

The Impacts of Pandemic on Women's Position in the Labor Market in Bangladesh

Saima Sultana

Assistant Professor, Department of Business Administration, Prime University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Abstract

The effect of Covid-19 pandemic is more serious on women than on men globally. This paper aims to highlight on women's inferior positions in the labor market and focuses on the increasing burden of unpaid workloads, job loss, domestic violence, and restricted mobility in the public sphere in response to the COVID-19 outbreak. Both in the formal sector and informal sector, women are facing challenges at workplace as well as home due to increased workload. As they are spending most of the time at home, their arena of social communication has become smaller, on the other hand, activities like exercise, traveling, etc. have decreased. As a result, they are facing both physical and psychological difficulties. The effects are particularly dire in developing countries like Bangladesh.

To improve the situation there is a need for more gender-targeted policymaking to reduce such effects on women and give them better shield in the labor market and at home.

Keywords: Lockdown, Labor Force, Covid-19 pandemic, Dependents, Unpaid Care Work.

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I. Introduction

Bangladesh, a country of South Asia, has also become a victim to the Covid-19 pandemic like other countries around the world. Till date, 552,087 people have been tested COVID positive and the dead toll has risen to 8,489 (Worldometer 2020b). The aftermaths of COVID-19 pandemic are not only confined to health issues, but also have a major bearing on the social and economic facets of the country. Nevertheless, the womenfolk belonging to different economic strata have been affected the worst as pandemic has made them jobless and confined to home (Imam, 2020).

During the pandemic, numerous women who were working in the conventional area lost their positions and physical and emotional mistreatment on women has expanded. Women business visionaries in small and medium ventures have lost capital because of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has caused challenges for running their associations and they needed to lay off their employees (Imam, 2020). Including at home women are serving more on each forefront. Since lockdowns, women are looking after three demographics; kids, who don't approach childcare or schools; parents and older family members, who don't approach matured consideration or their typical administrations; just as keeping themselves, accomplices, more distant family and companions safe. What's more, around the globe, it is women and young women confronting the most savagery (Suraiya, & Saltmarsh, S. 2020).

In recent days women's employment in different sectors has enabled them to escalate their control and influence in domestic expenditure and decision-making, and men's participation in unpaid care work has significantly increased. However, by being jobless due to the pandemic, prospects for women's continuous empowerment may decline as they have lost their economic freedom and, in some circumstances, become dependent on their families (ILO. Better Work Project).

The study aims to represent the economic impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on women and to investigate the burden of unpaid works that women are bearing through. A number of strategies have also been proposed considering the current state of women in Bangladesh.

II. The Pre-COVID Employment Status of Women in Bangladesh

Before the inception of Covid-19 pandemic, Bangladesh had attained a remarkable progress on some indicators in terms of gender equality. Bangladesh was ranked as the topper among the South Asian countries by best performing in reducing the gender disparity (UNDP 2020).

The progress can be perceived with several social pointers regarding education, health and empowerment. Undeniably, this is an outcome of women's increased involvement in the labor force.

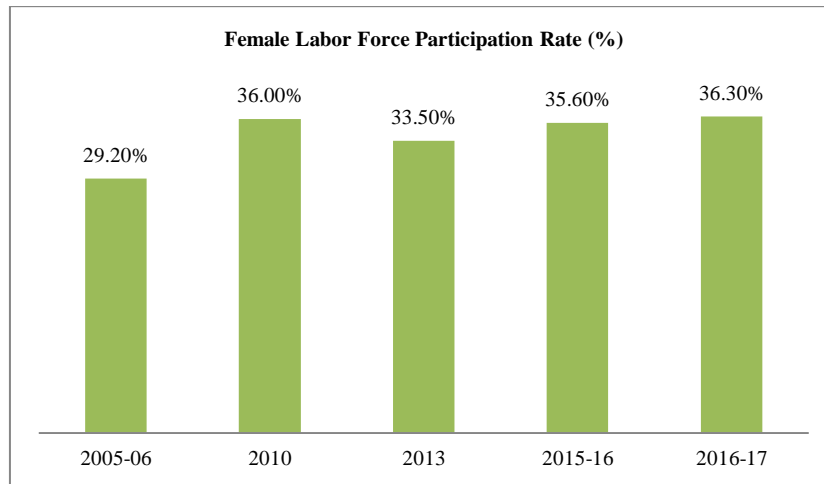


Figure.1 Female Labor Force Participation Rate (Source: Labor Force Survey 2016-17, BBS)

However, in formal valuations of gross domestic product (GDP) women's contribution is much poor compared to men. Only 3.25 per cent of working women are engaged in the public sector and 8.25 per cent in the private sector in Bangladesh. The outstanding 89.5 per cent are employed with random and fluctuating earning patterns in varied informal sectors. Most of them are working even without any return (Khatun, Khan, 2016).

