

Abstract

COVID-19, reported to the World Health Organization (WHO) as an outbreak of pneumonia with unknown cause in Wuhan, China, toward the end of 2019, rapidly spread worldwide and became a global epidemic. Since then, the epidemic has struck in multiple waves, and even now shows no signs of ending. The COVID-19 pandemic (hereafter, the pandemic) has set back the global economic activity, deepening and increasing existing inequalities (UN 2020b:21). This pandemic is not only health crises, but also economic and human rights crises, and have enormous impact on the world's poorest people. Women and people with disabilities in developing countries have been severely impacted by the COVID-19 as they were marginalized and economically vulnerable even before it began. Since the multiple vulnerabilities of women and persons with disabilities intersect, women with disabilities experience discrimination and disadvantages on both counts as “disabled women.” Therefore, the difficulties faced by women with disabilities, that cannot be understood only from the perspective of women or the disabled, will become apparent in the pandemic.

However, previous research has underestimated the impact of COVID-19 on women with disabilities, and at the same time, there has been a lack of research on individual situations and difficulties of women with disabilities. Hence, this research focuses on women with disabilities in Bangladesh, a developing country immensely affected by the pandemic. Through field research, I aim to clarify changes in their daily lives before (before 2019) and after (after 2020) COVID-19, and analyze the impact of the pandemic on women with disabilities.

The study employed face-to-face, semi-structured interviews using a questionnaire titled “Survey on daily life impact in the COVID-19 pandemic in Bangladesh,” and was conducted between January and March 2022. The total number of respondents were 102 (80 women and 22 men), which included 70 women and 22 men with disabilities, and 10 women without any disabilities but with children (persons) with intellectual disabilities. All respondents belonged to local disability organizations and received some assistance. From the quantitative and qualitative data collected, I analyzed the changes in the daily lives of women with disabilities before and after COVID-19.

This study analyzes difficulties faced by persons with disabilities in terms of the impact of COVID-19 in Bangladesh, based on the six issues highlighted from the perspectives of gender or persons with disabilities in previous studies. These have been presented in the following section.

1. Economic hardships: women with disabilities working in the informal sector, such as day laborers and self-employed workers, lost their income due to the pandemic, while women employed by organizations for persons with disabilities and NGOs were relatively protected. For some women with disabilities, their personal income has increased since COVID-19 although their household income has decreased. The range of the highest and lowest per capita household income for women with disabilities was large. COVID-19 has exposed the gap between the rich and poor among women who until now were collectively considered as "women with disabilities."
2. The risk of violence: the data of women with disabilities who have been subjected to violence and discrimination from people close to them since before the COVID-19 were captured. Unlike previous studies, our findings indicated that the number of people who experienced violence and discrimination after COVID-19 has decreased, while violence and discrimination against non-disabled women has increased. One of the reasons for the decrease is that information and assistance from organizations for persons with disabilities were brought to families and communities through women with disabilities.
3. Health risks: it was found women with disabilities have safety concerns of nighttime use of communal toilets located outside in slums. One participant (woman) with disability mentioned taking her husband's permission to see a doctor; this is a common issue among women which is based on gender norms. However, it becomes particularly difficult for women with disabilities, as they require more visits to medical institutions due to their disabilities. Inability to obtain permission from their husbands to see a doctor, increases their health risks and reduces their quality of life immensely. In addition, COVID-19 has exposed the difficulties of carrying toilet water for women with mobility disabilities because people have become more concerned about hygiene. Moreover, with vaccination venues not being accessible to persons with disabilities, socio-cultural norms in Bangladesh created additional difficulties for women with disabilities.
4. Distribution of unpaid care work: less than half of women with disabilities felt that unpaid care work in their household had increased since COVID-19. Even in households where unpaid care work increased, women with disabilities did not bear the load since they tend to be unmarried and reside in the home where they were born, or even when married, were not originally responsible for care due to their disability.

5. The government and NGO assistance: most women with disabilities received emergency assistance from the government or NGOs either through the concerned organizations to which they belonged or by being listed on a list of people in need of assistance. However, a reason why some of them could not receive assistance was because of the registered address on their national ID card.
6. Difficulty in accessing information: most of the women with disabilities had access to information about COVID-19 through TV/radio, NGOs, and mobile phones. For information on emergency aids, few women with disabilities could obtain information, and the source of information was biased toward NGOs. In addition, access to information on disabilities was primarily from respective organizations of persons with disabilities. Hence, it was evident that their source of information was biased toward the NGOs (organizations for persons with disabilities) to which they belonged.

In conclusion, it was clear that women with disabilities faced multiple discriminations in the daily lives during the pandemic. In some cases, the women themselves were not clearly aware of the discrimination. The study highlighted the complex intersection of various discriminations that women with disabilities face on a daily basis. In response to the difficulties faced by women with disabilities arising from such complex and intersecting discrimination, support from organizations of persons with disabilities, especially for women, goes beyond the direct benefit of material assistance. The findings emphasize the significance of restoring the dignity of women with disabilities, including their own self-esteem and respect from their families and community.