducted to get a clearer idea of the topic. Participants were selected using purposive sampling. Findings have been developed by Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method. References have been cited with A.P.A. style referencing and organized

alphabetically within the reference part of the study. Qualitative approach has been used in analyzing the research data. More particularly, collected primary data has been explained with thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach. After conducting the interview, recordings and notes were elaborated through transcriptions and coding has been done to develop themes. In the fifth chapter, analyzed data has been presented through thematic discussions using quotations relevant to the theme. Sensitivity to context has been ensured through provision of ethical participation care. Transparency and coherence have been maintained from both author and participants' sides. All data has been collected with the respondents' prior consent and he/she was given full independence to skip or quit parts of the interview session. Force, inappropriacy, confusing terminologies have been avoided to maintain the correct output of the interviews as they were presented by the interviewees. Respondents are mentioned using pseudo names in this study to ensure confidentiality. Accurate reporting of participant views, attention to contextual sayings during analysis and skilled facilitation of rapport building has been done as well. To further understand the context and correlate to themes, intensive literature review has been done along with theoretical structure development.

Findings

Any form of natural or manmade disasters initiates and increase violence; especially the gender based one. If we look down the history, during challenging times like the Holocaust, both the world wars, 1971 war, Rohingya crisis etc. have proven sign of gender-based violence within their occurrences as one of the major events. Besides manmade disasters like war, natural disasters like Sidr and Aila have been seen as a hub for increase in gender violence. We witnessed in Ebola pandemic that multiple forms of violence against women exacerbate within crisis contexts, including rape, sexual harassment, domestic abuse etc. (UNGA A/70/723, 2018). It is of no denying that the COVID-19 is steering similar trends at present (IASC, 2020). This is already being seen in overpopulated countries like Philippines, Bangladesh and India, as COVID-19 has immersed into the cities as well as rural areas, women's trepidation and experience of gender-based violence and is escalating very fast (Kumar, 2020). The findings of the study were not surprising as respondents thought the increasing vulnerability is real. Based on the responses, the vulnerability of women has been divided into three segments. Outdoor, indoor and cyber vulnerability.

Outdoor Vulnerability: Since the roads are being less crowded during lockdown and social distancing, women do not feel safe while being alone, particularly after evening, as according to them, they feel there is

scope of sexual violence. Confirming this, a respondent said, "I faced sexual harassment multiple times while walking in the streets during strict lockdown." Another respondent, on the same question, answered that, "I had to walk to my office during lockdown as transports were hard to get on time. While walking to my workplace, I have faced sexual harassment."

Indoor Vulnerability: In a patriarchal society like in Bangladesh, women are seen as a domestic homemaker who has the liability of fulfilling the family members' expectations. Women who fail to do that, often fall victim of domestic violence by either the husband or the in-laws which ranges from physical torture such as marital rape to even murder in many cases. The reason behind this increased domestic torture is, the wives are spending more time with the perpetrators than before which is allowing them to malpractice their patriarchal ideologies on a bigger space. Beside housewives, violence against girls is seen in many other social relationships. Such as, parents abusing their daughters, girls being exploited by their relatives, friends and peers etc. since the pandemic has the socially "inferior" gender to be confined with the "superiors." Quoting a respondent, "I have bruises all over my body from the torture I have faced during last year. Corona made my situation worst of all existence." Another respondent on the same theme has shared, "I don't like being with my abusive partner. The more time I spend with him, the more I get mentally and physically abused."

