



Impact of COVID-19 on the Rights of Informal Workers in Bangladesh

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Research Article

Abstract

COVID-19 is a devastating global crisis leading to unprecedented challenges in public health, food systems, the workforce, etc. The calamity has aggravated the situation for informal workers by putting them at risk of economic fallout. The informal workers remain exceptionally vulnerable as their livelihood depends on in-person daily labor. As the pandemic unfolds worldwide, informal workers face tremendous socio-economic challenges and health-related vulnerabilities. This research sheds light on this terrain to explore the impact of COVID-19 on informal workers in Bangladesh from a socio-economic perspective. At the same time, it also analyzes the legal aspects from a critical point of view. It employs a qualitative research methodology. Primary data were collected through 30 in-depth interviews with informal laborers such as taxi-driver, street vendors, domestic workers, hotel and restaurant stewards, and private tuition providers. Ten key informant interviews were conducted with trade union leaders, relevant practitioners, and researchers. It finds that informal workers face diverse challenges, such as the inability to manage family expenditure, drop-out of their children from education, lack of information on health protection, internal migration, etc. It also reveals a significant policy implementation gap in crisis management by analyzing fiscal and monetary policy, non-therapeutic measures, and social safety programs.

Keywords: COVID-19, Informal workers, Food safety, Bangladesh

1. Introduction

COVID-19 is an unprecedented crisis that is far more than a health emergency. As the transmission of the virus extended beyond control, it implicated a broader socio-economic aspect. The UN response team warned that the crisis would amplify poverty and disparities on a global scale. Hence, the informal workers comprising 90 % of the employment in low-income countries, 67 % in middle-income countries, and 18 % in high-income countries became highly vulnerable during this time (ILO, 2020). Their sufferings are asserted as the "paradox between life and livelihood. "They can avail of limited health facilities and live in congested areas without adequate access to water and sanitation. Hence, maintaining social distancing and hygiene is nearly impossible. On the other hand, the lockdown measures taken by the government to contain the transmission became an instant bug to their wage-earning.

In Bangladesh, 85% to 90% of the employment is informal. ILO reports that around 57% of employment in the country is brittle without a formal contract. The informal sector's contribution to Bangladesh's GDP is 43%. Though the sector attains the lion's share of the economy and employment, it enjoys no facilities such as occupational health and safety measures, pension and gratuity, insurance, sought leave, paid

vacation leave, and so on (S, Cuevas, & Rosario, 2009). It is characterized by casualness, uncertainty, challenging working conditions/environment, destitute productivity and efficiency, and low access to credit. Informal businesses are supported by social capital; laborers get credit through families, companions, and cooperatives and are regularly subjected to overpowering intrigue rates by casual usuries (Omobowale et al., 2020). This underprivileged condition led them to untold sufferings during the COVID-19 crisis, including employment losses, food scarcity, shelter insecurity, education, and social, physical, and psychological soundness (Alam et al., 2021). The study by Hossian (2021) reveals the sudden unemployment of informal workers in urban and rural areas during COVID-19. It also argues that the growth-oriented development strategy does not possess an inclusive improvement of the working environment. Bodrud-Doza et al. (2020) demonstrate several implications of lockdown measures, including psychosocial and economic stress. The study also identifies the link-up of the gendered impact of the pandemic. Josephson, Kilic, & Michler (2021) explore food security perspectives of the pandemic in lower-income countries in Africa. It addresses educational drop-out during the pandemic. Yadav & Iqbal (2021) narrate a comparative scenario of South Asia, analyzing unemployment, economic growth, and human development perspectives. Though these studies significantly contribute to illustrating the socio-economic impact of COVID-19, there is still a lack of sector-specific qualitative research focusing on informal workers. In addition, Bangladesh is an important case to study because it is a labor-intensive economy where informal workers are the prime contributor. This study aims to fulfill three objectives- (1) reviewing the overall scenario of the informal sector in Bangladesh, (2) exploring the socio-economic implications of COVID-19 faced by informal workers, and (3) analyzing the policy intervention from a critical point of view to find substantial solutions.

2. An overview of the informal sector in Bangladesh

The area of the informal economy is broad. The informal sector implies the economy comprising action taking place outside of the formally directed structures (Mujeri, 2020). Participants of the sector can be divided into two sections- informal enterprisers and informal workers. The 17th International Conference of Labor Statisticians (ICLS) attempted to accommodate both categories. Informal enterprises are those small and unregistered enterprises that ascribe less than five workers. Informal wage workers incorporate employees without formal contracts, laborer benefits, or social security and are employed either in formal or casual ventures (Hussmanns, 2004).

