Capítulo IV

Gender Benders: Coronavirus Pandemic, Women & Bangladesh

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Introduction

Though the coronavirus (covid-19) pandemic descended at an extraordinary moment of Bangladesh's economic growth (elaborated below), the "sound and fury" it generated in 2020 and 2021 ultimately began to "signify nothing" during 2022. Perhaps 'nothing' may be too strong a term to use, but the prior 'business-as-usual' mode dominates again. On the eve of Bangladesh's first covid-19 case, reported on March 8, 2020, three reverberating dynamics among policy-makers, demanded public attention.

The first was *Vision 2021*. This policy approach mandate permeated the public mindset since it was connected with the country's Founding Father and his 100th Birth Anniversary. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was affectionately and popularly known as Bangabandhu (friend of the Bangalees). This auspicious occasion was on March 17. Nine days later was Bangladesh 50th Birth Anniversary. Bangabandhu himself announced the country's independence from Pakistan's control in the early hours of March 26, 1971. Under the banner of "Operation Searchlight," Pakistani troops had indiscriminately begun massacring civilians in the fading hours of March 25, arresting Bangabandhu too.

Bangladeshis were well prepared for *Vision 2021*. The country had applied to the United Nations (U.N.) Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) to upgrade its 'less developed' identity and status into a 'developing' country. Accordingly, *Vision 2021* was replaced by *Vision 2041*, with a mandate to make Bangladesh a 'developed' country in the 2040s. ECOSOC approval was necessary. Based on its CDP (Committee for Development Policy) recommendation, this was given in November 2021, when Bangladesh was still an 'undeveloped' country. It now had five years to shift to a 'less developed country' (LDC), that is, from November 2026, in route to becoming fully 'developed'.

'Economic development' was eagerly anticipated for a country hitherto known as a "basket case," a term U. Alexis Johnson first used, on December 7, 1971, in a conversation with U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger (U.S. Government, Department of the State, Office of the Historian, Foreign Service Institute, 1976). It was among the dominant images of the country in everyday conversation, as much in the country's first year, 1971, as when the pandemic erupted in 2020. Though low-waged, low-skilled ready-made garments (RMGs) had vaulted that "basket case" country up the 'developmental' ladder after the 1970s and now fetches more than 80% of Bangladesh's foreign-trade income, industrial *diversification* still remains key to 'graduate' into both a 'developing' and 'developed' country. Bangladesh has to move beyond processing primary products into manufacturing products and promoting services using high-skilled personnel and hi-tech. It must, in short, dispense of *physical* labor earning *wages* for *intellectual* inputs demanding *salaries*, before transiting to automated alternatives to human labor.

The pandemic suddenly exposed how vulnerable the country had become economically because of its low-wage and low-tech fulcrum. Instead of diversifying after the pandemic, Bangladesh only dug deeper into RMG production, if only to earn badly needed cash. Without that game-changing shift, two ongoing traits magnified: low-wage exploitation,

not just of women under normal circumstances in a patriarchal society, but also women confronting greater pressures; and learning from the pandemic about lessons to safeguard health better.

A second dynamic upturned two routine *social* features. One was the export of low-wage migrants in huge numbers, literally flocks, particularly to the Middle East (and specially to build infrastructures, such as for the forthcoming 2022 World Cup Soccer Tournament). These workers received little or no protection in their *host* countries (in alphabetical order, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen), but dispatching them back to their *home* country because of the covid-19 crisis only compounded Bangladesh's acclimation to social distancing practices.

The other *social* feature related to the migrant gender balance. Though Bangladeshi migrant workers have largely been male, a female renaissance blossom within the country, fueled no less by the prime minister, key opposition party leader, and the speaker of the national assembly all being women (at the start of 2023). Given the country's chauvinistic social roots, emancipation at a very sensitive economic 'take-off' moment was challenged too abruptly and shaken by the country's 'business'-based pandemic recovery mode and mindset.

With a 2023 population of 170 million, one of the world's most congested country faced a third unfolding challenge, over population. With 23,500 people packed into every one of the capital city's (Dhaka's) 300 square kilometers of space (World Population Review, 2022), the metropolitan's total population of over 22.5 million includes four million slum-dwellers (UNICEF Bangladesh, n.d.), living in 5,000 city sites. Having received unabated displaced persons (DPs) from Myanmar from the late-1980s and 1990s, Bangladesh would find its demographic bubble bursting from August 2017, when a DP avalanche of 1.2 million barged across its southern border. Much like their Dhaka slum-dwellers, they have no hope of returning home (Economist, 2023). As a

sympathetic Bangladesh established DP camps, the largest of them all worldwide spanned 13 square kilometers of Cox's Bazaar district in Kutupalong. Importantly, Bangladesh calls its residents *displaced persons* rather than *refugees* since the latter term opens the door to settling down permanently. As alluded, an overcrowded Bangladesh is not in a position to handle that.

