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Gender based perception and differentials of COVID-19: Findings from Rapid Surveys

Background

The current COVID-19 pandemic has caused huge impacts on public health, societies and economies. Certain groups such as women, adolescent girls and children are widely considered to be more affected groups.¹ In many developing countries including Bangladesh, preexisting societal norms and gender expectations pose women and adolescent girls in greater risk of experiencing adverse impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic. A recent report by UN Women on COVID-19 and gender issues in Bangladesh states that, the COVID-19 pandemic is disproportionately affecting women as gender-based disparities still exist in terms of access to information, resources to cope with the pandemic, and its socio-economic impact.² The report further pointed out that COVID-19 related policy responses are not incorporating gender-responsive plans. In this backdrop, a group of researchers at BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University have utilized the rapid survey data of COVID-19 currently conducted by the School to understand the gender-based perceptions among different population groups and differentials between their perspectives on the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods

The rapid survey on COVID-19 was conducted among 2,776 respondents. The number of male and female respondents interviewed was 1,982 and 794 respectively. Respondents were randomly selected from three different studies conducted by the school in the recent past: Ready-Made Garments (RMG) study, Vashantek study, and National Nutrition Surveillance (NNS) study. The respondents were asked a number of questions to assess their knowledge about COVID-19 (how COVID-19 spreads, what

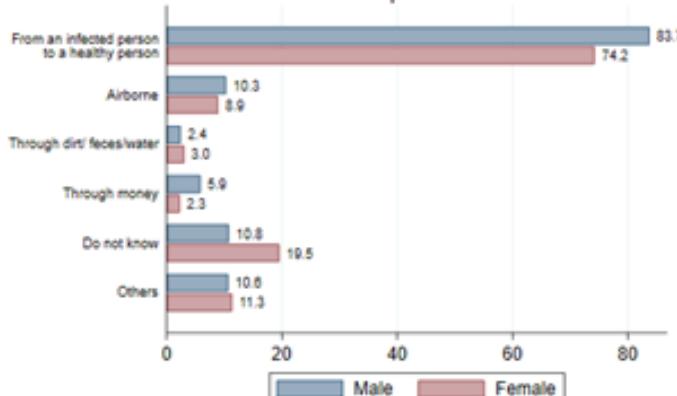
to do to avoid getting infected with the virus etc.) and perceptions on whether COVID-19 affects men and women differently. They were also asked which gender group has a greater chance of being infected by COVID-19, and whether men and women have differential access to information on different aspects of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Findings

All of the respondents (n=2,776) were asked questions to assess their knowledge on COVID-19, for example they were asked if they heard about COVID-19 or not, how the virus spreads, the symptoms of the disease and prevention of the disease etc. There was not much difference noticed between the answers about symptoms and prevention of the disease by gender. However, difference was noticed while the respondents answered the question about the spreading of the virus. Among the male respondents, 84 percent said that the most common way to spread the virus is from an infected person to a healthy person and only 11 percent of them said that they don't know how exactly the virus spreads. When the same question was asked to the female respondents, 74 percent of them marked infected people as the most common way of spreading the virus to healthy people. However, 20 percent of the female respondents said that they don't know how this virus spreads (Figure 1).

In order to understand the reasons of the difference in knowledge among different gender, all of the respondents (n=2,776) were also asked whether they think that someone will have limited access to accurate, official information and public service announcements related to the COVID-19 outbreak because of their gender. Only 10 percent of the respondents (n=275) said

Figure 1: Respondents' knowledge on how COVID-19 spreads

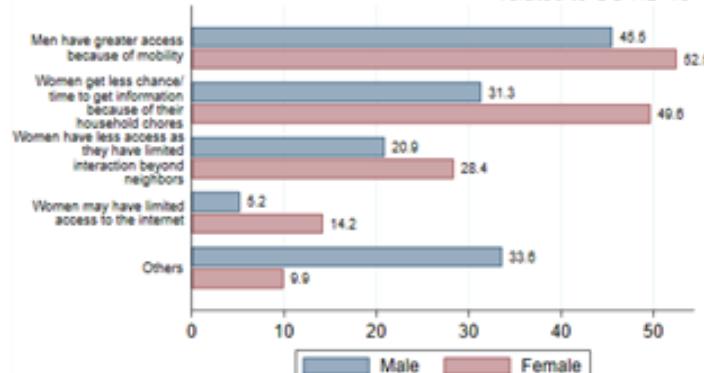


Source: JPSGPH COVID-19 Rapid Survey

Note: Respondents provided multiple answers on how the virus spreads, so the sum of the percentages exceeds 100.