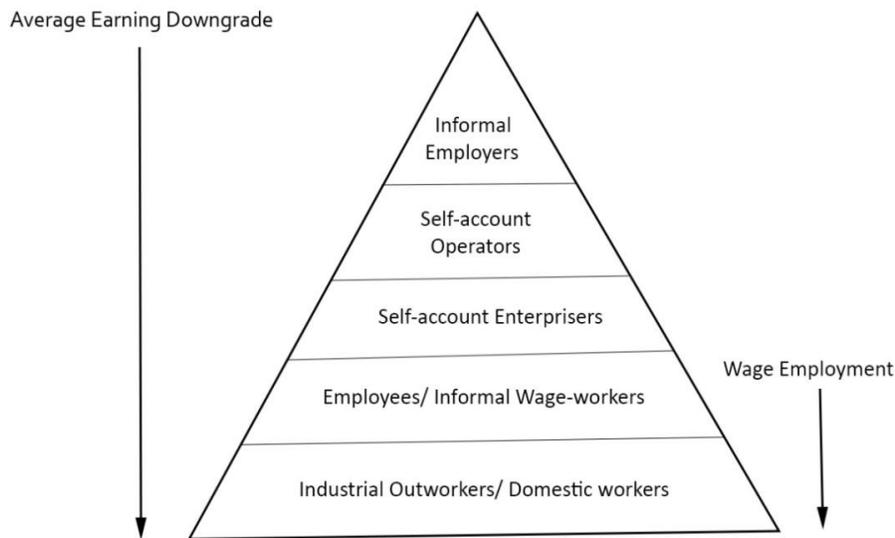


Fig. 1: Sections of the informal sector

Source: Adapted from Chen 2004

Figure 1 demonstrates the layers of participants in the informal sector. Informal employers remain at the top of the structure employing others without any formal contract. Their ventures are small; they do not have to pay business duties as formal enterprises follow. The self-account operators are generally semi-skilled or skilled workers who contractually serve, such as vehicle drivers and mechanics. Self-account enterprisers own the venture; at the same time, he/she is the only workers over there, such as fruit sellers, cobblers, etc. Moreover, the last two layers include daily laborers, waste collectors, domestic workers, etc. They are not skilled in general.

In Bangladesh, the informal economy is imperative in leveraging economic development (ILO, 2021). Measuring the sector is challenging because it covers various activities, including agriculture, manufacturing, transport, service, enterprise, etc. However, it is estimated that most employment in the country is provided by the informal sector (ADB, 2009). It encompasses 95% employment in agriculture, 72% in service, and 90% in industry (Danish Trade Union Development Agency, 2020). It accommodates 85% - 90% of the entire employment, entailing 13.1 million employment in urban areas and 38.6 million in rural areas (Islam, 2020; Hossain, 2021).

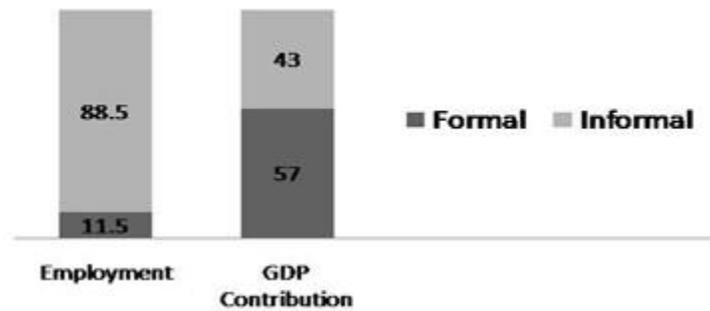


Fig. 2: A comparative table of the formal and informal sectors in Bangladesh

Source: Khondker 2019

The formal and informal sectors are differentiated against their GDP values and employment in Figure 2. The critical highlights are uncovered from the comparison. The informal segment, which accounts for 43% of GDP, retains nearly 88% of the total employment. On the other hand, the formal division only serves around 12% of full employment, even though it accounts for 57% of the entire GDP. This expansive awkwardness is hostile to efficiency, decent work generation, and financial development (Khondker, 2019). In addition, most informal workers depend on daily wage earnings and are uneducated or less educated. For example, the respondents of this study are taxi drivers, hotel and restaurant stewards, domestic workers, street vendors, and private tuition providers, where only the private tuition providers are educated or university/college students, and others did not pass the primary or secondary level. They work in indecent conditions, do not attain labor rights, and live below or near the poverty line. They have fewer facilities than formal employment, except for free meals and lodging (S, Cuevas, & Rosario, 2009). The critical aspect of this political economy is that the informal economy becomes vulnerable while the country "modernizes," neglecting the informal sector as underdeveloped, backward, and pre-modernity (WILLIAMS & ROUND, 2007). Moreover, social stratification weakened their situation, and they could not work remotely (Raghunath, & Tan, 2020).