Located right next to Myanmar, Cox's Bazaar is one of the very few upland areas of a flat deltaic country. Trees were chopped down to accommodate the 'guests' (Hussain, 2022), further aggravating the world's most vulnerable climate-change country as soil erosion threatens even more secular damages. Living in cramped 1-room or 2-room abodes, the displaced persons imposed the most herculean pandemic task of preventing viral spread-effects. International organizations played a stellar and largely silent role in those most difficult days. Yet almost six years later, since nothing has happened to tackle the DP problem, the positions, performances, and predicaments of these organizations appear shakier by the day. With more than half of the displaced persons being children, increasingly urgent education opens another window of residency and citizenship. 'Marriage' to a local is one outlet, but fraught with danger if made a stepping-stone to feed the sex industry. Since imparting education has been difficult inside the camp, another stealthy outlet allows educated DP teenagers to seek admission in neighboring institutions. Anecdotal evidence points to a sizable number enrolled in Chattogram's Asian University of Women. Strict rules allow them to visit only their own refugee camp. Elsewhere in the camp, though, every mother's plight particularly, but women in general, worsens.

Confronting covid-19 against these dynamics would throw more than stumbling-blocks on the remedial pathways, but for historically subordinated women these crushing impacts would become particularly severe. How did they fare against these pressures? What did the top income-generators of the country do to survive? Not only were women vying

to break the glass-ceiling, but even their preponderant proportion in the DP camps did not alleviate them from another task only they could properly manage: cater to children. Whereas children accounted for more than 51% of the camp residents, adult women constituted 24% and men 19% (the remainder included 1.5-2.5% widow or female-headed families and 3-4% disabled people) (Akter et al., 2021). Mothers and women had to be in charge just to ensure camp survival. In civil society, women also do the 'dirty work' so the country can both survive and progress, but unlike the camps, they remain too subordinate to men in spite of the alluded 'emancipation' flickering now and then.

I address the above questions by (a) taking stock of the covid-19 casualties; (b) government policy responses to them; (c) evaluating impacts upon the women subset of the total population; (d) exploring how the dust from the refugee-camp is settling; and (e) both drawing conclusions and projecting implications for other cases and Bangladesh's future.

Treating Second Uninvited Guest First: The 2020 Pandemic

Two covid-19 statistics speak volumes about Bangladeshi *economics*, *society*, and thereby their *policy-making* priorities. The first is that covid-19 victims expose some degree of immunity, having frequently weathered floods, storms, and even war. They have built the capacity to not go into a panic for too long. After one-quarter of 2020, when the pandemic began (World Health Organization, n.d.), there were only 165,000 confirmed cases in Bangladesh and less than 100 tests per day were carried out until almost mid-April 2020. By June 2022, the covid-19 tally had climbed to a respectable 14,225,301 tests but surprisingly, only 1,956,327 cases were reported, and even more bewilderingly, a scant 29,131 deaths were recorded. Only 34 other countries, out of over 200, had a higher toll than Bangladesh, the eighth most populated

country in the world. Even the country's startling economic feats (moving rapidly up from being the 42nd largest economy when the Rohingya influx began, to the 35th largest today by posting one of the highest annual growth-rates globally for thirty-odd years), lowered guards against the pandemic (particularly because the country, companies, and women citizens needed the income, albeit for disparate purposes and reasons) (Arafat, 2022).

After the drive to expand tests by creating more laboratories began on April 2, the daily scorecard climbed to over 2,000 tests by May 2020, but still woefully short of what was needed (Anwar et al., 2020). Even with a larger pool of cases and casualties today, panic is largely absent in the streets, offices, classes, and factories. This is in sheer contrast to the almost total 10-day lockdown from March 26, 2020, when fears and urgencies dominated the average citizen's mind. True, the average citizen knows how to recover from shock (though the degree varies), and quickly catches on with mainstream vibes, instincts, hopes, and fears (even if they get disseminated through rumors). Yet recovery from the first-cut personal pandemic experiences was catalyzed less by instincts and traditions than *economic* needs, particularly income for upwardly-aspiring people living at the margin of life. Low-wage RMG women were paid randomly (rather than through a fixed scale), and only when the day's/week's/month's work was done.

Since the lockdown broke this pattern, it was only inevitable for returning workers to expect the same remuneration pattern sooner than later. This did not always happen. Some factories remained closed, and given the advent of social distancing, the obvious shift, no matter how slowly, to automated production did not take place as much as to make a difference. Thus, the road not taken was the looming industrial upgrade opportunity. Social distancing also fell by the wayside or got thrown into the winds. To this, one must add ingrained *social* practices influenced by a pervasive extended family lifestyle: the typical household includes individuals

living in cramped conditions in minimal space, with shared beds as a common practice. One can only imagine how the pandemic shook such traits.

The second covid-19 statistic depicts precisely all of the above in a different format: from the initial panic or shock, *sociological* and *economic* considerations catalyzed a different response trajectory. After the first covid-19 case was reported on March 8, which was followed three days later by the World Health Organization declaring covid-19 a pandemic, mainstream citizens dived indoors and the government declared a 10-day lockdown from March 26, the country's Independence Day. Celebrations disappeared and escaping Dhaka took an exodus form: Dhaka's population growth was fueled by rural migrants for over two-odd decades, many newcomers seeking newly sprouting RMG jobs. Belatedly the government and the people realized this exodus could not go on for too long. On April 9, the government localized the lockdown for 60 communities, half of them in Dhaka. Simultaneously, it imposed a specialized lockdown in Rohingya camps.

