**TO THE UN SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN, ITS CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES**

Submission for the UN SRVAW’s Report to the General Assembly on COVID-19 and the increase of Violence against Women, with a focus on Domestic Violence

**RESPONSE TO QUESTIONNAIRE ON COVID-19 AND THE INCREASE OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN**

Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST)[[1]](#footnote-1)

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**Summary:** This submission has been prepared by Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST), a non-governmental, legal services organisation working across Bangladesh to mitigate barriers and strengthen access to justice for individuals in marginalised communities. BLAST provides pro bono legal services, particularly supporting women and children who are survivors of gender-based violence, including domestic violence, to claim necessary redress.

This submission consists of responses to the questionnaire on the increase of gender-based violence and domestic violence against women in Bangladesh, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The responses are based on information from media reports of gender-based and domestic violence taking place during the country-wide shutdown (‘general holiday’) from 26 March to 31 May 2020, and since, and the responses of justice mechanisms; findings of various surveys conducted by human rights organisations with women and children in different parts of the country to track the increase of such incidents of violence; discussions in online consultations organised by BLAST with coalition partners ;[[2]](#footnote-2) and data based on the legal services provided by BLAST, during and immediately prior to the shutdown.

**About BLAST:** BLAST provides free legal services – awareness programmes, advice, referral mediation and individual and strategic litigation – to individuals who are unable to access justice due to poverty, discrimination or exclusion, irrespective of gender, age, or community or status. It operates in both the informal and formal justice systems, and from the frontlines of the formal system (Village Courts and Magistrates' Courts) right up to the Supreme Court, and now – during the Covid-19 pandemic –including the Virtual Courts - providing comprehensive advice and assistance in criminal, family, civil, land and constitutional law matters while also facilitating alternative dispute resolution.

BLAST operates through 25 district offices, two university legal clinics, and community legal clinics and mobile legal clinics in informal settlements in urban areas and refugee communities. BLAST has a dedicated body of 600+staff, including paralegals, lawyers, researchers, and advocates and operates with support from a pro bono network of 2600+ lawyers across every district of the country, and with formal and informal partnerships with other community based and national civil society organisations. It works across the country in close collaboration with district Bar Associations, with elected members responsible for its management, alongside leading members of civil society. Its leadership includes senior lawyers and jurists, several of whom have served in UN bodies.

BLAST’s research and advocacy, including public interest litigation (PIL) is aimed at law, policy and institutional reforms to ensure effective legal protection of rights and to combat discrimination on the basis of religion, disability, gender and gender identity, sexuality, marital and other status, caste and occupation. Over the years, BLAST has advocated particularly to promote women’s rights, working closely on the special laws on violence against women and girls, including domestic violence, and rights of children, workers, and persons with disabilities.

BLAST contributes to national monitoring and advocacy on the promotion and protection of rights through its role in national coalitions including the [Human Rights Forum Bangladesh](http://www.askbd.org/ask/hrfb/), the [Citizens’ Initiative against Domestic Violence](https://www.facebook.com/CIDV-Coalition-100725104950636) (CIDV) (of which it is currently the Secretariat), the Citizens’ Initiative on CEDAW (CIC-BD), the Sromik Nirapotta Forum (Workers’ Safety Forum), the Domestic Workers Rights Network amongst others. It has contributed to Shadow Reports by these coalitions for UN treaty monitoring bodies (such as the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women) and for the Universal Periodic Review. BLAST is involved in regional and international networks including the Right Here Right Now Platform (on youth engagement with rights on gender and sexual identity) and is currently involved in a regional initiative, Feminist Inquiries on Rights and Empowerment (fostering engagement between women’s rights and trans groups, and examining impact of criminalization in child marriage cases).

1. **To what extent has there been an increase of violence against women, especially domestic violence in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns? Please provide all available data on the increase of violence against women, including domestic violence and femicides, registered during the COVID-19 crisis.**

A nation-wide ‘general holiday’ was declared by the Bangladesh government on 26 March 2020, extended multiple times before it was withdrawn on 31 May 2020. During this two-month de facto lockdown, all government and non-government institutions were closed, only emergency service providers (including healthcare and law enforcement) and businesses providing essential services (including food and grocery delivery) were open, social distancing measures were ordered to be in place, and travel and movement within and between districts were restricted except in case of emergency, or in case of voluntary distribution of food and other aid to communities.

