

Livelihood Transitions of Women Workers During COVID-19: The Case of Domestic Workers in Dhaka

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1. Introduction: Lives Versus Livelihoods in Times of COVID-19

One of the challenges that have been posed by COVID-19 is the trade-off between lives and livelihoods. On 20 May 2020, *The Financial Times* wrote about it as a macro-level issue in an article headed “Lives versus Livelihoods: COVID-19 conundrum,” where it spoke of the difficult choices facing policymakers about whether they should prioritize public safety or open up their economies, the health of their citizens or the health of their economies.

The relationship between lives and livelihoods is also a concern at lower levels of analysis in the daily lives of real people. At this level, it is evident that the relationship is not a uniform one. Instead, it is mediated by workers’ positions in the hierarchical structures that characterize labour markets worldwide. In the context of the COVID-19 economy, we can distinguish between different groups in the population based on how they experienced the relationship between lives and livelihoods. First, there is the small group of people who make up the richest 1% in the world and own around 50% of its wealth (Oxfam, 2015). They do not themselves engage in the labour market but rely on the labour efforts of others. The relationship between lives and livelihoods is unlikely to feature much in their concerns; on the contrary, most appear to have become wealthier over the course of the pandemic without any risk to their lives.¹

Then there are those who are fortunate enough to continue working from the safety of their homes. According to a study by Berg et al. (2020) carried out when the crisis hit, around 30% of North American and Western European workers fell into this category, but only 6% of workers in sub-Saharan African and 8% in South Asia. It was very clear both from the international distribution of this category of workers and from the study’s references to access to broadband internet and ownership of personal computers as preconditions for working from home that it was not talking about the kind of home-based piece work or industrial outwork that poorer women in the Global South are engaged in.

A third category comprises those who are classified by their governments as “essential workers” during the pandemic and who had to continue to work but faced risks to their health and lives. The trade-off between lives and livelihoods is very real for them, but they do not have the choice of opting to protect their lives.

Then there is a fourth category of workers, the inessential workers who lost their jobs because of the lockdown and other restrictive measures. How these workers’ lives were affected by the loss of their livelihoods has varied. Lives were less likely to be affected, the effects of the trade-off attenuated if they were in formal jobs with the benefits of social insurance. Among those with informal jobs, access to some form of social assistance during the pandemic provided protection from destitution, even if it did not compensate for the loss of earnings. However,

¹ In 2020 the ultra-rich got richer. Now they’re bracing for the backlash. (2021, March 25). *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-wealth-billionaires-outlook-insight-idUSKBN2BH0J7>

according to the International Labour Organization (ILO), 55% of the world's population do not benefit from any form of social protection. These workers, mainly informal workers in the Global South, have had to cope with the crisis on their own. For these workers, lives and livelihoods are almost indistinguishable. They must feed themselves and their family from what they earn—their livelihoods *are* their lives.

Domestic workers fall into this category. This paper explores their experience of COVID-19 in the context of Bangladesh. Estimates of the number of domestic workers in Bangladesh vary between two to four million, but it is generally agreed that most of them are women. They are based entirely on the informal economy and hence outside the purview of the country's labour legislation. While Bangladesh is a signatory of the ILO Convention 189 on Decent Work for Domestic Workers, it has not yet ratified it and is therefore not bound by its recommendations. Domestic work in Bangladesh, as in many other countries, thus have all the characteristics of precarious work in the informal economy. It continues nevertheless because it provides a livelihood for women and children who have few other alternatives.

The paper draws on primary research into the conditions of domestic workers in Bangladesh and how they coped with the shocks and disruptions associated with COVID-19. We can see our research as a lens to view the lives and livelihoods of workers with no legal or social protection and with the tenuous relationship they have with their employers. The country's trade unions bypassed these workers during this unprecedented crisis which they had to deal with almost entirely on their own. Based on our findings, we suggest possible policy initiatives to increase the livelihood security of such workers.

The paper is organized into five sections. Section 2 draws on the national and international literature to provide an overview of how domestic workers are positioned in the informal economy internationally, and in Bangladesh, the nature of their working conditions and the forms of protective measures in place for them. Section 3 explains our research methodology, describes the workers in our study, and sketches out a conceptual framework integrating livelihoods, capitals, and capabilities to organize our empirical analysis. Section 4 reports on our main findings, dividing them into livelihood strategies prior to the lockdown, coping strategies during the lockdown, and the uncertain recovery period after the lockdown was lifted. Finally, Section 5 discusses our findings and offers some concluding policy reflections.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Domestic Workers in the Informal Economy: “Exploited, Undervalued - and Essential?”²

According to the ILO (2018), two billion workers in the world are informally employed, making up 61% of the global workforce. The overwhelming majority (90%) are in developing countries. Indeed, as the ILO notes, there is an inverse relationship between gross domestic product (GDP) and the share of informal employment. Informal work is characterized by its exclusion from the legal, regulatory, and policy frameworks of a country. These workers are generally drawn from poorer households within a country; they have little assets, education, and skills, and hence a limited range of jobs to choose from (ILO, 2002). Their exclusion from the mainstream institutions of society, including banks, trade unions, and labour courts, exacerbates their disadvantage. These make it unlikely that they will be able to accumulate the resources or gain the support that would help them move out of informal employment into better-paid and better-protected jobs (Chen et al. 2004, 2005; De Soto, 1989, 2000; Hanagan, 2008; Samal, 2008; Von Braun & Gatzweiler, 2014).