Realities sank in during those 10 lockdown days after March 26: the country's export income was crippled without RMG factory production, the country's export income plunged drastically. RMG owners, many of whom happen to be legislators or related to the government in one way or another hurriedly summoned back the workers. According to one study (Gautam et al., 2022), 20 million informal-sector people lost their jobs in the first full pandemic year, whereas in the formal sector, 10 million day-laborers and 27 million self-employed workers became jobless. Among them were construction workers in a growing public sector list of building 'megaprojects', mostly much-needed infrastructures. Without the government's generous stimulus plan, the country would have been in dire straits. One May-June 2021 survey by the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO, 2021) gave a more corporation-based face to these macro-observations. In a large survey of firms, it found 50-100% of workers in the formal sector (textiles, ap-

parel, and leather industries) were prevented by governmental covid-19 restrictions from working, while 60% of largely small-and-medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) or micro-credit counterparts anticipated losses during 2020. Medium and larger firms were less badly hit (UNIDO, 2021).

Against a broader national picture of women, generally representing 93.3% of those informally employed in the countryside aided by the microfinance revolution targeting their inclusion from the late 1970s (Hussain & Tartila Suma, 2023, ch. 4), and 87.3% in urban areas, two out of every three RMG workers were not only women (other women serve as household staff, clean the premises or clothes on a regular basis, cook meals, run errands, look after the home owner's children, and so forth), but also stood first among those financially devastated. They not only found more relief in returning to work than being locked inside their own suddenly packed rural household facing greater pressure and violence from their now-unemployed and more-disgruntled spouse. They also faced greater hardships upon returning to work, given the new covid-19 rules/temperaments or stagnation in factory production/marketing.

Nearly 3 billion USD worth of garment orders were either canceled or bottled up in warehouses as transportation grinded to a halt during the first month of the pandemic. Of the 2.28 million RMG workers badly hit in over 1,100 factories, 48,000 were in 300-odd SMEs and micro-credit enterprises (MCEs) along the Dhaka-Naraynganj corridor. Between March and May 2020, RMG exports fell 54.8%, from 8.2b USD to 3.7b, forcing the government to muster a RMG stimulus package (Gautam et al, 2022). Exports to the largest RMG destination, the European Union, fell by 19% in 2020, as they did to the largest single market, the United States, by 16%. Canada posted the largest proportional single-country loss, by 25% (Ahammad et al., 2021).

Like their male counterparts, women needed the work to make ends meet at home. The lower the social rung they belonged to, the more difficult that prospect became in the

post-covid-19 atmosphere. Behind this *economic* impulse to return to work lay *social* strictures. For a very socially intertwined people living in extended families within patriarchal parameters, social distancing became hard to accept. This was evident with the advent of *Eid-ul-Fitr* (May 23-4), one of the two holiest religious annual occasions. After praying (which is a collective exercise, typically inside a mosque), males hug each other three times as a ritual, a habit many will simply not compromise, no matter how deadly the pandemic (the belief *Allah* overrides health fears is common, in fact, feeds a side-belief that *Allah* rewards those putting faith above pandemic fears).

Women doing the household work, particularly in the kitchen, bustle even more given the routine arrival of guests whom even a pandemic cannot restrain: family members, close relatives, and next-door neighbors constitute early and inevitable visitors, then across the community, since, by tradition, everyone wants to be on everyone's list in extending an *Eid* greeting personally. Such an occasion allows children and staff to glow more as they often receive gifts. Both the celebration and *social* inheritances (patriarchy) promote mixing (that is, both mingling and mangling), while the *economic* imperative to work also rings loud and clear—all within the most forbidding gender climate in the lives of many Bangalees. A later section picks up the gender theme.

If only the proverbial *economic* 'buck' stopped there. Complicated as evolving countries and communities become, when the *economic* and *sociological* forces mix, the *socio-economic* punch can leave a nightmarish memory. For example, if the patriarchal *sociological* inheritance spills over into *economic* operations, stratification subtly enters the picture. Becoming a 'developed' country implies the growth of democratic behavior of sorts, thus leveling society, and opening more space for women. Such expectations often get stumped, even aggressively. The results remain the same: whereas benefits go to the few (the upper class *socially*, or the rich *economically*), the costs have to be absorbed by the

many (the middle and lower classes *socially*, the 'have-nots' *economically*). The 2020-22 pandemic reinforced this pattern and structure rather than promote the hypothetical democratic mindset 'economic development' supposedly invites.

Opening the *economic*, *sociological*, and *socio-economic* dimensions of covid-19 in Bangladesh helps us wade through the pandemic's toll more comprehensively. Yet to fully understand the causes and consequences, as well as the costs and benefits, we must first explore the *political* responses to the pandemic. How did the government battle the broader pandemic issue, particularly if it addressed 'gender' pointedly at all?