Development studies found that, economic progress is associated with a decline of female participation in agriculture and a rise in nonagricultural doings (World Bank, 2011). The similar trend has been undergoing by Bangladesh for years (Sarker, 2020). Since 1991, a sharp upswing of female employment has been observed in the manufacturing and service sectors. Figure 2 shows the distribution of female employment in different economic sectors.

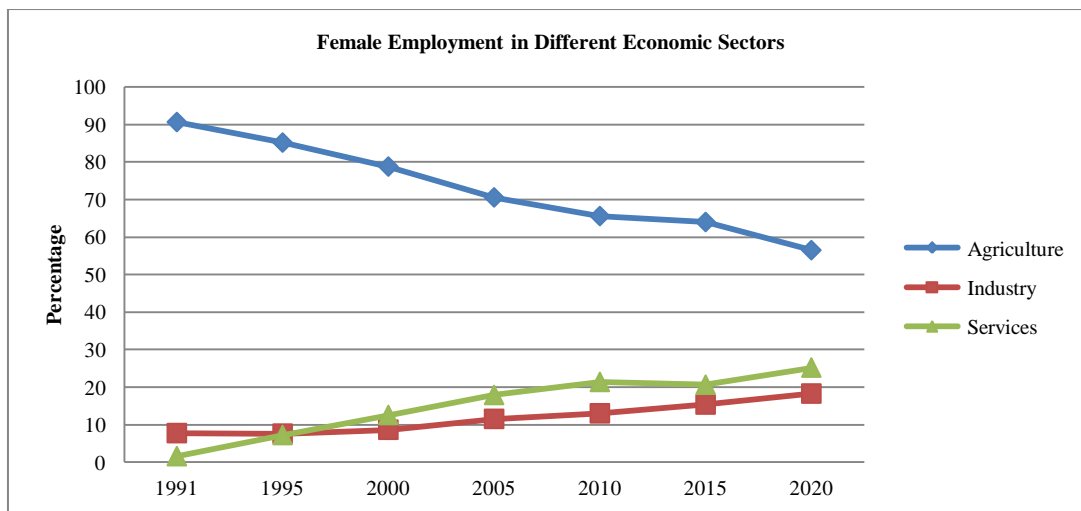


Figure.2 Female Employment in Different Economic Areas (Source: World Bank Database)

Women participation in informal sectors of employment has been remarkably observed in recent periods. In 2005-06 the ratio of women employed in informal sectors was 9.7% which raised to 17.1% in 2016-17 (Labor Force Survey, 2016-17).

Besides, women are also looking for migrating across the country to improve their socioeconomic position. The number of female workers participating in overseas employment has been significantly increased from 1991 to 2019 (BMET, 2020). The remittance sent by migrants workers are contributing to improve their standard of living, and brings economic solvency to them which lessens the dependency of women on the other family members.

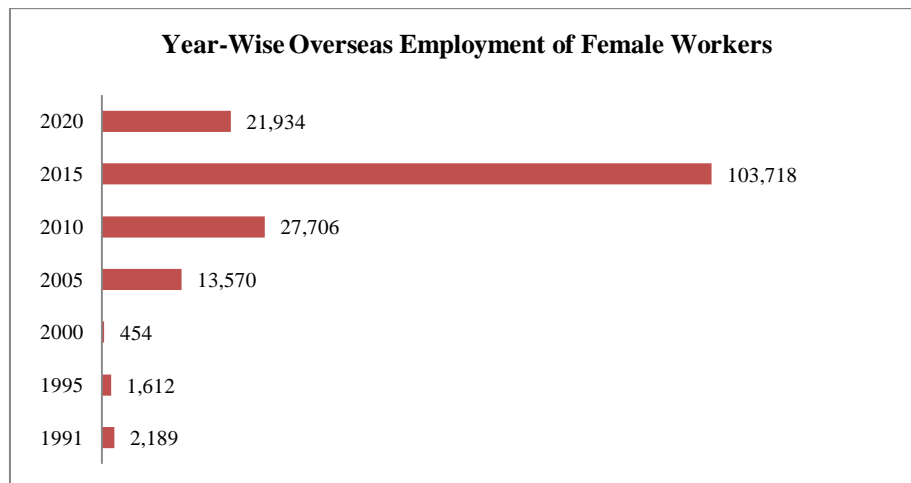


Figure.3 Year-Wise Overseas Employment of Female Workers (Source: BMET 2020)

Figure.3 represents the year-wise overseas employment trend of female workers from Bangladesh

III. How Women Have Been Affected Due to Pandemic

Informal and Formal Employment Sectors:

According to BRAC Gender Justice and Diversity Program study, 65% of women businesspersons had no returns, whereas 58% women had no jobs between February and June who were employed in the informal sectors. Both, women businesspersons and informal sector employees have faced 67% and 66% drop in their individual income respectively.