In the Global South, a great deal of informal work is in self-employment, either own-account work or small-scale enterprise based within or outside the home. But certain forms of wage labour are also classified as informal: employment in informal enterprises; casual or day labourers; temporary or part-time workers; paid domestic workers; contract workers; unregistered or undeclared workers; and industrial outworkers, also called homeworkers. Given the higher rates of male labour force participation in much of the world, men make up a larger share of informal employment than women. Yet, relative to their share of overall employment, women tend to be over-represented in the informal economy (ILO 2018).

Similar to the formal economy, the informal economy is characterized by a hierarchy of occupations stratified along the lines of class, gender, and other forms of social identity. One attempt to capture this is found in Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO)’s stylized depiction of the informal economy as a pyramidal structure, with informal employers at the top and unpaid family workers at the bottom. As WIEGO points out, the risk of poverty rises, levels of earnings decline, and the share of women increases as one moves from the top of the pyramid to the bottom. Casual wage work is ranked above unpaid family labour and home-based piece work but below own-account work and regular wage work. Women workers are thus crowded into these activities at the bottom of the pyramid and tend to be restricted to a more limited range of poorer paid and more precarious jobs than men, most often working as street vendors; petty traders; unpaid family labour; casual wage labour in

² We borrow this heading from the title of the Social Law Project Conference 7–8 May 2010, Cape Town: “Exploited, Undervalued - and Essential: The Plight of Domestic Workers.”

fields, small-scale factories, and workshops; and, most relevant to the focus of this paper, waged domestic workers.

The ILO estimates that around 67 million people worldwide are employed as domestic workers, with numbers steadily growing. Approximately 1 in 25 working women in the world are domestic workers (ILO, 2015). And in most countries, the overwhelming majority (80%) of domestic workers are women (Kabeer et al., 2021). Domestic work occupies a particular place in the analysis of stratified labour markets because, of all forms of wage labour, it is the most systematically dominated by women from the poorest sections of society across the world. These women also tend to be drawn from the most socially marginalized groups, who are very often migrants, either moving from poorer rural to richer urban areas within a country or crossing borders from poorer to richer countries.

Domestic work embodies all the key characteristics that define precarious work. It falls outside labour regulations and social welfare schemes, so workers have no legal protection or safety nets to tide them over the crisis. Domestic work is rarely covered by minimum wage legislation, and domestic workers rarely have unions to engage in collective bargaining on their behalf. Indeed, they are frequently not permitted to unionize and hence have no political voice (Boonstra, 2012). There are variations and uncertainties about wages and working conditions. Hours of work may be part- or full-time agreed ahead of time or left to the fluctuating demand of employers. Remuneration thus tends to be not only low but also highly irregular.

Domestic work is distinguished from other forms of precarious work because it frequently entails providing personal services for families within the intimate domain of the household. This has allowed it to be governed by relations of servitude, subjection to the control of others, and, as the heading to this section suggests, deprived of recognition as an essential form of work. The consequences of servitude have been documented by the International Domestic Workers' Federation (IDWF) and relate to the multiple forms of abuse faced by domestic workers, including intimidation, physical abuse, sexual assault, and denial of privacy.

2.2. Domestic Workers in the Informal Economy of Bangladesh

As in many developing countries, the informal economy in Bangladesh is the mainstream of the economy. It employs 85% of the 61 million in its labour force and generates 43% of its GDP (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics [BBS], 2017). It also accounts for a higher proportion of working women (93%) than working men (82%). Accurate estimates of the number of domestic workers in the country are difficult to come by because of the difficulties of measuring this form of work. According to the ILO (2006), there are four million domestic workers. The BBS (2017) suggests there are 1.3 million domestic workers in the country, of whom at least 80% are female. The Domestic Workers Rights Network (DWRN) estimated that there were approximately two million domestic workers in 2011. In their various statements, the National Domestic Women Workers Union (NDWWU) estimated between 2.2 to 2.5 million domestic

workers in Bangladesh. Finally, according to the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS, 2015), there are three million domestic workers in the country, of whom around 1.7 million live in the capital.