Covid-19 & Bangladesh's Policy Responses

Some of the game-changing policy responses of the Bangladesh government can be viewed through the same three prisms accented thus far in the study: *economic*, *sociological*, and *socio-economic*. We easily notice the governmental bias: when all the emergency covid-19 related health-based measures have been assessed, attention almost overwhelmingly goes to the *economy*, emitting more than a critical message or two; and though the *socio-economic* and *sociological* segments vie for a place in the front-row passenger-seat of the covid-19 correction carriage, it becomes almost impossible to find any space for *gender*-specific treatment, even as a back-seat covid-19 policy-response passenger. Rohingya influxes received noticeably more attention than covid-19 affected civil society women (and more directly too).

Understandably, without women, DP camps would crumble in a way civil society might not, reiterating an earlier point of how much more weakened camp males were in their relations with women than their civil society counterpart was with his. In both cases exerted violence against women reaffirms male control, a sign that geographical displacement did not displace masculinity. Governmental responses can be seen as *initiatives*, not all of them being *poli-*

cies. Enacting them often exposes *societal* or exogenous *problems*, if not as a consequence, then as a contextual or some other consideration. Future measures can be extracted or extrapolated from both of the above, often through trials and errors, or from gaps left asunder. Such steps, simply dubbed *preventive* here, stem as much from scholarly recommendations or ground-level lessons.

Before turning to the cream set of policy responses dealing with the *economy*, it seems fitting to address the immediate health steps taken to combat the pandemic, that is, the initial panic leading to *economically*-driven and *sociologically* nurtured mindsets and responses. That, after all, meshes better with the public perception of policy recalibration. This health priority had both directly-related and indirectly-impactful dimensions.

Among the directly-related actions of the government, was creating a simultaneous covid-19 response team and committee, both under the Ministry of Health, led no less by the Health Minister himself, Mr. Zahid Maleque. Augmenting the concerns both groups faced and the immediate actions they would take were such indirect measures as abandoning celebrations of three pivotal events, the first two of which were previously recognized: Bangabandhu's 100th Birth Anniversary on March 17, National Independence Day on March 26 (when the 10-day lockdown was announced), and the Bangalee New Year (*Pahela Baishak*), typically on April 14. These events traditionally draw throngs of people onto the streets. In the panic-driven lockdown, these had to be avoided at all costs.

Augmenting that was the cancellation of all flights leaving Shahjalal International Airport in Dhaka. The only exception was to China (wherefrom vaccines and other supports were being dispatched), on April 5, 2020. The severe paucity of testing laboratories led to a decision to expand into new ones, and on April 11 the decision was made to open 17 of them. To support these measures, government offices, private offices, and educational institutions were closed, at least

during the full and partial lockdown spells, while all public gatherings and transportation were forbidden, at least until the strict lockdown ended in early April.

Such functions as education and bureaucratic work, turned to online dissemination. In particular, the 100+ private universities in the country turned to online education if, and only if, they survived the financial crunch of establishing the new software infrastructures after absorbing regular expenses. Whereas public universities were closed *sine die*, many government offices and private businesses often made protracted shifts to online usage such that partial office return could begin on a rotational selective basis. These return-to-work initiatives began sporadically through April 2020.

Turning to the *economic* policy responses, the government identified two priorities early enough: *food*, to avoid any crisis; and *security*, so as to safeguard against any lawlessness, economic difficulties, and health crisis. Food production began with the "Rice for *Taka* 10 per kilogram" campaign (the market price was *Taka* 12, which translated into 15 cents in U.S. currency then), particularly to sustain vulnerable people. It was a popular campaign, hitting a big gaping hole right at the start. Extending the rice initiative to farmers specifically and agricultural workers broadly, the government further allocated 10 million USD for the healthcare of farmers, 15 million USD to help farmers recover, 6m USD for rehabilitation after any natural disaster, 9m USD for new crops, 23.5m USD for farm machinery, 4.1m USD for *Aus* rice seeds (*Aus* being a rice variety), and 4.25m USD for irrigation, 12m USD to mechanize agriculture, and 180 harvesters and 137 reapers in *haor* areas (*haor* being 'a saucer-shaped marshy wetland ecosystem'). A string of other farm supports fell under the *socio-economic* grouping. Almost all *security* measures fell under the *economic* cluster or *socio-economic* cluster.

The string of *economic* support was long, came early, and hit the spot when needed the most. These were packaged in some of the largest public bailouts or welfare provisions ever made. For cottage and small-and-medium enterprises

(SMEs) 2,353m USD were allocated for short-term working capital needs, while interest rates on SME loans were reduced from 9% to 4%, with the government picking up the remaining 5% (Arif et al., 2021). A similar short-term credit fund was opened for the industry and service sectors, with 3,529m USD made available. The country's central bank, Bangladesh Bank, launched a Pre-Shipment Credit Facility with 589m USD bearing only 7% interest and opened 2 Export Development Funds to (a) expand benefits to 5 billion USD from 3.5b for raw material imports; and (b) reduce interest-rates to 1.5-2.0% of LIBOR (London Interbank Offered Rate).