In April 2020, the [Manusher Jonno Foundation](http://www.manusherjonno.org/) (MJF), a national grant making body working to promote human rights and good governance, conducted a tele-survey with 17,203 women in 27 districts across the country, and found that 4,249 of these women, and 456 children, had been subjected to domestic violence during the lockdown.[[3]](#footnote-3) 848 women reported to being physically abused, 85 were subjected to sexual abuse, 2,000 faced psychological abuse, and 1,308 were subjected to economic abuse as they were deprived of proper sustenance and/or financial support.[[4]](#footnote-4) Among those surveyed by MJF, 1,672 women and 424 children stated that this was the first time that they had experienced such violence.[[5]](#footnote-5)

MJF conducted further surveys through May and when releasing the complete findings on 10 June 2020, asserted that in May, these incidents of violence against women and children had increased by 31%.[[6]](#footnote-6) Surveys conducted with 53,340 individuals (37,437 women and 15,906 children) in 53 districts show that in May, 13,094 women and children had been subjected to violence; 11,025 women out of those surveyed had faced domestic violence. Amongst them, 3,589 women reported facing economic abuse, 4,974 were subjected to psychological abuse, 2,085 suffered physical abuse and 404 women faced sexual abuse. In most cases, the perpetrators were their husbands, and in the remaining cases, women were subjected to domestic violence by other family members. 2,841 women and 1,319 children shared that this was their first time experiencing such violence, which means that in May, 4,160 individuals had faced domestic violence while in lockdown, twice the number of first-time victims reported in the April surveys.

To draw on two egregious examples of domestic violence during the shutdown – on April 15, a man hacked his wife to death with a machete in Feni, Chattogram and streamed the entire incident live on Facebook, before turning himself in to the police.[[7]](#footnote-7) On 16 May, a man in Patiya, Chattogram allegedly struck his wife in the head with a brick for not being able to get cold water from the refrigerator during iftar. The woman sustained a severe head injury and later died.[[8]](#footnote-8)

A survey conducted by Steps Towards Development, an NGO, and the Gender and Development Alliance, a national platform of NGOs, with 7,000 families in eighteen districts across Bangladesh, found that between 26 April and 10 May, women and children from about 4,550 of these families (65% of the total families surveyed) had been subjected to different forms of violence.[[9]](#footnote-9)

According to statistics on violence against women compiled from news reports by legal aid and human rights organisation [Ain O Salish Kendro](http://www.askbd.org/ask/) (ASK), 182 women were reportedly subjected to domestic violence between January-May 2020, 86 of whom were murdered by their husbands, and 25 of whom had died by suicide after being subjected to such violence.[[10]](#footnote-10) During the same period, 427 women had been raped and there were 79 attempts to commit rape; 24 women were murdered after being raped, and six had died by suicide following rape.[[11]](#footnote-11) 62 women faced sexual harassment between January-May, eight of whom committed suicide as a result, and one woman was reportedly murdered after protesting harassment.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Data collected by the Dhaka Metropolitan Police also reflects that incidents of violence against women were higher in March of this year, compared to cases filed in February and January. 56 rape cases and 132 cases relating to other forms of violence against women were filed in March, compared to 45 and 120 cases, respectively, in February.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The Government of Bangladesh’s National Emergency Helpline reportedly received 796 calls relating to violence against women between 26 March and 12 April 2020 (the first phase of the nationwide shutdown), higher than usual.[[14]](#footnote-14) The Centre for Policy Dialogue, a civil society think-tank, also reported that the number of calls relating to domestic violence made to organisations associated with CPD, had increased during the shutdown; however, these organisations were not able to provide legal aid as victim support shelters and law chambers were closed due to the COVID-19 crisis.[[15]](#footnote-15)

BLAST’s Case Management System (CMS), a database on client applications for legal advice and assistance, shows that during the shutdown ( 26 March- 31 May), BLAST provided legal advice to 29 individuals regarding violence against women; this included advice to sixteen individuals in relation to incidents of domestic violence, including one domestic dispute involving threats made to the complainant, which is classified as ‘psychological abuse’[[16]](#footnote-16) under the Domestic Violence (Prevention & Protection) Act 2010. These incidents had, in fact, begun to rise since the beginning of March, when the coronavirus was declared as a pandemic but Bangladesh had still not gone into lockdown. Between 01 March to 25 March, the period immediately before the lockdown, BLAST CMS recorded ten applications seeking legal aid in relation to domestic violence.