Domestic workers in Bangladesh fall into two broad categories. One group is made up of tied “live-in” workers who reside in their employers’ house and work full-time in different tasks, ranging from cooking and cleaning to taking care of elderly family members and children (Ashraf et. al., 2019; Bhattacharya, 2014; Jensen, 2007). The other group lives in their own accommodation in low-income neighbourhoods and work for an agreed number of hours a day for more than one employer (BILS, 2015).

Around 85% of domestic workers live below the poverty line, suggesting not only that they earn less than the poverty line measure (BDT 5,000 per month) but that joint household earnings are also below the poverty line (BILS, 2015; WIEGO, 2020). Those who “live-in” have no set hours of work. They work long hours without any concept of overtime (Ashraf et al., 2019; WIEGO, 2020). Many do not receive their monthly wage on time: 50% of domestic workers. A further 29% claimed that employers made irregular combined payments rather than regular monthly payments (BILS, 2015). Wages in rural areas tend to be at the discretion of employers. In urban areas, there are generally neighbourhood rates for the different tasks done by domestics.

The findings of a joint government/ILO study (2012) showed that domestic workers experienced considerable physical and psychological harm. Verbal abuse and raised voices by employers were common, while physical abuse, such as slapping and hair-pulling, was also frequently reported. Younger workers were often subjected to sexual harassment (BILS, 2015; Ministry of Labour and Employment [MoLE] & ILO, 2012). Examining instances of domestic worker deaths and injuries due to workplace violence reported in the media, BILS (2019) found that between 2011 and 2018, 264 domestic workers died because of violence at work, and 213 were reported to be injured.

Domestic workers are not recognized by Bangladesh’s national labour legislation. While the 2006 Labour Law provides detailed guidelines for the workers-employers relations and refers to the need to develop skills in the informal economy, informal workers, including domestic workers, are explicitly excluded. Whatever the reasons for this omission, it means that domestic workers do not have access to social security, skills training, or the right to take their grievances to labour courts (Ahmed, 2012).

Excluded from social security provision, domestic workers must rely on employers’ generosity to help them in times of crisis, such as ill-health in the family. In some cases, employers advance their wages to pay for medical expenses (BILS, 2015). In other cases, workers were either sent home to their families or dismissed from work if they fell ill. Domestic workers are explicitly excluded from the provision for paid maternity leave and are likely to be sacked if they get pregnant (WIEGO, 2020). Domestic workers are, in principle, eligible for the non-contributory Old Age Allowance (OAA) after the age of 62, but most domestic workers are not able to meet

the other criteria for eligibility³ and must rely on their personal savings or other family members in their old age (Dulal, 2017).

The vast majority of domestic workers are not organized and do not have the bargaining power or collective support to negotiate improved working conditions (WIEGO, 2020). Despite international conventions and international trade unions that have emerged over the years, there has been very little evidence of any regulation or safeguarding of domestic workers' interests in Bangladesh in the past.

There has been some slow progress in recent years. One major victory at the international level, the result of the coordinated effort of domestic workers organizations in different countries, was the adoption of the Convention Concerning Decent Work for Domestic Workers (C189) at the 100th International Labor Conference (ILC) in Geneva in June 2011. The key provisions of the convention require governments to provide domestic workers with the same basic labour rights as those available to other workers, to protect them from violence and abuse, to regulate private employment agencies that recruit and employ domestic workers, and to prevent child labour in domestic work. The accompanying Domestic Workers Recommendation (No. 201) provides member states with non-binding guidance for strengthening protections for domestic workers and ensuring conditions of a decent job. However, while Bangladesh is one of the signatory states of the convention, it has not yet ratified it and is therefore yet to abide by its recommendations (ILO, 2011).

Within the country, the National Domestic Women Workers Union (NDWWU) was set up as an unregistered, member-based trade union in 2000 (Ghosh, 2021). It claims to have close to 20,000 members and is affiliated with the International Domestic Workers' Federation (IDWF), established in 2013. The NDWWU has worked hard to garner support from various trade unions and policymakers and has worked particularly closely with the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS). Together, they formed the Domestic Workers Rights Network (DWRN) in 2006, with the BILS acting as its secretariat. The DWRN consists of members of various trade unions, worker groups, civil society organizations, lawyers, and human rights activists. Its goal is to assist in the mobilization of domestic workers and ensure their inclusion in policy-level change affecting their working and living conditions (WIEGO, 2020).

The DWRN made notable progress in 2015 when the government approved the Domestic Workers' Protection and Welfare Policy (DWPWP). The policy was hailed as a milestone for extending legal recognition to those in domestic service. It has 16 provisions, with clearly specified responsibilities for the employers, the workers, and the government. However, it remains a symbolic victory as it has no legal backing and there are limited means of enforcement (MoLE, 2015). The primary outcome of the policy has been to increase awareness about conditions in domestic work and public shaming of abusive employers—although this is limited to a few cases of serious physical abuse (Ghosh, 2021).