On the *social/socio-economic* front, the government again extended its hand far and wide. An honorarium fund of 12m USD was opened for physicians, nurses, and health workers given how large a proportion of them were contracting covid-19 in the line of duty of protecting others (note how women slide in but are not specified as direct recipients of the bailout), while an 85.2m USD fund opened for health and life insurance has given the new urgencies. These were augmented by one fund of 236m USD to create jobs for non-residents as a stimulus, and others of 148m and 250.6m USD targeted vulnerable populations and housed the homeless.

As one can see, the government dug deep into its potential coffers to not just bail out those under duress or headed that way, but to also stimulate others to return as much to normal business, albeit under more supportive circumstances. Net relief packages added up to a huge amount by Bangladeshi standards: 25 stimulus packages in 2020 and 2021 doled out a total of 1,250 thousand million *Takas* (Bhattcharya et al., 2021), or 16.6 billion USD, using 80 *Taka* as the dollar value. They also conformed with the volume of largesse being doled out in many other countries, especially in the west, to combat the covid-19 outbreak.

Though many of the *economic* and *sociological* targets had huge *socio-economic* consequences or connectors, the pandemic made it far harder to disentangle the one from the other: combating the pandemic necessitated the nature

of the health crisis, and conditions carried such an *economic* price it was hard to speak of one alone without extending the conversation to the other if only to complete the picture.

Such a spate of governmental *initiatives* has not evidently sunk in smoothly, exposing both *administrative* (*political*) and *sociological* bottlenecks. These have surfaced in at least four areas, two belonging to the former cluster, one to the latter, and one combining both.

Administrative mishaps have become legendary across Bangladesh. One of the arenas where this blatantly shows is in the insulated tradition of the country's ministries, the tendency to look only within the ministry to solve or execute ministry-specific problems affecting broader society. In the past, this did not generate any major problems. Yet tackling the covid-19 invasion and pushing it out of reach goes beyond a single ministry. Teamwork not only shows no footprints, nor can it spring up in a climate of social distancing, lockdowns, and online communications (for the first time).

Such a handicap extends to managing rules in a patriarchal society: deference allows incompatible practices to flourish to the point of making them 'normal'. Regulating travelers in the ports and airports, for example, exposes a double constraint. When a virus carries the potential of navigating and invading an insulated population, should a high-level visiting official (or any visiting traveler) get airport clearance when other civilians cannot? This differential treatment is widespread, and complicated by another common airport practice: resorting to grafts. Indeed, graft has become 'business-as-usual' in many regulatory offices. Not only do they help rake in badly-needed money, but they also set up the platform to extort, for example, anyone bringing in a respirator to save human lives (a case often cited in the media as being rampant), had to pay bribes.

One *sociological* problem is a combination of both of the above *administrative* problems. Regulating flights is just as important as regulating passengers. Tackling airport congestion exposes the problems of ignoring rules, be it either

with low-wage migrants released from their jobs abroad, or the many wealthy individuals wanting to travel abroad to either escape the pandemic here or be with family abroad. Since congestion breeds covid-19, how much safer we could have been remains an open-ended question deserving an answer if correction is the future goal.

Sociologically, the covid-19 onset and atmosphere could not deter many citizens from properly curbing *Eid-ul-Fitr* rituals, an occasion when many urbanites return to their village homes to be with friends and relatives. Hugging is part of those rituals. Yet, an implicit understanding that belief in God (*Allah*) was powerful enough against any virus, and thus the citizen would overcome the virus because of such a belief. This did not pan out as expected, and plenty of cases might not have erupted had caution been given more respect.

Gender: Socioeconomic Concerns

With women producing the future generations, grinding the stone that brings in the cash, and supplying the cement to keep families hinged to their communities, clearly the safeguarding of the fairer gender becomes pivotal to escaping the pandemic quickly and with the least casualties. Yet, we find them stumped at every step, thus complicating the covid-19 combat, and reducing the key flaw in government policy-making.

Once low-wage production represents the mainstream and is left in the hands of structurally back-seated passengers, as women have been in patriarchal societies, the gap between *economic* growth and *sociological* symmetries widens. Today's standards of *economic* liberalism, *political* equality, and the *sociological* flattening-out associated with these other dynamics push these gaps embarrassingly beyond acceptable levels. In essence, women become the carriers of every human expectation: supplying the future generation, serving as the country's breadwinner, and lubricating the social hinge.

The reasons are many. They begin with the birth of every child, run through the bottling phase of the child, nourish the adolescent into adulthood, then bequeath that new grown-up individual into secure hands to begin the ball game all over again with another new child. To walk this rope with the barest of income has been the traditional fate of women in many transitional countries that never seems to be genuinely or fully broken.