Cyber Vulnerability: COVID-19 has brought humans closer to cyber space like never before. Globalization has allowed people to express themselves on the internet however they want. And this has immensely increased the scope of cyber violence. According to Council of Europe, Cyber violence is referred to as online behaviours that are criminally or non-criminally assault, or can lead to assault, of an individual's physical, psychological or emotional well-being. 2020 was the year of internet usage. As social distancing and lockdowns became the new norms, communicating through cyberspace was done in almost every sector. There is no denying that this helped in making and keeping connections between relations alive, but, as everything comes with a bad side too, we saw the highest amount of cyber violence in 2020 as well. Sexual objectification, harassment, insults, bullying, trolling etc. were on rampage. And as always, women were the prime target of gender-based violence in cyberspace too. Reasons being the anonymity and increased access to explicit contents on the internet such as pornography. 83% of the respondents said they have faced one or more forms of cyber violence during the pandemic. One respondent saying "I have been victim of sexual objectification and harassment almost every other day. My others messages on Facebook is full of sexually frustrated men." A known

internet influencer shared, "due to my public exposure I have been commented on my character based on what I post on social media. This is depressing." Cyber bully ranges from body shaming to character assassination and more. There is no strict law to prohibit this. Besides, the pandemic has shifted the focus of law enforcement from cybercrimes as these are not considered to be "as violent" in nature.

Recommendations

Although the paper does not aim to practically contribute in policy making; based on the outcomes, some recommendations need to be made. Considering the severe patriarchal practices, it is easy to point out the nature of the outlook and demographic elements that affect the ways of modus operandi. According to a study, most of the abusers and offenders in sexual violence cases are young males because they are more aggressive, more eager to mate, more sexually assertive (Tornhill & Palmer, 2000). Another study indicates that sexual violence occurs disproportionately by males with low socio-economic status (Kalichman, Williams, Cherry, Belcher, & Nachimson, 1998). Before we jump to the conclusion however, we need to analyzie the patterns of this shadow pandemic. Reports from Ain o Shalish Kendra show that there were more than 900 rape cases reported in the first 9 months during the pandemic (The Financial Express, 2021). This excludes any marital rape as our constitution does not recognize it as a crime. So, eliminating the pandemic within the pandemic will be a mammoth task to do. Starting with of course, policy reformation. As discussed, Bangladesh does not have any solid legal policy to deal with cyber violence against women. Although it is advised to call the National Emergency Service, 999 while in need, it does a little to nothing to serve the purpose. Strict laws must be enacted to protect women in cyberspace. Empowering women should be a key to solve gender-based crimes. And by empowering, I do not mean to be educated and self-dependant women; it includes standing against the wrong and the wrong-doer, standing for herself, physically and mentally. Women should be encouraged to take part in policy making. In cases, they must participate to become the center of policy making, playing a pivotal role as policy maker. They must be given the power to ensure that vulnerable women and girls have their concerns and needs identified as fast as possible making sure that suitable interventions are applied; especially when vulnerable girls and women are confined with their abusers due to a pandemic. These organizations must speak up on behalf of vulnerable women. Both men and women must acknowledge the vulnerability of women and girls due to COVID-19.

Conclusion

In Bangladesh, people believe in shared responsibility of gender-based violence, connecting the victim's demography to why they get abused! In cases of domestic violence, women are viewed as a puppet of the husband who is expected to listen to whatever he commands. His commands are her wish. And if she does not obey, it is the right of the man to verbally, physically or sexually abuse that woman. This is a controversial concern where most feminist disagree to acknowledge shared responsibility of a women, and rightly so. The year, 2020, with COVID-19 has been severely rough in gender-based violence reports in Bangladesh. The alarming prevalence of gender based violence has initiated debate over whether the victims and the survivors had any role in it. Popular beliefs like "ekhaatetaalibajena", "shamir payer niche streeerbehesht" and "khabarekholarakhlemachhiboshbei" circulated throughout the forums of sensationalized headlines of violence against women. Mainstream social media was dominated by this "shared responsibility" debate. Many cases initiated public protest demanding swift justice for victims. Question arises; will capturing and punishing the offender really bring justice to the girl who suffered the physical and mental destruction? Will this eliminate rape from the society? Will men fear "justice system" and stop rape? Will the society acknowledge that there's no shared responsibility of a victim for what was intended and committed solely by a man? I don't have any answer to that. But if we study the pattern, we might see there's little to no use of blaming the victims for an act where they did not contribute at all.

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