In contrast, in the first two months of this year, between January 01 – 29 February 2020, BLAST’s CMS recorded nine instances of legal advice and/or assistance provided in relation to domestic violence. As stated above, between 01-25 March, this had shot up by ten further entries regarding domestic violence in less than a month’s time. While the above information entered onto the CMS is not the complete data on domestic violence, as not all records have been entered on the database, it does reflect a jump in the number of domestic violence complaints received by BLAST within a two-month period.

From the withdrawal of the shutdown on 31 May till date (21 June 2020), the CMS recorded another nine applications on domestic violence, of which four involved violence related to dowry demands.

Loss of income and work opportunities have been factors driving the increase in domestic violence among low-income families working in the informal sector. According to a study conducted by Bangladesh Nari Sramik Kendra (BNSK – Bangladesh Women Workers’ Centre) with ‘internal migrant female workers’ (women who have migrated to urban areas from their places of origin in search of work) during the period March-April 2020, almost 94% of women workers in Dhaka have faced domestic violence due to lack of income during the COVID-19 crisis.[[17]](#footnote-17) The women reported that their husbands tortured them out of frustration due to economic insecurity resulting from loss of work, and also due to the mental stress of not being able to gamble or use drugs during the shutdown.[[18]](#footnote-18) The survey, titled ‘Covid-19 Pandemic: Socioeconomic Situation of Migrant Women Workers’, covered 154 low-income families living in various urban settlements in Dhaka’s Mohammadpur. 96% of the women surveyed had migrated to the capital from other areas in search of work to ease economic hardship; 88% were part of the informal taskforce, working as domestic helpers, cleaners and street vendors, while the remaining 12% were RMG workers.[[19]](#footnote-19) 67% of these migrant women workers were the primary wage-earners in their family, while 33% contributed to the family income. Both groups reported that they had lost their jobs or had been suspended by their employers during the shutdown. All women workers surveyed reported that they had no savings to spend on daily food.

There have been multiple incidents of violence against transgender individuals, including those who are members of the Hijra community, in different districts of Bangladesh during the shutdown. At least ten transgender individuals were subjected to physical violence (one in Cumilla, five in Dhaka, one in Jashore, one in Khulna, one in Mongla and one in Sylhet).

In the Cumilla incident on 20 April, Rupok (pseudonym) was reportedly subjected to physical and psychological abuse by their family members (i.e. two brothers and sister-in-law), who entered Rupok’s home without permission during the evening, brandishing sticks, and proceeded to beat them up. Rupok sustained injuries from the beating, being strangled by one brother, while the other dragged Rupok out of the house and attacked them with a knife, injuring them further. Their sister-in-law ransacked Rupok’s home and threw out their belongings. Rupok was finally released when neighbours arrived at the scene, having heard their screams, and the perpetrators left the scene after making various threats. Rupok subsequently filed a complaint with the police.

In Jashore, a Hijra community member was attacked on 01 June when they went to a pharmacy to get medicine.

Reports of these incidents are on file with BLAST having been received from its network of paralegals within the Hijra and gender diverse communities, who support fellow community members across the country to seek legal assistance and remedies. Violence against individuals in gender and sexual minority communities in the country are rarely reported by mainstream media, and stigma and discrimination impede their access to justice mechanisms.

We have also received reports of cases of DV in the Rohingya camps but cannot provide the details due to difficulties with access. The lack of internet facilities and hotlines in the context of the camps and in Cox’s Bazaar also hampers reporting significantly.

1. **Are helplines run by Government and/or civil society available? Has there been an increase in the number of calls in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?**

Yes, there is a [National Helpline Centre for Violence Against Women and Children](http://nhc.gov.bd/) run by the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs’ Department of Women Affairs, which is 24-hours, and toll-free (109), and deals with complaints of sexual and gender-based violence, including domestic violence. There is another 24-hour, toll-free National Emergency Service helpline, (999), run by the Bangladesh Police, which offers immediate assistance by connecting callers to the police, or fire and ambulance services, as necessary.

In addition to the above, helplines run by civil society / human rights organisations, such as the Acid Survivors Foundation, ASK, BLAST, BNWLA, Nijera Kori, We Can and BRAC, are also available.[[20]](#footnote-20) As noted above these hotlines are not operational in relation to the Rohingya refugees in the camps in Cox’s Bazaar, given restrictions on internet access and mobile use.