Caroline Moser dubbed this the "triple burden" women have to carry (Moser, 1993), to which there is no corresponding male counterpart: reproduction, production, and communitarian obligations. Women have no choice but to inherit, cultivate, and eventually bequeath these tasks. They mandate each woman's future from birth. Using the same Moser model, Anika Intesar argues covid-19 also complicated each Bangladeshi woman's "triple-burden", with the net effect of making all women "one of the worst victims both physically and mentally"(Intesar, 2021). They have experienced, she continues, an "increase in education, employment, empowerment, healthcare, nutrition, social and political rights, economic freedom, and many other opportunities," yet retain only a "secondary status." All of this when "Bangladesh has got [a] female Prime Minister, female Speaker of the Parliament and female Leader of the Opposition at the same time." "Women's burden," she deduces against such a background of "motherhood penalty," "time poverty," and just being "close to nature" (Intesar, 2021), becomes "a pandemic itself" (Ortner, 1972).

Yet, the 'buck' behind the "women's burden" simply keeps rolling. If she has not had enough of a subjugated emergence and suppressed growth, the net effect has made mental stress another permanent feature. Based on their comparative studies of pre-pandemic and pandemic-influenced study of mental health from callers to a suicide prevention helpline, Yeshim Iqbal, Rubina Jahan, Md. Ashiqur Rahman, and Md. Omar Faruk reported how the pandemic intensified such "already-existing risk factors" as "chronic environmental strain

and pre-existing anxiety/depressive disorder," while adding pandemic-driven new bugs: "increased levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and loneliness" (Iqbal et al., 2021). Mental problems emerged as a growing problem. Gautam and others found suicide rates spiraling 70% faster than covid-19 death rates, with family problems accounting for 35% of those suicides, relationship stress for 24%, financial pressures to 4%, and educational challenges for 1% (Gautam et al., 2022).

Even after the pandemic "post-traumatic stress symptoms" climaxed, as did "domestic violence ... online violence such as stalking, sexual harassment, and verbal attacks," not to mention "burdens inside the home." In short, being a woman in an upwardly moving country/society itself emerges almost like a crime, which the pandemic only worsened.

Of course, such conclusions need further case-specific testing in other countries. At least the Bangladesh case tightens the "triple burden" theoretical argument by interlacing it with another theoretical argument: the "place-oriented" thesis popularized by Jane Booth in her thought-provoking 2021 article, "Becoming a global citizen: Developing community-facing learning in the social sciences" (Booth, 2021). Although applied to describe the formation of 'global'-mindedness among students, the "place-related" notion is interpreted by David Murphy and Stephen Joseph as nicely fitting a "social pedagogue" (Murphy & Joseph, 2019), thus of a compass broader enough to include the pandemic and refugees.

Their observation of creating "a relationship with a learner that is as free as possible from the role of being further a 'transmitter of power over'," particularly institutions, aligns many features of 'modernization' outside Europe or the Atlantic. One force in such a "place-related" footing is the recognition of "culture-based learning," since the fitting can produce (and has already so produced) alienation. S.C. Baldwin and others advocate that, since "the relationship between cultural diversity and social inclusion" is imperative to advance, "culture-based learning" fits the bill better than others (Baldwin et al., 2007). Understanding 'the other' is eased by a

reflecting self-learning approach, which is why this "place-related" approach may go further to explain the pandemic's impact on women in Bangladesh than "triple-burden."

We notice the overemphasis on protecting, then resuscitating the *economy*, and the elevation of farmers, by making food-supply an initial priority. Almost all the policies and initiatives target them. Yet not a specific word was said or proposal/initiative made with women as direct subjects. The 148 million USD allocated for 'handicapped' groups or 250.6m USD allocated for 'homeless' people did not have a counterpart just for women. True many farmers involve women in the countryside and RMG protection cannot but trickle down to women given their numerical superiority. Yet the subjects were *food* (thus *security*) and *income* (an *economic* cash returns), not women at all. Converting a 'trickle-down' flow into a direct subject is the difference between imposing and alleviating the typical woman's "triple burden."

Already discussed at length, the "triple burden" seems to have been checkmated at each step: as a mother, she finds herself heeding a lifelong alarm clock in raising her children so they return the favor when she ages; as a worker, she earns, at best, a low pay to lift spirits in the household; and as part of the community, she bonds with too many unpredictable results to not buckle when raising her children, supervising the house, or completing her work. Now if we add coronavirus-19 to this inherited interplay of forces: a) social distancing gets aborted somewhere along the line constantly and without warning; b) lockdowns, as we learned from the literature, bring further and harsher imprisonment for women, though those in education find a momentary breather since house-based work through online education eliminates the struggle to go to classes through traffic-jams on a daily basis; and c) as a covid-19 victim case, elevate ire in the family, society, or workplace from absences or inabilities. Clearly, what star one is born under will rule on Planet Earth regardless of humans having collectively evolved into a 'civil soci-

ety': laws of the jungle remain, albeit in such softened terms for the very gender "closer to nature."

Covid-19 casualty figures will never capture the costs of the "triple burden", only the fallen and the hurt. This is not at all commensurate to the silent forbearance, subservience, perseverance, and severance entailed by women.