³ It covers only 12% of the elderly population, with preference given to those physically unable to work, landless/homeless, over 62 years old, and an average annual income no greater than BDT 10,000.

One other aspect of state policy is relevant here: social protection provision for the poor. The government has expanded means-tested social protection coverage through its National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) adopted in 2015, which has several different elements, including free food distribution, open market sales (of rice at subsidized prices), cash transfers to vulnerable populations, and the Old Age Allowance scheme mentioned earlier. The strategy covers informal workers, including domestic workers, through the Labour Welfare Fund, though benefits are limited, and the application procedure is complex (Government of Bangladesh [GoB] 8th five-year plan, 2020).

With the onset of the pandemic, the government proposed a vertical extension of its current social safety net program by extending the scope, level, and quality of provisions. It also put forward a rapid one-time horizontal extension of transfers of BDT 2,500 to approximately five million informal workers, including domestic workers, using mobile financial services (Gentilini et al., 2020). However, due to the addition of the “newly poor”—those who fell below the poverty line during the pandemic—and the influx of those previously working in small scale garment factories, it has been difficult for domestic workers to access the transfer. In any case, the amount is barely adequate given the length of the lockdown and, according to NDWWU, the grant promised by July 2020 has yet to be received in September (WIEGO, 2020). However, the 2021/22 budget declared a fund of BDT 5,000 crore under natural calamities where domestic workers were referred to specifically along with day labourers, farmers, and victims of natural calamities (Islam & Rahman, 2021).

Excluding direct pensions, the inaccessibility of which has already been noted, social protection funding for the poor and vulnerable amounts to around 1.2% of GDP. This is inadequate for a country with 40 million poor and another 20 million near-poor (1.25 times the poverty line). COVID-19 has further accentuated the urgency of increasing funding and strengthening the social protection programs.

2.3. The Impact of COVID-19 on Domestic Workers: Review of Findings

Domestic work, both paid and unpaid, has been hit in particular ways. Studies show an increase in the burden of unpaid work for women in different parts of the world (Kabeer et al., 2021). This reflects a combination of factors: there are more unemployed men around the house all day; schools and care homes have been closed, so children and the elderly are also at home; family members who contract the virus need additional care; and extra effort has to be put into keeping the home sanitized. While many of these findings relate to women working within their own homes, studies by WIEGO (2021) note a similar increase in burdens for those who retained their jobs as paid domestic workers—also for the same reasons.

In Bangladesh, the first official recognition of COVID-19 was the announcement of a national lockdown (described as a “general holiday”) by the government for 10 days starting 26 March 2020. The “holiday” was subsequently extended to two months.

Rapid telephone surveys were carried out by Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC) and BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), drawing on telephone contact databases from previous surveys. For the COVID-19 study, they drew a random sample of 12,000 households evenly divided between urban and rural areas. Of this sample, 38% were classified as extremely poor, 18% moderately poor, 18% were the vulnerable non-poor, and 6% had monthly incomes above the median income (Rahman & Matin, 2020). We should note that 76% of domestic workers (an almost entirely female-intensive occupation in Bangladesh) were classified as poor and 60% extremely poor of the sample.⁴

The first survey was carried out in March 2020, which gathered information on household livelihood for February 2020 before the lockdown. The second one was carried out in June 2020 and documented how these households had fared during the lockdown. A third survey was carried out in March 2021 to capture recovery dynamics.

The livelihood impact had to be assessed by combining estimates of job loss and declining incomes. Between February and June 2020, all categories reported a rise in unemployment and declines in per capita income—76% had remained in employment, 17% had lost their jobs, and 7% had shifted into lower-paid occupations. Income, on average, declined by 44%, and 22% of households had become “newly poor.”

The most significant loss of livelihoods was reported by domestic workers, 54% of whom were unemployed in June. Formal workers (factory workers and salaried employees) were the most protected, reporting 10% and 14% unemployment rates, respectively. Rickshaw pullers and agricultural workers reported unemployment rates of 11%, which disguised the magnitude of income loss. Rickshaw pullers who remained in employment reported a 54% decline in income—the largest reported—while formal factory and salaried workers reported declines of 16–18%. Domestic workers who had gone back to work reported a 37% decline in the income—they were, of course, already among the poorest paid. Overall, the group reported a 61% decline in income (Rahman & Matin, 2021).

A year later, in March 2021, 8% of the overall sample remained unemployed, but unemployment rates by occupation varied from a high of 32% among domestic workers to a low of 4–5% among factory and transport workers and rickshaw pullers. Average household incomes were still 7% lower than pre-COVID levels and lower for all occupations except agriculture, while it was 1–5% lower among formal employees, 12% lower among employed domestics, and 19% lower among rickshaw pullers. Forty-one per cent of the overall sample reported switching occupations invariably into poorer-paid activities. There was a clear gendered impact: 31% of women who had been employed in February 2020 were still unemployed in March 2021 compared to 6% of men (Rahman et al., 2021).