Between 26 March and 12 April 2020 (the first phase of the COVID-19 lockdown in Bangladesh lasted until 11 April, before multiple further extensions), the national emergency helpline reportedly received 769 calls regarding violence against women.[[21]](#footnote-21)

According to the Centre for Policy Dialogue, field level data reflected an increase in domestic violence cases during the lockdown period, and the number of calls made to the Centre’s partner organisations, in relation to domestic violence, had also increased.[[22]](#footnote-22) ASK has also reportedly received many phone calls through its helpline alleging domestic violence.[[23]](#footnote-23)

The BLAST phone helpline, has also received calls on domestic violence. BLAST received 36 calls from individuals seeking legal advice regarding family matters (including domestic violence, dowry related violence, dower and maintenance), during the period of March-May 2020 (the government-mandated nationwide shutdown was imposed on 26 March and withdrawn on 31 May). A majority of these calls were from women facing domestic violence during the COVID-19 lockdown period, who stated that they were stuck in their homes with partners and/or other family members who subjected them to physical and psychological abuse. Some also shared that they were being subjected to financial abuse, in addition to physical abuse, as their husbands were depriving them of maintenance and causing them to go through financial hardship. Most callers stated that the main problem was that they could not even get away from the violence and go to a safe place (e.g. the house of a friend or relative) due to the lockdowns.

According to a report received by BLAST during the lockdown period, on the evening of 25 April 2020, a woman had left her home in Tongi, Gazipur, where she was subjected to physical violence by her in-laws, and had gone to the nearest police station for refuge and subsequently refused to return to her house. As she had no relatives living in the area or in nearby Dhaka, the police could not take her to a safe place. She then spent the night in the police station, and only left when her brother arrived from Bhola, Barishal (a district and division in the southern part of the country) to pick her up the next morning. Due to the movement restrictions then in place limiting travel between cities and districts except in case of emergencies, they had to make a number of phone calls, with the help of the police station, to get permission from the police to leave Gazipur, cross all security check posts at exit points and travel back across the country to their hometown in Bhola.

1. **Can women victims of domestic violence be exempted from restrictive measures to stay at home in isolation if they face domestic violence?**

No. The restrictive measures are applicable to everyone, including women who face domestic violence while staying at home in isolation. There are no government directives, or as far as we are aware, procedures currently in place to exempt them from such measures, or to intervene and transfer them to a place of safety, if domestic violence is reported.

1. **Are shelters open and available? Are there any alternatives to shelters available if they are closed or without sufficient capacity?**

There are only seven Safe Custody Homes for women and adolescent girls in Bangladesh, each with the capacity to accommodate 50 individuals, set up by the Ministry of Social Welfare in six divisions of the country (two in Dhaka division).[[24]](#footnote-24) These safe custody homes, which are insufficient both in number and capacity, provide shelter to women and girls who are subjected to sexual and gender-based violence, and ordered by the Court to be sent to the custody homes.

There are eight Victim Support Centres (VSCs) in the country, run by the Women Support and Investigation Division of Bangladesh Police in partnership with ten NGOs (including BLAST),[[25]](#footnote-25) which provide a range of services to women and girls facing violence (who either come directly to the VSC as complainants, often referred by NGOs, or are taken there from police stations) including emergency shelter of up to five days, healthcare, referrals to other government and non-government organisations for longer-term assistance, legal advice and assistance, psychological counselling, capacity building and rehabilitation.[[26]](#footnote-26) Apart from these, several shelters are run by human rights NGOs, including [Ain O Salish Kendra](http://www.askbd.org/ask/), [Bangladesh Mahila Parishad](http://mahilaparishad.org/) (BMP) and the [Bangladesh National Women Lawyers’ Association](http://bnwla-bd.org/).

The Safe Custody Homes are open but not admitting any new residents at this time as COVID-19 testing kits have not been provided to these custody homes. VSCs are providing shelter to individuals through maintaining all necessary hygiene and safety protocols, but are functioning in a very limited capacity and only taking in missing children. According to BMP, its Legal Aid Sub-Committee has been working with VSCs across all six divisions to ensure extended shelter for women and girls who are victims of violence, throughout the lockdown period, instead of five days at the VSC.[[27]](#footnote-27)

As of May 2020, 13 girls have been living in Rokeya Sadan, BMP’s shelter home for SGBV survivors.[[28]](#footnote-28) However, it appears that they had been residents of the shelter since prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 in Dhaka and the ensuing lockdown. From consultations with other organisations, it appears that NGO-run shelter homes were also unavailable to victims of violence during the lockdown, as they were not able to take in anyone new due to the risk of coronavirus transmission.

BRAC has proposed that testing kits be made available at Safe Custody Homes, so they can test for the coronavirus and offer temporary shelter to women who are facing domestic violence while being forced to share a home with abusive partners or family members during lockdown. However, this suggestion is as far as we are aware, yet to be heeded or implemented.