Treating First Uninvited Guest Second: Rohingya Influxes and Kutupalong Controls

In its *Monthly Situation Report*, #4, covering April 2022, the World Health Organization reported 42 Rohingya refugees had died from covid-19 overall, out of 925,330 Kutupalong residents, and that there were 5,992 lab-confirmed covid-19 cases in the camps against a total of 99,607 tests conducted (World Health Organization, 2022). It noted how the government had planned to vaccinate another 115,000 refugees over 18 years of age, and that 120,000 pieces of cotton masks had been distributed in the latest campaign. Also of note, particularly for the gendered subject of this study, of the 5,922 refugee cases in April 2022, 55% were women, reversing the general trend in Bangladesh and elsewhere across the world. Indeed, in Cox's Bazaar, where the Kutupalong refugee camp is located, of the 23,447 covid-19 cases reported in April 2022, 65% were males, leaving only 35% as women.

How do we explain such an astounding outcome reversal? Microscopic examination of the camps before the pandemic began led Shaun Truelove and others from Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Infectious Disease Dynamics Group, Center for Humanitarian Health, and International Vaccine Access Center, all in Baltimore, Maryland, in the United States, to a wild outcome (Truelove et al., 2020). They predicted not only "a large-scale outbreak" but also how "after a single introduction of the virus into the camp ..." within a year there would be 421,500 in the *low* transmission group, 546,800 in the *medium*, and 589,800 in the *high*, with 2,040 deaths in the *low* group, 2,650 in the

medium, and 2,880 in the *high*. Evidently even the most trenchant research sailed wildly off.

Other researchers supplied more sanguine findings from studies based upon more protracted on-the-spot analyses. Already vulnerable to "their precarious living atmosphere, stateless identification, and uncertainty of livelihoods," displaced persons were too distraught to even respond to help-givers. Salma Akter and others, in fact, noted how DP lip-service to "aid agencies' advice" (of "forcing them to believe that they were vulnerable to covid-19"), only aggravated their pathetic plight. Although "the number of affected cases along with casualties [was] not that significant and consistent," they chastised aid agencies and camp administrators for failing "to consider and prioritize Rohingyas' socio-psychological trauma from their past lives and thus failed to optimize the pandemic risks" (Akter et al., 2021).

Another study, by Kamrujjaman and others, praised "the Bangladesh government and other humanitarian organizations," for their "extensive precautions." Conducted in early 2021, they could predict more accurately there would be "only 169 confirmed covid-19 cases in the Rohingya refugee camps" by "the end of December 2020" (Kamrujjaman*, et al.*, 2021). There were actually 366 confirmed cases and 10 deaths (Akter et al., 2021). After the first case was detected in the camps on May 14, 2020, the Kamrujjaman study found "one out of every 11,029 Rohingya ha[d] already been infected," by August 12, 2020, and that the disease-free-equilibrium (DFE) was so stable "the disease [would] die out in the population as time passes." These observers were not far from the truth. Though a hardened Bangalee soul and a complex set of social factors played as important parts as proper medical care, there was not a paucity of help. For every 10,000 persons, the Ministry of Health and family Welfare posted 3.4 physicians in the camps, compared to 5 in civil society. In addition, there were 216 health stations, 36 primary health-care centers, 9 sexual and reproductive health centers, and 25 more specialized units for all the camps. These were augmented by

2 field-hospitals exclusively for covid-19 Rohingya patients, and both camp-dwelling and local women also teamed up in non-governmental collaboration to produce face-masks (Humaira, *et al.*, 2020).

Akter and her colleagues predicted "the total number of male cases would be higher than female cases [by a 54-46% margin] ... if the existing scenario regarding sensitivity and transmission rate did not change in the Rohingya camp." But the overall outlook remained gloomy. "They were more concerned," the Akter study noted of the refugees, "about monsoon flooding and seasonal calamities than Coronavirus" (Akter et al., 2021).

By August 2021, Cox's Bazaar's Civil Surgeon's office and U.N. refugee agencies, augmented by 500 Bangladesh Red Crescent staff and volunteers, had started vaccinating the refugees. All 34 camps were covered, beginning with Rohingya community leaders, healthcare officials and workers in the camps, and senior citizens (over 55 years of age) (*Al Jazeera* English, 2022). Targeting 65,000 displaced persons, the first campaign expanded, even as concerns grew.

Some of those concerns were reflected in the findings of a study examining the "cascading" risks of the pandemic, particularly as they bore upon women. In a survey, officials of several multilateral and international organizations observed how, in spite of over 150 domestic and international aid agencies helping out in congested Cox's Bazaar camps, where the population density spiraled to 60,000 persons per square kilometer, 'vulnerabilities' targeted women. Of the 5 areas of 'vulnerability', 2, they found, directly pinpointed women (UNDRR/UNU/EHS, n.d.): socio-cultural; as well as safety and security. Why this was the case should be well known by now: child-marriage, partner violence, sexual harassment, exclusion because of social preference, and exposure to trafficking. While the "restrictive" measures of the Bangladesh government aggravated "income and food insecurities, and child malnutrition," among the consequences they elaborated were an "increase [in] psycho-social stress,

violence against women, girls, and children, illegal activities, child-labor, child-marriage, and children engaged in drug-trafficking in the camps." These have, the report adds, "further cascaded across different components of the humanitarian and provision system and led to risks of deterred personal growth ..."