Other estimates of the economic impact of COVID-19 on domestic workers come from Karim (2020), who found 57% of the domestic workers in his study had lost their jobs, and 43%

⁴ By way of comparison, rickshaw pulling is an example of extremely poorly remunerated precarious work that is entirely dominated by a poverty estimate of 61%, with 37% classified as extremely poor.

reported a drop in incomes. The NDWWU reported a job loss of 1.2 million part-time domestic workers since March 2020.

How the workers in the informal sector—who are already at the bottom of the economic rung with little savings and access to formal or informal social security—coped with the economic crisis generated by Covid is of grave concern. The trade-off between lives and livelihoods that the pandemic posed to those in precarious forms of work—between pursuing their livelihoods to meet the most basic of their needs and risking their lives because of the danger of infection—is experienced in its harshest form by the domestic workers who had to earn in order to eat.

A study of their situation, how it changed during COVID-19 and how they coped, can therefore provide important insights into what this crisis has meant for workers with limited capacity to earn and save and who are largely excluded from formal security mechanism. It can also inform a more inclusive approach to social protection in the future.

2.4. Conceptual Framework: Capital, Capabilities, and Coping With COVID-19

In order to organize our empirical material around our key objectives of understanding responses to the crisis by domestic workers and their families, we draw on the framework developed by Kabeer (2018), which combines insights from the livelihoods literature with the concepts of capitals and capabilities drawn from Bourdieu (1977) and Sen (1987). The framework conceptualizes livelihoods in terms of the strategies through which households relate their means and ends within the rules and norms that prevail in the wider society and pose cultural constraints on different groups of people about what they are and are not, what they are able to do, and their capabilities. Given our concern with women workers, patriarchal constraints will be particularly relevant to our study.

The “ends” element of livelihoods refers to household members' material concerns—their search for survival, security, and prosperity. It also refers to their more intangible goals, which reflect the human need for respect, dignity, social status, or spiritual satisfaction, and goals with intrinsic value because they give meaning to people’s lives.

The “means” element of the framework refers to the various resources that people have at their disposal, resources that become forms of capital when used to achieve their desired goals. These capitals can therefore have instrumental or intrinsic value depending on what they are used for. We draw on Bourdieu’s distinction between different forms of capital. In terms of material capital, the garment workers in our study had their wages, savings, access to credit, perhaps land in their villages. Mobile phones emerged as an unexpectedly important form of material capital for the workers in our study, connecting them to employers and potential employments and allowing mobile money transfers. As far as human capital was concerned, few had skills, education, or training. They relied on their own bodily capacity for physical

labour and the physical ability of others in the family. Social capital took the form of family or village networks, their relationship with employers, as well as any connections they could cultivate with people who were in a position to help them. What they absolutely lacked was what Bourdieu calls symbolic capital—the status, respect, and authority associated with particular positions and activities in the social order. It is worth noting that a 2008 survey of over 5,000 women in different districts of Bangladesh found that paid domestic work was regarded as the least desirable of the various jobs available to women (Kabeer et al., 2018).

The “strategy” element of the livelihoods framework refers to the various activities people engage in to mobilize the resources at their disposal to achieve their desired ends. It focuses on what people do and the relationships which govern what they do. For instance, in order to achieve the basic capability of feeding themselves, they may use their homestead plot to grow food; sell their labour to buy food; barter their possessions in exchange for food; take an advance from their landlords or a shopkeeper, obtaining food on credit; or they may steal food from someone else.

While a household’s position in the social hierarchy reflects its capital endowments, determines its opportunities, and shapes its immediate and longer-term goals, patriarchal inequalities are woven into relationships within and beyond the household. It means that men not only have greater command than women over household resources and greater access to opportunities outside, but they also exercise authority over what household priorities ought to be and the kinds of activities women from their households are permitted to pursue. Women’s capabilities are curtailed by their gender to a far greater extent than men.

The dominance of poor women in domestic work in Bangladesh reflects the intersection of poverty and patriarchy. Gender discrimination leads to lower levels of productive assets, education, training, and marketable skills among women than men—even from very poor households. Strict patriarchal constraints on female mobility in the public domain in Bangladesh lead to women crowding into forms of work that can be done in and around the house. Better-off women can work from their own homes, but poorer women must hire themselves out to work in the homes of others. Finally, women’s socially ascribed responsibility for unpaid care and housework further restricts their range of livelihood options. These factors combine to make paid domestic work one of the few options available to poor women. It is regarded as an “easy entry” job since it requires no assets or skills apart from those they learned in their own homes. At the same time, as we noted, it is also an undesirable job. Not only is it poorly paid and unprotected, but it is also characterized by servitude and stigma.