1. **Are protection orders available and accessible in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?**

Protection orders are available under section 14 of the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act 2010, whereby –

*“The Court may, after giving the parties an opportunity of being heard, satisfied that domestic violence has taken place or is likely to take place, issue a protection order in favour of the victim and issue order restraining the respondent from committing following acts, namely:*

*(a) from committing any act of domestic violence;*

*(b) aiding or abetting in the commission of any acts of domestic violence;*

*(c) prohibiting or restraining from entering any protected person's place of employment, business, or educational institution or other institution which the protected person ordinarily visits;*

*(d) prohibiting or restraining from making any personal, written, telephone, mobile phone, email or any other form of communication with the protected person;*

*(e) prohibiting from causing violence to the dependants of the victim or any relatives or any person who gives assistance to the victim from domestic violence; (f) any other act that may be cited in the protection order.”[[29]](#footnote-29)*

However, the protection order is **not** **accessible** in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, as the concerned Courts have been officially closed since the shutdown came into effect on 26 March. Virtual courts have been operating across the country in a limited capacity since 11 May,[[30]](#footnote-30) following promulgation of an Ordinance issued on 09 May,[[31]](#footnote-31) allowing courts to conduct proceedings digitally during the pandemic, using video-conferencing technology. Virtual courts at district level currently only have jurisdiction to hear bail petitions, while the High Court Division of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh will receive applications on urgent matters relating to writ petitions and civil suits;[[32]](#footnote-32) cases on violence against women, including domestic violence, and family matters, are not as far as we are aware, being heard. It may be noted that in practice such protection orders are not generally available to Rohingya women and girls facing domestic violence.

1. **What are the impacts on women's access to justice? Are courts open and providing protection and decisions in cases of domestic violence?**

The COVID-19 lockdowns *have* had an adverse impact on women’s access to justice. Analysis of the International Rescue Committee’s (IRC) case management data on gender-based violence reflects that between February and March 2020, there was a 50% decrease in the number of women and girls reporting GBV and seeking necessary services.[[33]](#footnote-33) IRC further explains that in many contexts, women and girls’ access to technology is limited, as phones or computers are often controlled by male relatives. Their opportunity to safely make a phone call or any other form of digital communication to report violence and seek help is particularly compromised where they share residence with the perpetrator.[[34]](#footnote-34)

According to data from BLAST’s CMS, between 01 March – 31 May 2020 (over three-months), BLAST provided legal advice regarding violence against women to 42 individuals; of them, fourteen women received advice in case of domestic violence, seven in relation to dowry demands, five in relation to dowry related violence, one woman received legal advice in relation to murder, and four women received advice regarding rape. 111 applications were filed by clients seeking legal aid (including mediation and litigation services), of which, nine were filed in relation to domestic violence, 93 in relation to dowry demands, five regarding dowry related violence, and one application for litigation in relation to rape.

In contrast, in the first two months of the year alone, between 01 January – 29 February 2020, BLAST had provided legal advice in relation to violence against women in 54 cases, and received 307 applications for legal assistance. The decrease in these numbers from March through May, particularly in the number of applications received, indicates a drop in individuals reaching out to BLAST to seek legal remedies against such violence, which is a result of the restrictive measures in place during the shutdown preventing women from seeking these services, and legal service providers, such as BLAST, from providing necessary legal assistance.

On the one hand, the countrywide lockdowns in Bangladesh have resulted in women being trapped with their abusers for days on end, without being able to move out. While many are unable to get away because of the restrictive measures, there are also women who simply have nowhere else to go, or a safer place to seek shelter in. On the other hand, even if they do get out of such abusive spaces, they face challenges when trying to seek legal assistance and protection against that sort of violence, because law enforcement agencies, like all other wings of government, have largely shifted their focus to emergency COVID-19 related response, especially during the shutdown, and have been occupied in providing emergency services and enforcing quarantine and other restrictive measures. At this moment, police are not prioritizing response to complaints and incidents of violence against women, including domestic violence, so victims are prevented from securing necessary redress. This can be seen from the experiences of at least two human rights organisations summarised below, from an online consultation held by BLAST on 28 April 2020, to discuss violence against women and children during the COVID-19 lockdowns.