3. The legal framework of the rights of informal workers in Bangladesh

The primary responsibility to strive for the guarantees and commitments made in the constitution for the informal workers essentially rests with the government (Nanavaty, 2020). Social exploitation is forbidden by Article 10 of the Constitution, which also aspires to create a social welfare economy. This clause expressly calls for an economic role that engages all citizens, regardless of class, in the creation and sharing of wealth. The government is required under Article 14 to put policies in place that help employees and socially disadvantaged groups improve their living conditions. Additionally, Article 15 guarantees workers' rights to employment, a decent working environment with breaks, and the fundamental obligation to pay workers a living wage regardless of the industry. Moreover, Article 20 commands the state to abide by the demands of equitable compensation in accordance with employees' skills as well as capacities. Forced labor, whether it be in a formal or informal setting, is prohibited by Article 34 of the Constitution. The freedom to organize and the freedom to select a profession, subject to some limitations, are listed in articles 38 and 40, respectively. The irony of fate is that despite the Constitutional provisions, many of these principles incorporated in Part II are not legally enforceable in court (Constitution of Bangladesh, 1972). But, the aggrieved party may submit a writ petition before the High Court Division in the event that any of the aforementioned fundamental rights incorporated in part III, which are to be interpreted in light of the preamble and the fundamental principles, have been violated (Constitution of Bangladesh, 1972).

Again, every informal worker has some legal rights recognized by existing statutes as a citizen of the country in addition to the fundamental rights guaranteed by the Constitution. But, there isn't any special law in Bangladesh that can defend informal workers' rights except for the Domestic Servants' Registration Ordinance of 1961, which is, however, detrimental to the protection of labor rights (Ahmed, 2012) and the Domestic Workers' Protection and Welfare Policy 2015. The Prevention of Suppression Against Women and Children Act 2000 was passed to enforce strict penalties for actions that oppress women and children. The provisions of this statute attempt to address a number of issues that informal workers should consider. Moreover, informal workers like any other citizen, fall under the authority of criminal courts, which decide on all criminal offenses in accordance with the Penal Code 1860 and the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1898. Furthermore, there is a contract between the employer and the employee whenever an informal worker begins to work. Though this agreement is essentially oral, the informal worker and his or her employer has a fiduciary relationship in accordance with the Contract Act of 1872 and this agreement is binding on both.

According to ILO Convention No. 122's Article 1(2), each member is responsible for making sure that there is employment for everyone who is looking for it (including both formal and informal employees). According to Article 1 of the European Social Charter, the contracting parties agree to adequately defend employees' rights to make a living through unpaid employment and to enable the effective exercise of labor rights. The ILO Homework Convention 177 (C177) was adopted by the International Labor Organization in 1996. Following that, it establishes minimum wage requirements and regulations for working environments, including 'occupational health and safety'. Convention no. 189 of ILO, a global agreement on domestic work, was adopted by the International Labor Council in 2011. Domestic workers have a right to reasonable working conditions, including minimum pay and an age requirement that is commensurate with other industries, according to Convention no. 189. The 2013 ILO Convention on Decent Work for Domestic Employees affirms the right to decent working conditions for domestic workers. But, the ILO Convention no. 189 on Domestic Workers has not yet been ratified by the government of Bangladesh, however, it has ratified a number of other conventions, including Convention no. 29 on Forced Labor, 59 on Minimum Age (Industry), 105 on the Abolition of Forced Labor and 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labor.

Though Bangladesh has overlooked the urgency and necessity of informal workers' rights, numerous countries have progressed in an inclusive way to transform their policies from a 'mercy based' to a 'right-

based' regime (Dias, 2011). The Indian Supreme Court requested their government to establish a law safeguarding street vendors in 2009 after recognizing the value of street sales to India's urban economy and the particular vulnerabilities of street vendors (Salès, 2017). Additionally, it was suggested that a city sales committee be created, with at least a third woman and street sellers making up 40% of the committee's members. Even though it isn't ideal, it is a significant step towards acknowledging a street vendor as a legitimate contributor to the urban economy and securing their participation and representation in the planning process for the city. The Mexico City Human Rights Commission (CDHDF) released Recommendation 7/2016 in July 2016, admitting that garbage collectors' rights to decent work had been violated (Sánchez, 2016). It also emphasized the shortcomings of the city's public waste management system and the drawbacks of allowing unofficial city workers to provide public services in hazardous and precarious working conditions.