This paper is concerned with livelihood strategies in exceptional times: a global pandemic that has led to the deaths of many people and the infection of many more, disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable population groups across the world. How people have coped has depended on where they are located in the occupational hierarchy. Those in the formal economy are best positioned to maintain their living standards through their own savings, assets, state protection, and continued ability to work. We are concerned with workers at the other end of the occupational hierarchy, workers in the most informal of jobs in an economy

dominated by informal work. As our interviews show, these workers had not only precarious jobs but also precarious lives, a result of the risks and uncertainties of patriarchal constraints in the lives of poor women.

At a time when the uncertainty of their lives has escalated in an unprecedented manner, and the normal livelihood activities of these workers have suffered major disruption, their strategies are likely to be reduced to coping with the challenges of the “here and now,” the imperative of meeting the daily survival needs rather than with symbolic concerns with status and dignity or strategic concerns with securing the future. The questions we will be asking are:

- How has a group of women workers with no formal protection or organized voice and subject to harsh constraints associated with patriarchy and class strategized to cope during an unprecedented crisis? What sort of capital and capabilities do they bring to bear?
- What does this tell us about the Bangladesh state’s attitude towards its most vulnerable citizens?
- What kinds of recommendations does the study suggest if these workers are to be given a modicum of dignity and security in the future?

3. Research Methodology and Conceptual Framework

3.1. Data Collection and Sample Description

In this study, we carried out detailed qualitative interviews by telephone with 30 female domestic workers aged over 18 years. These were “untied” domestic workers who worked for more than one employer and lived in their own accommodation. Although domestic workers are to be found across the country, we restricted our research to those who lived and worked in Dhaka city, selecting them purposively to cover different age groups, current occupational statuses (domestic work, other paid work, unemployed), and locations (urban residence or return to rural area). We were not aiming at a statistical representation of the lives and livelihoods of domestic workers but at an in-depth understanding of how a particular subset of them managed during the crisis. Our insights are likely to be “analytically representative” in that they will be found among other workers as well, but particularly those in other urban areas who face similar circumstances.

The research was carried out between January and February 2021 using semi-structured interviews. We asked them to recall their lives and livelihoods before COVID-19 (Jan–Feb 2020), to discuss the period of strict lockdown (Mar–Apr 2020) and then the changes that may have occurred after April when the strict lockdown was lifted. The interview guidelines were organized to gather common background information and information on migration, work and

work-related transitions for both respondent and other household members, income, assets, social networks, and government support relating to COVID-19. We also had five key informant interviews with trade union leaders and non-governmental organization (NGO) staff working with domestic workers. The recordings were transcribed, translated, and entered into NVivo. We developed an initial codebook based on our guidelines which were further developed through reading and coding of the transcripts. We used NVivo primarily to organize the data and conduct basic analysis.

Table 1 provides a brief description of our sample of workers. The interviewees told us that they came from the poorest sections of the population. They had all migrated at some stage from the countryside into Dhaka city, on their own or with their families, because of financial hardship and the failure of family members to find work in the countryside. They arrived from different parts of Bangladesh, with the majority from the southern districts of Bangladesh prone to river erosion. Only a couple of the domestic workers had parents who were already migrants to Dhaka city.

As annex 1 shows, eight of these workers were between 25 and 28 years, nine were between the ages of 30–39, eight were between 40–49 years, and the rest were over 50 years. Very few had any education, at most 3–4 years but they were vague about it. Eleven, mainly from the younger age group, were married and lived with their husbands. The rest were separated, abandoned, divorced, or widowed—a group that is typically the very poorest in the population. Most of this group lived with their children and grandchildren but two lived alone. While many of the households included adult males, who were not always the primary earners because of the irregularity of their work patterns.

Based on our discussions, we found that these households could be broadly divided into those where the domestic worker was the **sole earner**, the poorest in our study and making up a third of the sample; another third in which they were the **main earners**, but there were other earning members, including husbands, children, siblings, and so on; and a third category in which a male member, generally her husband, was the main earner, and she had **secondary earner** status.

4. Findings From the study

4.1. Lives and Livelihoods Before COVID-19

4.1.1. Entering Domestic Work

Most of the domestic workers entered paid work when they migrated into the city. In the village, they had very few opportunities, because few had any education, and thus they could not hope to earn very much. One who had worked in her village as domestic help said that she

had barely earned enough to feed herself. Another had taken a loan to start betel leaf cultivation. The rest of the women in our study had engaged in their own household work. Male household members who worked were involved in low-paying occupations, either agricultural or non-agricultural daily wage labour, such as rickshaw pulling. Only one was in a salaried occupation.

There were several reasons for the decision to migrate to the city. There were 16 married women whose husbands had failed to find work, or adequately paid work, in their village. For instance, one had been married at the age of 12, while studying in class 4, and had migrated to the city with her husband three years ago to search for better opportunities. She herself had joined a garment factory.