The manufacturing sector in Bangladesh contains a large number of women in their workforce. Particularly, these sectors have experienced the biggest falls in export growth throughout the pandemic period. In the RMG sector of Bangladesh industry orders had dropped by 45.8% during the first quarter of 2020, and by 81% in April, where 80% of the total staff is represented by female workers (WTO, 2020). During the early closures RMG sectors have sacked about 2,138,778 workers; most of them are women (ILO, 2020).

According to BRAC Migration Program, almost 49,924 female migrants have returned from different host countries amidst COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020 the total number of female migrants was 21,934 whereas, in 2019 the number was 104,786 (BMET, 2020).

A large number of women are working in industries that have been directly influenced by travel restrictions caused by lockdown, like tourism and other travel services (WTO, 2020).

Increased Burden of Unpaid Care Service:

Multiple studies found that women are suffering from increased physical and psychological shocks during the pandemic. Lockdowns have increased the burden of unpaid care work that women carry, particularly in the masculine social structures like Bangladesh (Haque & Faruk, 2020). The closure of academic institutions and having everybody remaining at home has enlarged the volume of unpaid care work that has to be delivered by women even more. Previously women tend to be occupied as much as 6.2 hours a day in unpaid household work (BBS, 2018). According to a rapid assessment survey by BRAC's Gender, Diversity, and Justice Program, 91% of women respondents stated about higher amounts of unpaid care work during the covid-19 period, and 89% stated about having no break time at all (Suraiya, & Saltmarsh, 2020). A number of women might be forced to take away them from the labor market, which is often supposed to be interim, can easily converted as permanent (Haque & Faruk, 2020).

Emergence of Violence against Women

Several reports have appeared that violence against women (VAW), particularly domestic violence have increased worldwide, since the outburst of COVID-19. Restrictions and procedures imposed by the system during pandemic have deteriorated the total human rights situation. With a "general holiday" announcement by Government many people lost their jobs, and, the number of people remaining at home has increased for such extended lockdowns. The masculine approach of society has produced more burdens on women. (FIDH, 2020) In some cases, women are being pressured to perform the all the household tasks – including the additional responsibilities raise from the demands of family members staying at home. In 2020 (April to September) around 40,000 women had become sufferers from domestic violence (Odhikar, 2020). Moreover, violence related to dowry, rape against women and children have also been reported throughout the period.

IV. Recommendations for a change in situation

- The Government of Bangladesh should come forward with policies to create further employment prospects for women. Some particular gender-sensitive policies may be adopted, typically in the form of social protection measures to help the women for getting optimum benefit (WTO, 2020). In addition, researchers and academics should conduct more studies to help in preparing appropriate and need-based policies.
- Policy decisions regarding formal documentation of loans need to be more relaxed. Female entrepreneurs should get the facility of getting loan at minimum and flexible interest rates. Moreover, women have to be provided with training facilities so that they can upgrade their skills and capacities for the Post-COVID challenges. The qualification and skill requirements for woman employment could be relaxed in some cases (especially for indigenous women). Also, a number of quotas may be offered to women for technical jobs in RMG sectors.
- Focus should be given on valuing women's unaccounted deeds and their contribution in the GDP. Also our social perceptions need to be changed regarding unpaid care work, and family members should come forward to share the responsibilities for reducing the burden on women (Sarker, 2020).
- The Government may introduce lawful measures to reduce the earning gaps between women and men in all sectors. NGOs and feminist organizations can perform an active role in this regard by promoting equivalent pay for all (Khatun, Khan, 2016).

V. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has put a dire impact on the labor market because of lockdowns and travel restrictions. Women in Bangladesh have affected badly considering their involvement in labor market, job loss, facing increased violence etc. It is critical to take the necessary steps to keep women from losing their work positions, keep up women portrayal in the workforce, and make them to reemerge with upgraded professional stability. Meanwhile, supporting women employments and wellbeing is fundamental to stay away from additional impoverishment. Government of Bangladesh, Business Organizations and other Stakeholders need to understand the compound impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on both men and women, and formulate policies to address a justified and gender-responsive recovery.

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