In Bangladesh, the Labor Act, 2006 is a comprehensive legal document that provides detailed guidelines on labor relations and interests. The law has been amended in 2010, 2013, and 2018, but workers in the informal sector were not included as workers under the law. Generally, discussions about informal workers and law have focused on the vanity of protections that labor law gives to workers in the informal economy. The struggle of workers in the informal economy has focused on gaining recognition as a worker and improving the social protection or regulation of working conditions given to other workers by labor law.

4. Research Methodology

This study tends to explore the socioeconomic impact of the COVID-19 situation on informal workers in Bangladesh. To do this, it employed a qualitative strategy, which is claimed to be the leading approach to recognizing the implicit components of any social phenomena (Babbie, 2020). The primary data were undertaken through 30 in-depth interviews and 10 key informant interviews. The vast informal sector in Bangladesh comprises various types of workers. According to the perception of the key informants, the taxi drivers, hotel and restaurant workers, street vendors, domestic workers, construction workers, health service workers, waste collectors, migrant workers, and private tuition providers were in the most vulnerable condition, hence, in the pre-study contact, they indicated to pick respondent among them.

Though all the types are relevant to the study, the researchers could interview five types of informal workers. They are taxi drivers, hotel and restaurant workers, street vendors, domestic workers, and private tuition providers. Accordingly, the research at the first stage narrowed the focus to the aforementioned informal workers. Subsequently, it conducted in-depth interviews conveniently. The study areas include different locations in Chittagong city in Bangladesh. The hotel & restaurant stewards, taxi drivers, domestic workers, and private tuition providers were found in snowballing method, and street vendors were found randomly. The data were deciphered within the nearby dialect (Bangla) and translated into English so they could be analyzed appropriately. Assembled data were synchronized in a thematic measurement. Both the thematic and content analysis strategy was followed to prepare the findings. Relevant citations from the respondents were embedded within the discussion area so that readers could comprehend the context easily. Secondary data were collected from journal articles, reports, news, books, etc. The primary and secondary data were triangulated to depict the analysis.

5. COVID-19 and its implications for the fundamental rights of informal workers

5.1. The paradox between life and livelihood

The informal workers comprise 61% of global laborers ascribing 2 billion people. The report by ILO (2020) reveals that 80% of them faced livelihood challenges during the COVID-19 situation. The

COVID-19 patient was first confirmed in Bangladesh on 08 March 2020. The government initiated several measures to contain the transmission, such as lockdown, social distancing, shutdown, etc. It implied a significant negative impact on the livelihood situation of the informal workers. As vehicle movement was restricted, drivers suddenly became unemployed. One of the taxi drivers imparted that, *"We hire the taxi from the owner for 900/day return. We have to manage it along with the fuel cost. With the call of lockdown, the movement of the vehicle was restricted, and we became jobless. Though the lockdown withdrew, our earnings remained low. Before the pandemic, we used to earn 500-700 BDT lowered to 200-300 BDT during the pandemic."* (Personal correspondence, 08 October 2020)

The pandemic guideline advised people to maintain social distancing and avoid public gatherings that significantly reduced people's movement. The Google Community Mobility report (25 July 2021) demonstrates that the mobility patterns for places such as eateries, cafés, and shopping centers decreased by 24%. As a result, hotel and restaurant stewards became unemployed immediately. They were employed based on daily labor before the pandemic. One of the respondents shared,

"The hotel and restaurant remained off during the lockdown. Earlier, the restaurant was open on the condition of taking away service. So, the owner ousted some of the workers. I lost my job. I sold out the long-cherished necklace of my daughter she dreamt, in the lockdown, finding no other way." (Personal correspondence, 07 December 2020)

Other respondents also shared similar experiences. The report by Financial Express (2020) depicts that seven million employments within the micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME) sector, five million occupations within the transport sector, three million employments within the construction division, and more than three million occupations within the manufacturing division vanished briefly. It implicated their livelihood imputes, such as the inability to manage daily expenses, foodstuffs, house rent, etc. (Sharif, 2021). According to a study by SANEM, a 25% negative stun on households' expenditure led to a rise in the poverty rate in Bangladesh from 20.5% in 2019 to around 41% in 2020 (Raihan, 2020). The key informants opined that the "hunger virus" faced by the informal laborers was not less dangerous than the Coronavirus in terms of their survival.