According to ASK, many women seeking to file complaints regarding domestic violence during the shutdown had been turned away by police stations, which were focusing on providing emergency services in relation to COVID-19 response, including distributing aid to community members and ensuring quarantine is maintained, and had declined to accept any General Diaries (GDs) relating to incidents of domestic violence or provide any other assistance to victims. ASK volunteers have been supporting women to file GDs in police stations in the organisation’s working areas. ASK also shared that the [National Legal Aid Services Organization](http://www.nlaso.gov.bd/) has not been taking any cases at district level, or in Dhaka.

According to BRAC’s Human Rights and Legal Aid Services Team (BRAC HRLS), also participating in the consultation, complainants of domestic violence cases were being referred by the police to BRAC for legal support instead. Some First Information Reports (FIRs) in relation to rape had been accepted by the police, but the process of investigation and arrest was slow, and in most of these cases, no progress had been made beyond conducting medico-legal examinations of rape survivors. BRAC HRLS also shared that BRAC has been facilitating alternative dispute resolution for compoundable cases of domestic violence (reconciliation, dower and maintenance) over the phone, but a lot of cases went unreported as women cannot leave their homes to go to the police station.

Access to justice is further impacted, as all courts are currently closed and no protection orders and decisions are being made in cases of domestic violence. While virtual hearings are being conducted by courts across the country, these do not currently cover domestic violence, or any other form of violence against women (please see response to question 5 above for more details).

BRAC HRLS has further reported that while courtrooms remain closed, violence against women and girls has been on the rise. According to data from BRAC’s 408 legal aid clinics, incidents of violence against women has increased by 69% in March and April 2020, in comparison with same time period in 2019.[[35]](#footnote-35)

The Citizens Initiative against Domestic Violence (CIDV), a coalition of 25 civil society organisations working on implementation of the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act, 2010, has called for all domestic violence cases to be brought within the jurisdiction of the (then proposed) Virtual Courts,[[36]](#footnote-36) which are empowered to deal with “urgent matters”. CIDV has appealed to the Chief Justice to permit the Virtual Courts to issue protection orders, residence orders, safe custody orders and compensation orders on an emergency basis in relation to domestic violence cases, in accordance with the 2010 Act.[[37]](#footnote-37) The Coalition has also proposed that GDs (general diaries) and FIRs (first information reports) in case of domestic violence be accepted through online filings at police stations during the lockdown.[[38]](#footnote-38)

MJF has recommended that the government accelerate the activation of Domestic Violence Prevention Committees at district, Upazila and Union levels, to monitor and report incidents of domestic violence, and assist survivors, including to file cases.[[39]](#footnote-39)

1. **What are the impacts of the current restrictive measures and lockdowns on women's access to health services? Please specify whether services are closed or suspended, particularly those focusing on reproductive health.**

Healthcare services in the country have not been suspended during the lockdowns. However, there have been increasing reports alleging denial of services and treatment to patients (with or without coronavirus) in hospitals all over the country, including denial of entry without Covid-19 negative health certificates. There have been multiple incidents of patients dying during the shutdown from denial of medical services in both public and private hospitals, which continued to refuse admission to patients showing respiratory symptoms or running a fever on suspicion of COVID-19.[[40]](#footnote-40)

Coronavirus testing is currently only possible at the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research, government hospitals and selected private diagnostic centres and testing facilities. A majority of the private facilities are in the capital, Dhaka. It is difficult to get tested and receive health certificates as all available facilities are overcrowded. There has also been denial of admission to hospitals dealing with coronavirus cases to avoid transmission. Often, people are unable to seek medical services as no doctors are available, and in many cases, private hospitals and doctors’ chambers are closed.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a public health crisis that has put an immense strain on the existing healthcare system, as government and private hospitals and healthcare complexes continue to work round-the-clock, over capacity, to support coronavirus patients. There is a great shortage of intensive care units (ICUs) in the country, as 47 out of 64 districts in Bangladesh lack ICU facilities, which means many patients in critical conditions encounter delays in treatment amidst the surge of coronavirus patients.[[41]](#footnote-41) According to the Directorate General of Health Services, there are currently only 1,000 ICU beds (733 in government hospitals) for a population of 165 million.[[42]](#footnote-42) Since the majority of healthcare services are prioritizing response to COVID-19 at this time, access to and availability of reproductive health services have been severely affected.

The Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MOHFW), issued two circulars on 11 and 24 May, respectively, directing all private and government hospitals to ensure treatment of all patients seeking medical care, regardless of whether they have the coronavirus. Hospitals cannot refuse treatment to any patient if they have the required facilities to provide necessary medical care. Despite these directives, hospitals reportedly continue to deny life-saving treatment to patients, or deny other medical care (such as reproductive health services), and demand COVID-19 negative certificates.[[43]](#footnote-43)

According to UNICEF, an estimated 2.4 million babies will be born in Bangladesh during the nine-month period following the declaration of COVID-19 as a pandemic on 11 March 2020.[[44]](#footnote-44) UNICEF further reports that an analysis of data collected from the [dashboard](http://103.247.238.92/webportal/pages/) of DGHS, indicates significant reduction in the number of individuals availing maternal and newborn health services from healthcare facilities since the start of the COVID-19 crisis,[[45]](#footnote-45) which suggests that the lockdowns and restrictive measures on movement have impacted women’s ability to seek health services. According to the same reports, only 33 out 63 district hospitals in the country are providing emergency obstetric care.[[46]](#footnote-46)

According to a Multi-Sectoral Anticipatory Impact and Needs Analysis conducted by the Needs Assessment Working Group (NAWG), a platform of government and non-government humanitarian agencies in April 2020, 43% of health workers surveyed in early April had reported that they had heard of pregnant women and mothers dying in their working areas; 25% of health workers had observed a decrease in the number of women visiting healthcare facilities; and 26% had reported that existing sexual and reproductive health services were not meeting the needs of individuals seeking such healthcare.[[47]](#footnote-47) NAWG also conducted surveys with women of reproductive age and found that 51.7% of women did not have sufficient access to personal health items, which was deemed as a possible result of restrictions on movement.[[48]](#footnote-48) According to NAWG’s analysis, unmet needs in family planning, lesser access to clinical management of rape care, and reduced access to antenatal care and life-saving, comprehensive emergency obstetric and newborn care, were anticipated during the COVID-19 pandemic.[[49]](#footnote-49)

There have been multiple reports of pregnant women being denied treatment and services in hospitals across the country, amidst the shutdown. [UBINIG (Policy Research for Development Alternative)](http://ubinig.org/index.php/campaign/index/english), a policy and action research organisation in Bangladesh, has compiled five such incidents in a [report](http://ubinig.org/index.php/home/showAerticle/221/english/4.%20Pandemic%20and%20Public%20Health%20Challenges%20of%20Bangladesh), but many others have been reported by different news resources.

For example, in Gaibandha district in early April, a woman experiencing labour pains was reportedly refused admission by the Family Welfare Supervisor at the district Mother and Child Welfare Centre (run by the Directorate General of Family Planning (DGFP) under MHFWA) and was subsequently forced to delivered her child in a CNG-run auto rickshaw while on her way to another hospital.[[50]](#footnote-50) On 24 April 2020, a pregnant woman, who was also experiencing labour pains and running a slight fever, was denied admission by three healthcare providers in Dhaka (two Maternal and Child Health Training Institutes (MCHTIs), run by DGPF and one private hospital). One of the MCHTIs had suspended services during the lockdown, while the private hospital refused to admit her suspecting that she may have the coronavirus. The second MCHTI refused to issue her a ticket for the emergency ward, citing the existing COVID-19 situation as reasons for denial of admission. She had to move from hospital to hospital for nine long hours before she could receive medical care at the Dhaka Medical College Hospital[[51]](#footnote-51) One woman, who was due for a Caesarian section in early May, informed bdnews24.com that she had been denied ultrasound services at her usual hospital as she lived in Wari, an area in the capital which had been marked as a hotspot for the coronavirus.[[52]](#footnote-52)

Apart from denial of services, the fear of COVID-19 transmission from overcrowded hospitals, as well as the unavailability of obstetricians, have also left pregnant women vulnerable to health complications, including both physical and psychological stress, as many are reportedly skipping antenatal appointments, rethinking delivery options due to health and safety concerns, or are missing scheduled check-ups and lacking access to essential medication as they are simply unable to consult with their absent doctors.[[53]](#footnote-53) For example, a pregnant woman suffering from thalassemia was unable to visit the clinic to ensure her baby had sufficient oxygen as the clinic was overcrowded, and at her 35th week of pregnancy, was unable to visit her gynaecologist when feeling unwell.[[54]](#footnote-54) Another woman was unable to go to her local Upazila Health Complex for the delivery of her baby as the hospital had reported 33 staffers who had tested positive for the coronavirus.[[55]](#footnote-55)

Telemedicine is being encouraged by doctors if a problem is not severe; however, this is not a feasible option for many patients requiring tests and closer examinations.