A second reason was the death of the primary breadwinner of the family, most often a husband or father and sometimes a mother. Three respondents mentioned this reason, who had migrated on their own or with their small children to take on the primary breadwinning role. Indebtedness was another major reason. In some cases, a health crisis had wiped out the family's savings and plunged them into debt. Others had borrowed money to invest in a business and then found they had to find work in the city if they wanted to pay it off. The woman who had started betel cultivation had her crops destroyed by floods, leaving her with no option but to migrate in search of work to pay off her loan. In another case, the failure of their business had left family members with the choice of either selling off their land or migrating to the city.

“We kept wondering what to do. My son suggested selling our homestead land [six decimals]. But I thought to myself that all we had was this. If we sold it, we wouldn't have any place to live. My son tried to stop me from coming to the city. He said, ‘Ma, you need not go anywhere. If Allah keeps us alive, we will think about it later.’ I replied, ‘What is there to think about? Who will give us shelter? Who will give us land to live on?’ That's why I came to Dhaka without telling my son.”

—Nazma, 45, sole earner

Finally, the destruction of their homes by river erosion was a significant reason for migration among those who lived in the coastal belt. These were families who no longer had village homes to return to.

4.1.2. Living Arrangements in the City

Most domestic workers lived in Dhaka city with their families. Their household size ranged from two to six members. They were variously made up of husbands, parents, children, sons-in-law, daughters-in-law, mothers-in-law, fathers-in-law, grandchildren, siblings, and sometimes other close relatives. Therefore, multi-generation households were not uncommon. A few had left

their children with family in the village because of financial hardship, and two shared accommodations with other working women.

These women all lived in low-income neighbourhoods, often sharing just one room, sometimes two. Despite the poor quality of their housing conditions, rents were extremely high, ranging from BDT 2,500 up to BDT 6,000, accounting for an estimated 50–70% of the domestic workers' incomes. The cost of living was generally divided between income earners in the family, so one member might be responsible for rent, another for groceries and bills, and so on. Some were able to send their children to school, and one or two had children in college. A 45-year-old worker told us that her daughter had just been admitted to a college, who had bought a sewing machine to try and earn additional income so she could bear some of her own expenses.

Those who had other earning members in the family reported that male members generally worked in rickshaw pulling; a few also worked in other forms of daily labour as waiters, house painters, street vendors, masons, shopkeepers, and van pullers while one or two worked in garment factories. Female members mainly worked as domestic workers, but some worked in the garment sector. But very few of these jobs provided regular income or regular work. As one worker told us,

“My son works as a helper to masons. But if he goes to work one day, he doesn't go the next day. Whether he will get to work on a particular day depends on whether the contractor wants him at work or not.”

—Fatema, 34, main earner

However, a frequent complaint by the women in the study was that the irregularity of male earnings also reflected the failure of men to go to work regularly. While they recognized that daily male wage labour was extremely demanding physically, they also complained that some men only went to work when their earnings were spent and that their earnings were not necessarily spent on family needs but gambling, drinking, and drug abuse. It was the women in these households who went to work regularly and provided the main income for the family, even when there appeared to be a male household head.

Domestic workers who had sick, disabled, or elderly family members had to take on additional pressures. Five had children with severe disabilities, and three had elderly parents who were totally dependent on them for food, shelter, and care. Four of the women were themselves old and suffering from various ailments, particularly back and eyesight problems. Their responsibilities for other's and their own declining health meant that these women could only work for one household and earned far less than younger and more able women.

4.1.3. Finding Work in the City

While the common motivation behind the decision to migrate to the city was the perception that the city offered more work opportunities than rural areas, finding a job as a new migrant

was not easy. Few formal channels of information exist about the kinds of jobs these women would be looking for, so they had to fall back on whatever types of “social capital” they could draw on. Many drew on pre-existing social networks of family members or other migrants from their village who were already working in Dhaka. Others drew on new ties they had developed with people they had got to know during their time in the city, within their neighbourhoods, or else through “someone who knew someone” who could help.

“I asked one of my acquaintances to help me get a job. You see, she knew someone who she knew could help. That’s how I got the job. My sister-in-law lived in Dhaka for 25 years, and her sister-in-law had also been living in Dhaka. Actually, it was my sister-in-law who helped.”

—Shefali, 35, main earner

Monoara, 60, sole earner of her household told us:

“Others had been working as domestic workers. I would go to them and request them to find me a job. I would tell them that I needed to start doing some work immediately as my children and I were starving, and if I didn’t, it would be impossible for us to survive. They helped me.”

Another common way to find domestic work was to go from door to door to inquire from residents or security guards and gatemen if work was available. Through recurring interactions, these figures were incorporated into their informal networks and became part of their social capital. As Halima, 27, secondary earner, explained:

“I would ask the gatemen for jobs. That’s how I managed to get myself more jobs. You see, they had seen me coming and going. I had become familiar with them. So, whenever a job becomes available, they call me on my mobile.”