5.2. Change of occupation

The sudden unemployment situation pushed the informal laborers to find other means of occupation. According to the field investigation, this tendency has two folds. Some of the informal respondents previously worked formally, while others recently joined in formal employment. One of the respondents shared that she had been working for three years at a ready-made garment factory in CEPZ, but she is a domestic worker now. Her father is a rickshaw puller, and he used to earn 8,000 BDT monthly before the COVID-19 situation. However, there has been a downfall in his earnings. She used to earn 9000 BDT before she lost her job the previous month. Her employer committed retrenchment, and thus, she faced unemployment abruptly. She shared,

"My house rent was 5,000 BDT; at that time, I could not understand how to run the family with my father's single income. About 150 workers, including me, were terminated from our factory. The owner said there was no work due to the pandemic. So, I decided to start work as a domestic worker till then." (Personal correspondence, 12 July 2021)

The study by Sharif (2021) revealed the job security perspectives of Ready-made garment workers in Bangladesh. As a result of global supply chain interruption during the COVID-19 situation, the RMG sector in Bangladesh was disrupted, resulting in the termination of casual or permanent workers. According to a report by Dhaka Tribune, 20% of the workers in the RMG sector terminated during COVID-19 are still unemployed (Dhaka Tribune, 2021). However, some of the self-account enterprisers downgraded due to the pandemic fallout of the economy. One of the respondents shared that he had to sell the shop as he could not carry the expenses and bought a van to sell seasonal fruits and vegetables in March this year. He burst out, sharing, *"I had a small shop that I bought on interest. I still have not been*

able to repay the loan even after selling the shop. Nowadays, I earn 500 BDT every day by selling vegetables and fruits. With this income, it is really hard for me to maintain my family and other expenses." (Personal correspondence, 16 July 2021)

In the reverse case, a respondent shared that he had started a pharmaceutical store with his son because he could not survive as a taxi driver. The tuition providers shared that they were said not to come as the educational institutions had been off for a long. Thus, they are searching for any other opportunity for earnings.

The changing employment pattern due to the pandemic is difficult because the data is still rare. Hossain (2021) categorized this unemployment into permanent and temporary job loss. The key informant also indicated that the pandemic might lead to a new employment dimension. They emphasized that informal enterprises with digital skills may shift to online-centric deals. On the other hand, those who do not have the technical knowledge of online selling or marketing may lose their earnings and eventually give up their venture.

5.3. The drop-out of education

One of the common implications of COVID-19 is the disruption in the education system. According to the UNESCO report, 1.6 billion learners had to remain out of school in more than 190 countries during this crisis. It also added that educational institutions in 29 countries were fully closed, and Bangladesh is one of them. The government announced the schools to be closed from 17 March 2020, which continued until 2021. According to a World Bank report, it affected 38 million students. Though the Ministry of Education initiated online TV classes, many students could not afford online access to TV (World Bank, 2021). The field investigation of this research also found that the children of the informal laborers became drop out. Most of them do not have knowledge about online classes.

Moreover, some started delivering child labor to manage their family expenditure. A respondent, who is 17 years old and a student of class 10, joined a garment factory as a casual worker during COVID-19. She shared:

"My father is a driver. He became unemployed during this pandemic. At this time, I had no choice but to find a job to survive. Then I managed this job. I want to return to my classroom when the pandemic ends." (Personal correspondence, 25 July 2021)

The private tuition providers imparted that the guardians were unwilling to spend a portion of their income on private tutors because their income had already been curtailed due to the pandemic's downfall. They also added that the country's education system is exam-centric; as the exams are held, the guardian and students repelled private tutors. Not only that, the private tuition providers became vulnerable to dropping out. A private tutor, a 4th-year university student said:

"I feel a deep uncertainty during this situation. We do not know when the university will be reopened. It feels that it will be better to get into a job rather than continue the study." (Personal correspondence, 30 July 2021)

The study's findings reveal two imperatives beneath educational drop-out during the pandemic- poverty-led educational drop-out and closure of educational institution-led drop-out. Most of the informal workers live below or near the poverty line. As the pandemic brought an economic bug to their earnings, their earnings could not accommodate their children's education costs (Alam et al., 2021). The key informants imparted that, while the informal laborers cannot afford basic livelihood costs, education becomes a luxury in their view. The educational institution-led drop-out depicts a detachment from education, experiencing a long-time academic gap. This drop-out type is alarming as it can significantly decrease the school attendance rate after the pandemic. The Ebola emergency experiences demonstrate that girls were 16 percent less likely to be in school during the post-pandemic period (Daily Star, 2020).

5.4. Internal migration

Changing in population distribution is a common phenomenon during any pandemic. As COVID-19 had an economic standstill that caused massive employment, it implied a reverse pattern of internal migration. Generally, people move to urban areas to find jobs, but the reverse case happened during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bernard, 2020).