There has not been sufficient news coverage of the impact of the lockdowns and restrictive measures on women’s access to healthcare services in rural areas. However, according to UBINIG, based on data collected from nine districts in Bangladesh during March-April (including Cox’s Bazar), there has been an increase in pregnant women in rural areas turning to traditional birth attendants (TBAs) to deliver their babies. During this period, 97 TBAs helped 360 women to birth their child through vaginal delivery.[[56]](#footnote-56)

1. **Please provide examples of obstacles encountered to prevent and combat domestic violence during the COVID-19 lockdowns.**

Due to restrictions in movement and safety and social distancing measures, lawyers/paralegals/community workers/human rights defenders from legal aid and human rights organisations are generally unable to directly respond to any domestic violence calls in person and intervene to protect complainants from such violence. BLAST is able to provide some limited direct support and intervene in a few areas where community based volunteers are active, for example in informal settlements in Dhaka or in some Rohingya camps in Cox’s Bazar.

Cases cannot be filed in police stations as many organisations have reported that police officers are not accepting GDs, and either turning complainants away on the ground that they are only providing emergency services in relation to COVID-19 response, or referring them to NGOs, to resolve their domestic disputes.

Courts remain closed; virtual courts are not dealing with cases of violence against women but only hearing bail petitions at the moment.

There are no ‘women’s help desks’ in police stations where women could go to report domestic violence incidents, preferably to female police officers, so these could be attended to as a matter of urgency.

As noted above the restrictions on internet access and also in practice the fact that most organisations are not equipped to run full scale hotlines and most of our clients are not in a position to make calls (having no private spaces from which to call, or not having access to a mobile phone) have been major barriers to service.

1. **Please provide examples of good practices to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence and to combat other gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic by Governments.**

The continuation of the Government helplines, the operation of the One Stop Crisis Centres, and support from the police run Victim Support Centres are examples of good practice.

1. **Please provide examples of good practices to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence and to combat other gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic by NGOs and NHRIs or equality bodies**.

NGOS such as BLAST, ASK, BNWLA and BRAC are providing information, advice and alternative dispute resolution services (e.g. mediation) to clients in relation to family disputes over the phone and through online video platforms. Through facilitating mediation requested by clients, NGOs have been able to prevent incidents of violence against women, at least in these particular cases. BLAST has found that where there are community level volunteers and /or paralegals operationa, and able to access a network of lawyers and rights advocates, they have been able to get more effective responses.

NGOs such as ASK, BLAST, BMP, BNWLA and BRAC are also routinely providing legal advice to women in relation to domestic violence over telephone.

ASK is providing support to GBV survivors to file GDS at the police station, through volunteers in its working areas in eleven districts across the country.

The CIDV Coalition is advocating for virtual courts to additionally hear cases of violence against women and domestic violence, and for activation of the process to file GDs online.

BLAST developed a number of public service announcement (PSA) audio bites and videos on raising awareness and combating gender-based violence, including domestic violence, during the COVID-19 crisis. These PSAs, which focused on GBV not only affecting women and children but also transgender individuals, advised on the legal remedies and helpline numbers (including the National Emergency Services helpline and the National Helpline Centre for Violence Against Women and Children) available to support individuals facing violence during the lockdown. These PSAs were published on social media, aired on FM radio, and broadcast on cable channels during the lockdown.

Social media is being further used as a platform by human rights activists, professionals in different sectors and influencers to initiate public dialogue on violence against women and girls, including domestic violence. For example, on 16 May 2020, a webinar titled '*Domestic Violence: Why Do Women Stay*?' was broadcast through the facebook page of *Dhaka Tribune*, a leading English daily newspaper. Moderated by a popular social media influencer, the webinar involved a panel of legal professionals (including from BLAST,), mental health professionals and human rights activists working to combat domestic violence, who came together to start this conversation on domestic violence and its impact. Two domestic violence survivors spoke of their individual stories of experiencing and overcoming such abuse.

The discussants analysed the root causes of domestic violence, and why women in Bangladesh face such a hard time leaving abusive relationships. They explored the roles of various institutions, and society as a whole, in facilitating or condoning domestic violence. Following the webinar with over 100,00 views, women from inside the country, and abroad have contacted panelists seeking legal remedies and other assistance.

The above, and similar efforts to initiate dialogue on the gender dimensions in the impact of COVID-19 on women’s lives, are a good practice which involve making effective use of technology, a critical tool during the lockdown, to raise awareness about violence and how to prevent it, and how to seek help if it occurs.

1. **Please send any additional information on the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on domestic violence against women not covered by the questions above.**

N/A

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