



Commentary

Sexual violence and rapes' increment during the COVID-19 pandemic in Bangladesh

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Sexual violence includes acts ranging from verbal sexual harassment to sexual coercion to forced penetration [1]. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), sexual violence is “any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic or otherwise directed against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work” [1]. About 35% of the women have been violated sexually and/or physically by an intimate partner or by a non-partner during their lifetime, as estimated by WHO [2]. Specific statistics related to sexual violence is limited in Bangladesh, but in this context, nearly 60% of Bangladeshi men are found performing violent behaviors towards their intimate partner [3]. Bangladesh has the second highest prevalence of sexual intimate partner violence against women in the world, after Ethiopia (58•6% vs 49•7%) [1]. Likely this prevalence has increased, as there has been a global increase in domestic and sexual violence during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic by the United Nations Population Fund [4]. Rape, a severe form of sexual violence, affects all aspects of women quality of life including– reproductive health (e.g., unsafe abortion, sexual dysfunction), mental health (e.g., depression, anxiety, suicidality), and behavioral health (e.g., unprotected sexual intercourse, multiple partners) [1].

Based on data from Odhikar, a Bangladeshi human rights organization, at least 14,718 victims (including 6900 women and 7664 children) were raped within the years of 2001 to 2019 in Bangladesh, and 2823 cases were gang-raped [5]. The highest rape incidence trend reported from 2001 to 2019 was between the year of 2002 to 2003 (with 1350 and 1336 victims reported, respectively), with a gradual decline in 2008. However, this was followed by an increase in the following years and in particular in 2019, when 1080 rape victims were reported compared to the 635 of 2018. Furthermore, daily 13-rape incidences were reported in the first four-month of the year

of 2020 [6] and later on a surge in sexual violence including rape has been observed in Bangladesh. At the end of 2020, there were at least 1627 rape victims and 317 gang rape incidences reported, which were 1080 and 294, respectively for the year of 2019 [7].

Of additional concern, there is evidence of an increase in rape in Bangladesh, under the pandemic. According to the Manusher Jonno Foundation, in a telephone survey conducted among 38,125 participants in June 2020 in 53 districts in Bangladesh, at least 4622, 1839, and 203 of the women felt mentally tortured, physically abused, and sexually abused, respectively, dramatically higher numbers than that seen in prior years [8]. Also, one of the most concerning issues is that only 3% of the victims seek violence-related justice, 2% via local leaders and only 1% seek help from the formal legal authorities [9]. These data were from prior to the pandemic, and help-seeking may have declined further more recently. This inadequate support and justice for Bangladeshi sexual violence victims has led to recent countrywide mass protests, but change in the system has not occurred.

Approximately 1093 rape cases were reported in national daily papers in Bangladesh between January and October 2020 [10]. These cases reported in the media are likely a tip of the iceberg and over-represent some of the most severe cases in the country, as 28 of these cases resulted in death. Nonetheless, they offer insight into the severity of violent rapes occurring in Bangladesh during the pandemic. In response to these cases, and resulting protests, the Bangladesh government in October 2020 approved a bill stating that anyone convicted of rape would face either lifetime imprisonment or the death penalty. Nonetheless, the incidence of rape showed continued increase in the last two months of the year 2020, with 534 cases reported [7,10]. Clearly, the increased penalty for rape is inadequate to create changes that must happen at a society level. Therefore, it has become crucial for the government to approach initiatives against sexual violence, such as developing prevention programs and programs to support the victims. In this regard, the participating role of the human rights organizations along with the government can be helpful. These programs should be focused on increase awareness on

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sexual abuse and on guidance on how to seek help and legal justice. There is a need for active help hotlines, where the victims can speak about the violence anonymously and freely. Social workers can play a role in circulating information on how and where to seek help. Besides, the law enforcement agencies should encourage the victims to file cases against the perpetrators. In relation to this, the government should reformulate the prosecution process in a fair and speedy trial to tackle sexual violence against women. Only by changing the system we will be able to effectively support women against sexual violence.

Contributors

All authors contributed equally to the realization of this work (conceptualization and writing).

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors do not have any conflict of interest.

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Supplementary materials

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