In Bangladesh, though agriculture is the major part of informal employment, rapid urbanization impressed people to migrate to the cities. Last few decades, the country liberated its economy and focused on industrialization. Thus, it employed many of the population living in urban and city areas. Many RMG workers employed are from rural areas. The pandemic-led economic downturn and unemployment pushed those unemployed people back to the village. A respondent, 40 years old, shared:

"I was a sell's person in a shoe store. The store had been shut down as it became a loss project during the pandemic. I lost my job. We are four members in our family. I had to send my family back to my village because I could not bear house rent and other expenditures." (Personal correspondence, 22 December 2020)

An evaluated 50,000 individuals within the low-income bracket left the capital for their hereditary homes as COVID-19 widespread has ransacked them of their employment (Dhaka Tribune, 2020). According to the report, most internal migrants were informal workers such as daily laborers, transport, construction, restaurant workers, etc. *"People who are losing their jobs, mainly those from the informal sector, are going back to their villages to minimize the cost of living,"*- Shariful Hasan, the head of the BRAC Migration program, asserted in a report (Dhaka Tribune, 02 July 2020). Around 37.4 individuals per 1,000 population had entered the rural areas compared to the 36.4 individuals who had left among every 1,000 population, the study by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) shows (Dhaka Tribune, 2021).

6. The policy intervention and its loopholes

The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown a challenge to policy intervention worldwide (Oldekop et al., 2020). It is bewildering for many developed and developing countries to take effective policies with the evolution of its different variants (Singh, 2021; van Oosterhout et al., 2021). The government of Bangladesh attempted to resurrect the situation by initiating various economic responses including social safety measures, public health, lockdown, and social distancing protocols (Chowdhury et al., 2020). But, the adequacy and efficiency of the policies beget so many questions as maintaining social distancing, mass gathering, and supplying necessary safety equipment to the health workers became a huge task for the government. Besides, the discriminative financial approach, lack of coordination and communication gap among different government functionaries, lack of reasonable foresight, and uncontrolled lockdown policies have created a negative impression (Shammi et al., 2020). These disparities have become more evident while we implement the COVID-19 policies on the informal workers. Though informal workers hold a gigantic figure in the tally of domestic employment and their contribution to the national economy is very significant, due to those policies they became a more vulnerable and socio-economically challenged group in this pandemic. So, the policies have been under scrutiny in the following heads- fiscal and monetary measures, non-therapeutic measures, and social safety net programs.

6.1. Fiscal and Monetary Measures

The expanding economy of Bangladesh is severely impacted by the COVID-19 outbreak. 23 stimulus packages totaling BDT 1,24,05 Billion or around 4.44% of the country's GDP growth, were announced by the government in 2020 (Report, 2021). Approximately 80% of the total stimulus packages went to export-oriented industries, large industries, organizations in the service sector, and cottage, micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (CMSMEs) as liquidity support in the form of repayable loans to be disbursed by the banks (Khatun, 2020). 20% of the total stimulus packages were announced for doctors, nurses, and other health professionals as well as the distribution of free food and cash among the most

vulnerable people as fiscal stimulus. Curiously, a closer examination of the stimulus packages reveals a number of incentives that are unrelated to COVID, such as rice procurement policy and traditional agricultural subsidies. In addition, only a few of the announced programs for the poor will be carried out in the upcoming fiscal year. The pitiful allotment of financial help for the underprivileged populations who were impacted directly by the pandemic was consequently artificially inflated by the pertinent data (Dhaka Tribune, 2021).