that the access to information might vary based on gender. Among the 275 respondents, 134 were men and 141 were women. Almost half (46 percent) of the male respondents opined that men have greater access to information because of mobility and almost one third of them (31 percent) opined that women get less opportunity or time to get information because of their household chores. When women (n=141) were asked the same question, more than half of them (53 percent) opined that men have greater access to information and half of the women (50 percent) mentioned that they get less opportunity or time to get information because of their household chores (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Respondents' opinion on whether any specific gender group has limited access to accurate information related to COVID-19



Source: JPSGPH COVID-19 Rapid Survey

Note: Respondents provided multiple answers on whether any specific gender group has limited access to accurate, official information and public service announcements related to the COVID-19 outbreak, so the sum of the percentages exceeds 100. The category 'others' include: don't have access to TV, lack of education, due to workload, not serious about this issue, Women has less interest in news etc.

Respondents were also asked to share their thoughts on whether men and women are equally likely to get infected with COVID-19. Among women respondents, more than two-thirds (67 percent, see Figure 3) reported that COVID-19 virus has the equal chance of infecting both genders. However, men are less likely to report that gender effects as 43 percent of them reported that there is an equal probability of contacting the virus. Moreover,

50 percent of male respondents reported that men are more likely to get infected with COVID-19 (Figure 3).

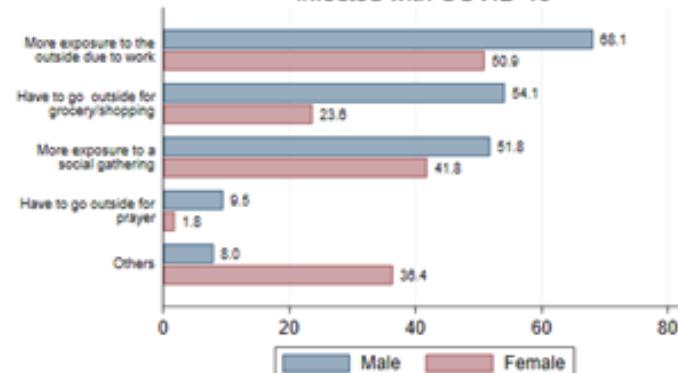
Figure 3: Respondents' opinion on whether the chance of getting infected with COVID-19 differs between males and females



Source: JPSGPH COVID-19 Rapid Survey

We also explored the reasons that led the respondents to perceive certain group being more at risk of getting infected with COVID-19. Among men who opined that males are at greater risk, 68 percent pointed out that more exposure to the outside due to work was the main reason behind their perception (Figure 4). Similarly, women who said that certain group is more at risk, 51 percent of them pinpoint that more exposure to outside because of work is one of the main reasons. Moreover, 54 percent of men and 24 percent of women pointed out that going outside for grocery or shopping increased the risk of getting infected. This finding highlights that the traditional gender role requirements of men being more mobile contributed towards the perception of men being more at risk of contracting the virus.

Figure 4: Respondents' thoughts on why specific gender group is more at risk of getting infected with COVID-19