Coordinating all the aid agencies in Cox's Bazaar, the Inter-sector Coordination Group (ISCG), spelled out 5 sets of "gendered impact" in 2020, along with recommendations (Rapid Gender Analysis, Governments of Canada and Sweden, Australian Aid, and Islamic Relief Canada, October 2020).

The first isolated 3 problems with communications: covid-19 prevention measures being unknown; door-to-door contacts with camp women becoming difficult; and contacts between the host community and DP women were both insufficient and complex. Similarly, 2 problems were exposed with education, the second set: not just the very lack of education, but also the gender bias favoring boys. A third sector was food security: though insufficient before the pandemic, food availability compounded routine women worries (both inside and outside the camp). Whereas health problems underscored mental stress in the fourth cluster, the fifth, on protection, reiterated mental health. Perhaps most concerning were the findings of a study examining a sixth cluster related to the basics of camp life: water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH).

Among the remedies emphatically proposed for the first cluster was to open and widen communications within and between camps, but to also extend these to host communities outside the camp. Home-based education was urged in the second cluster, that too to humans already at tether's end from being displaced, worn out from migrating abroad, and now confronted by a pandemic. For the third category, in addition to supplying more food, farming within the camp was encouraged as well as intra-camp income-generating initiatives. Similarly, the fourth category underscored the need

for more medical staff and services, while the fifth advocated stiff measures be adopted against gender-based violence (GBV), particularly in conjunction with Cox's Bazaar civil society. Raising gender sensitivity was the dominant problem in the WASH category, with increased gender security underlining all recommendations.

Conclusions

What conclusions can be drawn? First, though women play a disproportionately larger role in fetching Bangladesh's export incomes and dominating refugee camps, they were short-ended by the government's covid-19 bailouts. Such largesse targeted *economic* revival over and above *social* or *socio-economic* relief, in the first place, and in the second, they were not directly *gender-driven* relief across the country. Unavoidable covid-19 driven restrictions upon DP camps also bore heavily and directly upon women, leaving them as if incidental aid recipients. Substantial money was distributed across civil society to guarantee food, security, and export income, in all of which women contributions were massive and direct, whether in farms, families, or factories, but the bailouts would largely treat them secondarily, at best, or ignored, at worst.

Second, although women served as community hinges, they faced harsher spousal neglect and violence during the pandemic, largely because of it. Each of the triple "burdens" (reproduction, production, and community obligations) worsened, whether it was in rearing children, earning income, keeping the family linked to the community, or avoiding covid-19 at work in civil society, or the more cramped camp conditions to raise children, find and supply food to the family, or ward off the pandemic from the households, women faced more physical violence and indirect mental stress constantly. If living under inherited institutionalized discrimination can be seen as surviving in the frying pan, the pandemic tossed such a predicament directly into the proverbial fire.

Third, the net effects impinged camp residents more than civil society denizens: camp women were far more pegged and increasingly onerously so than in civil society. As the 2020 gendered impact measurement calculated, women expressed more concerns than men over all sorts of accesses: to food assistance (by 20% to 11%), medical services (by 66% to 23%), essential services (44% by 9%), and income-generating activities (62% by 61). If these show blatant gender discrimination and suppression within the camp, they also supply insights to how camp women suffered more than their civil society counterparts. On accessing assistance 20% of Rohingya women expressed concern, but only 13% of civil society women. It was a similar finding with accessing social activities (36% versus 14%), medical services (66% versus 17%), essential services (44% versus 29%), and income-generating activities (62% against 34%).

Even civil society women who strode into male professions, occupations, or domains suddenly found their emancipated gains rattling, even being crumpled. Among the consequences: long-term mental stress and distilling routine output, whether in civil society or in refugee camps. In short, the pandemic was a blunt and blatant exposure of the exploitation women face in regular life, but also how without prior institutionalized social provisions treating all citizens fairly and squarely, any crisis (which includes famine or even war) constitutes a double whammy of a punch upon the fairer gender.

Not only does the upward march of a country (seductively dubbed 'economic development') depend upon exploiting women, but without a commensurate 'social development', gender discrimination slides unavoidably into a higher form of discrimination nebulously, intangibly, and dangerously. Interpreting covid-19 impacts on women as well as displaced persons in Bangladesh exposed how the "triple burden" women routinely carry needs a drastic "place-related" platform reform to fully capture and convey the pandemic's impact on that burden. Even worse, it not already under-

way, it may be too late in a global society becoming more competitive each day.

Implications

Two implications can be projected. Empirically, gender-based reforms need to be strictly regulated if they are to work, in itself questioning the democratic expectations of 'development'. Yet, since anything less than democracy may not further the emancipation cause, finding a Shangri Las may have become too steep a climb for women in the more civilized 21st Century.

All of these empirical observations suggest, since the "triple women burden" theoretical argument worsens with the developing process, a "place-related" theoretical platform may better help explain the pandemic-related gender predicament.

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