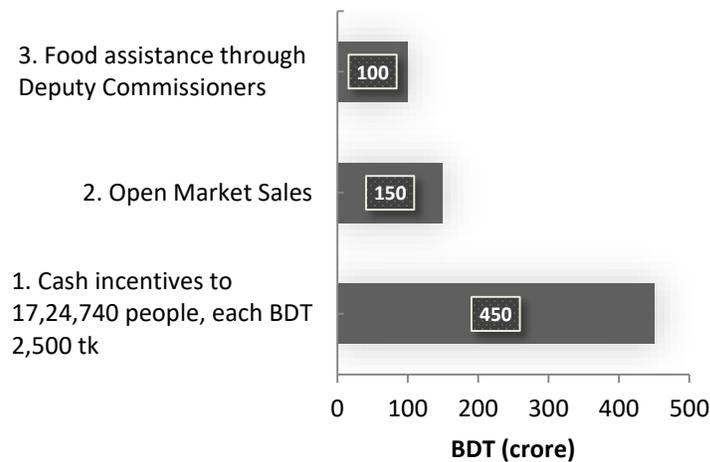


Fig. 3: Stimulus packages for low-income people

Source: The Dhaka Tribune, 2021

The government proposed a few programs worth BDT 320 billion to aid low-income groups, primarily day laborers, transport workers, small traders, and water transport employees, in reaction to the horrors of the situation. Among that only BDT 70 billion (22%) has been disbursed as direct support (Figure 3). It reveals that even specific stimulus programs for low-income, unemployed individuals are mostly (78%) funded by interest-based bank loans for working capital. But, direct cash transfer and food aid programs, on the other hand, came under fire for their insufficient funding and egregiously poor field execution (Bhattacharya & Hossain, 2021). According to a study by Sarwar (2022), approximately 75% of informal sector employees were still not included in these assistance programs, and many new poor people were also left out since updated data was not provided. Report (2021) asserts that because the policy discussions have focused only on a small number of service-oriented jobs, which make up approximately 33% of all occupations, this problem must be addressed from an "occupation-based paradigm" so that the informal workers get the best out of the govt. incentives.

6.2. Non-therapeutic Preventive Measures

Bangladesh imposed an all-out shutdown on March 25, 2020. Public transportation had been suspended and outlawed altogether. All other small, privately owned businesses were instructed to remain closed, with the exception of pharmacies, groceries, and other essential enterprises. The government also boosted public holidays and mobilized defense forces. Additionally, specific lockdowns were implemented in various regions of the nation, and lockdown durations were successively repeated.

Figure 4 indicates unequivocally how Bangladesh's lockdown strategy was uncooperative in ensuring the needs of the informal workers during the pandemic. Strict lockdowns have heavily affected the informal workers' sources of income and way of life. Lockdowns for developing nations, including Bangladesh and many sub-Saharan African nations, have drawn criticism for leaving an invisible emptiness for the demand for a variety of informal services and labor-oriented activities. This has prompted calls for a

socially just preventive model to fight hunger and promote development (Rashid et al., 2020; Haider et al., 2020). The partial lockdown has only been found effective to some extent in balancing the pandemic with the national economy (Nafees & Khan, 2020).

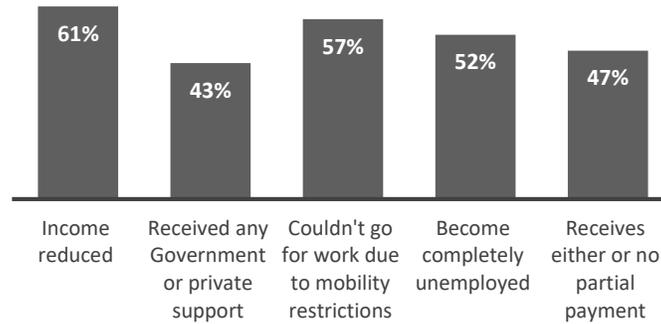


Fig. 4: COVID-19 pandemic and the situation of the informal sector workers of Bangladesh

Source: BRAC, 2020

However, nations from all over the world have tried a variety of cutting-edge and vitally required strategies to deal with the crisis. For the informal food vendors, the South African government has set specific health safety criteria and permitted them to trade properly (Skinner & Watson, 2021). India has launched an 'e-rickshaw' digital platform called 'Vegetables on Wheels' to deliver fresh produce from wholesale traders to root-level consumers (Chen, 2020). A few Brazilian waste-picker unions were successful in securing additional benefits funded by the industry sector under the government's corporate social responsibility policy, in contrast to the Argentine government who ensured representation of the informal workers in the social dialogue through the Emergency Social Committee (ESC) to identify the fundamental issues such as food, income, and job security (Alfers & Prayor 2021).

6.3. Social Safety Net Programs

Social Safety Net Programs (SSNP) provide cash assistance, food assistance, education, career opportunities, health services, and other services to reduce the vulnerabilities of marginalized groups and improve their standard of living (World Bank Group, 2019). These initiatives also advance social fairness, uphold human rights, advance the Sustainable Development Goals (Alfers & Moussié, 2019), and provide protection against risks and income loss (Ahmed & Khan, 2010).