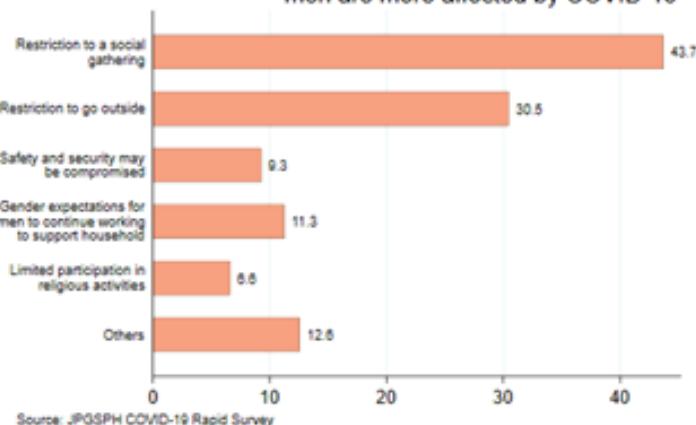
Source: JPSGPH COVID-19 Rapid Survey

Note: Respondents provided multiple answers on why specific gender group is more at risk of getting infected with COVID-19, so the sum of the percentages exceeds 100.

All of the respondents were also asked to share their thoughts on whether COVID-19 has disproportionately affected any specific group (such as girls, boys, women and men). Only 11 percent of the respondents (n=305) opined that the pandemic has disproportionately affected specific group. Among these 305 respondents, 230 were men and 75 were women. Most of the male respondents (66 percent) opined that men have been more affected whereas less than one third (29 percent) of the female respondents said that women have been more affected (data not shown).

When we asked the male respondents why they think that men have been more affected the most common answer was restriction to attend social gatherings (44 percent) followed by restriction to go outside (31 percent) (Figure 5).

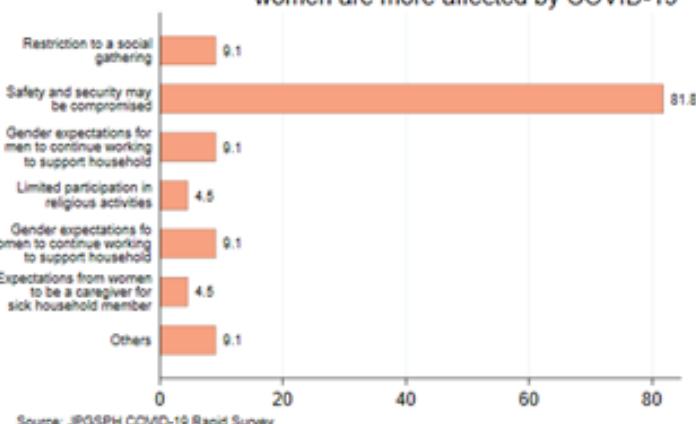
Figure 5: Male respondents' perception on why they think men are more affected by COVID-19



Note: Respondents provided multiple answers on their perceptions about how COVID-19 disproportionately affect specific group based on gender, so the sum of the percentages exceeds 100. The category 'others' includes: more mental stress, excessive household's workload, negative affect on men due to frequent smoking etc.

When the similar question was asked to the female respondents, most of them (82 percent) said that safety and security may be compromised was the main reason behind their perception (Figure 6). In a patriarchal society like Bangladesh, most men are expected to go outside because of work or other necessities. Therefore, a significant number of the respondents in this study mark that COVID-19 has affected men more than women.

Figure 6: Female respondents' perception on why they think women are more affected by COVID-19



Note: Respondents provided multiple answers on their perceptions about how COVID-19 disproportionately affect specific group based on gender, so the sum of the percentages exceeds 100. The category 'others' includes: more mental stress, excessive household's workload, negative affect on men due to frequent smoking etc.

Conclusion

There appears to be a lack of in-depth knowledge among the respondents on how COVID-19 spreads. Overall men have better knowledge on how the virus spreads than women. This difference in knowledge is perhaps linked with women's limited access to accurate, official information and public service announcements related to the COVID-19 outbreak in Bangladesh. We also observed that the study respondents irrespective of being male or female perceived that men are more likely to get infected with COVID-19 than women and the pandemic has affected men more than women. These findings are interesting and remind us the patriarchal culture of Bangladesh society where most men are expected to go outside for work or other necessities and because of being more mobile they are deemed to be more at risk of contracting any infectious disease including COVID-19. Future interventions and programmes related to COVID-19 in Bangladesh need to take into account the gender characteristics and how it interacts with other areas of social determinants.

References

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2. UN Women. (2020). COVID-19 Bangladesh Rapid Gender Analysis. Retrieved from <https://tinyurl.com/y7m3e7te>

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