


Sexual violence against woman at quarantine center during coronavirus disease 2019 in Bangladesh: Risk factors and recommendations

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Sexual violence can be defined as a range of activities from verbal sexual harassment to sexual force for involuntary penetration. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), sexual violence is “any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, or other act directed against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting”. Rape is a severe form of sexual violence. WHO defined rape as “physical violence against the body with coerced penetration of the vulva, anus, or oral cavity”. Worldwide, one in every three women suffers from sexual violence by their close partners or non-partners.¹ However, this behavior abruptly increased by 20% during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic across the world.² A study reported interpersonal violence against women during COVID-19 quarantine.³ In Bangladesh, we also noticed a case of sexual violence against a woman at an institutional quarantine center.⁴ Therefore, we aimed to discuss the associated risk factors of such sexual behaviors and actionable items that might prevent this sort of crime in Bangladesh.

Government-imposed quarantines in Bangladesh are necessary to curb the spread of the coronavirus from the present COVID-19 hotspots, India.^{5,6} However, the people of Bangladesh detested enforced institutional quarantine from the very beginning of the pandemic due to limited facilities, poor living conditions, and security concerns.⁷ The potential reason behind this increased sexual violence is the low rate of help-seeking behavior of victimized women. In Bangladesh, about 90% of perpetrators of rape cases reported that they did not have any legal consequences for raping.⁸ Also, lockdowns and movement restrictions have created high exposure of

women to the abusive male perpetrator during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sexual violence and rapes against women have increased during the COVID-19 pandemic in Bangladesh.⁹ Based on the statistics from “Odhikar”, an organization of human rights defenders in Bangladesh, incidences of rape had increased by 42% in 2020 compared to the prior year, and a total of 317 women and children have become victims of rape in January to March of 2021 alone.^{10,11} Also, mental health disorders, domestic violence, and suicide incidences have increased during COVID-19 in Bangladesh.^{12–14} Sexual violence against women at quarantine center might exacerbate the growing concerns and fears of general people about institutional quarantines. On the contrary, sexual harassment and dowry-related violence against women have decreased in Bangladesh.⁶ Improvements of these two indicators might be due to results from different government and non-government initiatives, for example, improvement in female education rates, social awareness against dowry, and child marriage. Implementation of dowry and sexual harassment-related laws might have been helped to improve the situation. However, the increasing trend of sexual violence against women is not limited to Bangladesh. United Nations has

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warned of a “shadow pandemic” referring to the increased incidences of violence against women and children in domestic settings due to the implemented stay-at-home measures.¹⁵

The present laws for the shield of rights of women and children are adequate. Therefore, the government needs to act fast to prevent the repetition of these incidences. Bringing the perpetrator to justice swiftly and opening separate institutional quarantine centers for women in quick succession are commendable moves by the authority. The law execution authorities need to show integrity, dedication, and loyalty when dealing with sexual violence or rape cases regardless of any partiality. Also, they should be more vigilant to ensure the security of quarantined people, particularly women and children. The implementation of laws in a speedy trial might help to regain the confidence of the general people about the institutional quarantine system. Human rights organizations can play a crucial role by standing beside the victims and encouraging them to file cases and seek legal justice. The punishment of the perpetrator for raping is not enough to improve the situation at the societal level. Training programs can be organized on human rights, gender sensitivity, and violence for the people who will perform their responsibilities at the quarantine centers to prevent such incidents in the future. Therefore, the government and non-government organizations need to arrange public awareness programs to educate the general public and women about their legal and social rights. This awareness of women might help them to empower and secure themselves. The combined efforts of the law enforcement authorities and public awareness can diminish this sexual violence against women in Bangladesh.

Author contributions

F.I.R. was involved in the conceptualization, data collection, and writing the original draft of the article. M.R.I. was involved in the conceptualization, review, and editing of the article.

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