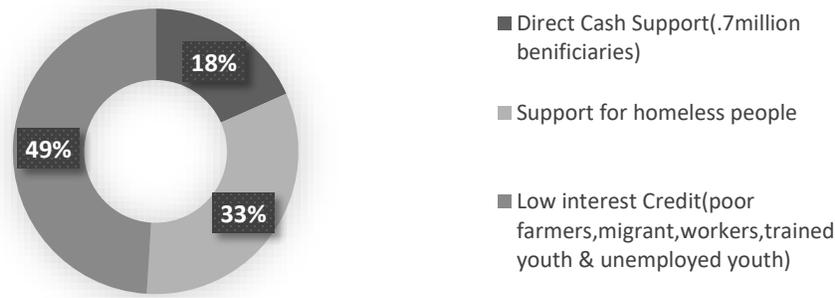


Fig. 5: Stimulus packages as SSN

Source: Bangladesh Bank, 2021b

Under the National Social Safety Strategy (NSSS), Bangladesh took a "life-cycle framework" approach in 2015–16 to address the various risks and vulnerabilities of people at various phases of life and create social protections in accordance. Because COVID-19 poses an unprecedented risk to people's lives, the government of Bangladesh and Bangladesh Bank have announced stimulus measures of BDT 653 billion

(Bangladesh Bank, 2021) and BDT 10761 billion worth of social safety net budget to accelerate the SSNPs (Budget, FY 2021-22).

A breakdown of the stimulus packages (Figure 5) shows that 49% of the incentives will be distributed as low-interest credit loans from various institutions, with the remaining funds going for direct credit and shelter support. However, due to bureaucratic corruption, the efficacy of "Ashrayan Prokolpo," a donated home for the homeless, is in doubt (The Financial Express, 2021). A flawed beneficiary list, political bias, corruption, and inadequate financial assistance undermined the effectiveness of the incentives (The Daily Star, 2020). Additionally, the Bangladeshi government has started fair-price mobile stores and open market sales to provide daily requirements. People must line up to collect those, but because there aren't enough supplies, it's impossible to maintain a proper social distance (Hossain, 2021). On the other hand, group feeding programs and food assistance through the Deputy Commissioners are very difficult to be availed the remote rural or peri-urban informal workers.

Except for stimulus programs, the annual national budget finances the necessities for the SSNPs. However, given the continuous subversive effect of COVID-19, the budgetary allocation for the SSNPs in FY-2022 is not as good as it was in the immediately preceding fiscal year (Centre for Policy Dialogue, 2021). The budget has increased the allocation for the pension scheme, a non-contributory transfer, whereas funding for many social empowerment programs, such as employment and skill development programs, which address the needs of youths and informal workers in this pandemic, has been cut. Moreover, the recipients of the "Funds to combat the outbreak of corona pandemic" and the "Funds to deal with economic and natural shocks," which together account for 11.44% of the entire SSN budget, are still unknown (Finance Division, Ministry of Finance, Bangladesh, 2020)

In Bangladesh, SSN programs are mostly village-centric (Sifat, 2020), but due to COVID-19 the number of new poor people is increasing day by day in urban areas and the majority of them are informal workers. But, due to the lack of an inclusive database, they continue to be ignored by the SSNPs, according to CPD, (2022). Because of these exclusion flaws, those receiving government help failed to portray a credible scenario. As a result, the national budget passed during this pandemic fails to recognize them and help (Hossain, 2021a). CPD proposed creating a database using the Labor Force Reports and the Household Income and Expenditure Survey to get rid of this backlog. In this regard, NGOs, public-private development partners, and local government might be useful in gathering data. Local unemployed youths can be involved in the data collection program with reasonable remuneration.

7. Conclusion

Though COVID-19 is a "tragedy of common" for all, it brings a complex socioeconomic challenge to informal workers. Some of these challenges are implicated by their already vulnerable conditions and others are the immediate bugs caused by exceptional characteristics of the crisis. As they live below or near the poverty line, live in congested areas, least access to health facilities they were most vulnerable during the COVID-19 crisis. On the other hand, the pandemic-related measures imposed extreme challenges to their livelihood, which are instant calamities. Moreover, for informal workers, there is also no socio-legal protection, no job perks, and no plan has yet been developed. This study finds a gap in pandemic policy intervention to address the condition of those informal workers in Bangladesh. To fill the gap, policymakers have to concentrate on an inclusive development policy rather than grown-oriented advancement. In this context, according to Narula (2020), there is room for the government to pursue an integrated industrial policy that would enable informal enterprises and workers to easily compete with the formal sector by creating a distinctive, digitized, and interdependent supply chain. A methodical matching process would offer benefits to counter the informal employees' high unemployment rate. The system would be less stressful if local governments were involved. Additionally, the local government might

assist informal workers in providing for their urgent requirements and governmental assistance, particularly in grass-root areas where many people were unable to access their essential needs owing to lockdown mobility constraints (Dutta & Fischer, 2021). Furthermore, the pandemic measures need innovative solutions that can contain transmission of the virus not hampering the livelihood of poor people. The inclusion of health vouchers may help them to split the cost of their medical care with the government (Ahmed & Khan, 2010b). To do that, the communication and coordination gap among departments should be minimized. The study also suggested increasing innovative social protection in skilling and re-skilling programs.

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