Five of the domestic workers in our study had initially found jobs in garment factories through these kinds of networks. They had left factory jobs for several reasons: pregnancy, the demands of childcare, and the intense pressure of factory work; the latter not only made childcare difficult but took a toll on their health. Two of the workers responded that they had started with manual wage work, breaking bricks, or digging the earth. They left because it was backbreaking labour; domestic work was far less physically demanding.

A 60-year-old woman said she was able to combine her domestic work with a small business which she set up with an NGO loan. She would buy sarees and other clothes from the market, stock them in her home, and then sell them in her neighbourhood in the afternoons. She had to give up the business when she had to move house as the result of one of the periodic demolitions of low-income neighbourhoods that are carried out by the Dhaka authorities.

“I don’t do the business now....The housing quarter was demolished. People moved to other places.”

—Nurun Nahar, 60, secondary earner

Another had used her savings and an NGO loan to set up a small poultry business but gave up when her poultry got stolen.

4.1.4. Conditions of Domestic Work Prior to COVID-19

Domestic workers who had to care for dependents at home or were themselves elderly generally confined themselves to working for a single household before COVID-19. The rest had worked for multiple families, and so they worked most of the day. They generally tried to work for families in the same area to minimize travel time. They had specific tasks in each home. For instance, for each of the families they worked for, they might be responsible for mopping the floor and washing clothes and dishes. Workers were generally paid monthly, but their incomes varied according to the number of houses they worked for, the range of tasks they performed in each household, and the rate paid per task. So, the monthly income of a domestic worker working in one house ranged between BDT 1,800 and 2,000, while someone who worked in three houses could earn BDT 5,400–6,000 per month. The rates paid per task also varied by the kind of area they worked in, with rates obviously higher in more affluent neighbourhoods. Some received occasional additional benefits like food, often leftover, and clothes, perhaps at Eid.

4.2. Surviving the Lockdown (26 March–30 May 2020)

4.2.1. A General Holiday

Bangladesh's first lockdown extended from March 2020 to May 2020. On 25 March, the government declared a "general holiday" to be effective for 10 days from 26 March, which gave people 24 hours to prepare. Travel on water, rail, and air routes was subsequently banned, and road transportation was suspended. All non-essential organizations, businesses, and educational institutions were closed, except for pharmacies, groceries, and other essential services. On 2 and 3 April, when the initial 10-day lockdown measure was about to be completed, thousands of service and factory workers started heading back to Dhaka, Narayanganj, Gazipur, and Chattogram, ignoring the risk of getting and spreading the infection. The government declared further two extensions to the "general holiday" till 30 May 2020.

This was the first time that people in Bangladesh had been banned from leaving their homes since the curfews that had been common during the liberation war and subsequent years of the martial law. The first few days of the lockdown were marked by the complete absence of people and vehicles on the streets of the city. Markets, shops, and businesses were closed, with only drug stores and open food markets allowed to stay open. The police had a visible presence in different areas of the city, questioning pedestrians who seemed to be outside without a proper purpose.

Restlessness amongst casual wage labourers became increasingly palpable as the first 10 days of the lockdown came to an end and then was extended. Survival was more important than the threat of infection. They started appearing on the streets in search of work. Rickshaw pullers waited in the hope of finding passengers but were beaten and chased back by the police if they were seen. Some businesses started running stealthily. But overall, the lockdown was observed.

4.2.2. The Impact on Domestic Workers: An Abrupt Loss of Jobs

The accounts provided by domestic workers of their experience of the lockdown described lives that went from routine insecurity to extreme uncertainty. They were, quite probably, the first groups of workers to lose their jobs—almost all of those in our study had lost their jobs within a day after the lockdown was announced. The nature of their work, which demanded working in close proximity to their employers’ families, handling food they consumed and objects they used, and providing care, e.g., bathing and feeding, to children and elderly, meant their responsibilities had to be reassigned to family members and their jobs terminated. The haste to dismiss them was exacerbated by the fear that as “slum dwellers,” domestic workers lived in the kind of conditions that made them especially vulnerable to the virus. To allow them to continue to work meant allowing the virus to enter their homes.

The sudden loss of jobs came as a shock to the workers since there had been no possibility of giving prior notice. When they turned up for work as usual, they were simply informed by their employers not to report for work from that day onwards. As reported,

“They told us something like, ‘You better go back to your village. We don’t want you to work for us now.’ Every family fired their domestic workers.”

—Shefali Begum, married, 35, main earner

Some of the employers assured their workers that they would be rehired within 10 days when the lockdown was ended, but, of course, it continued.

“They said, ‘Stay at your home now. We will call you if we need you again.’ But they never called me afterwards.”

—Rozina, divorced, 40, main earner

Some were fired even before the lockdown began because their employers decided to leave the city for their own safety. One worker told us,

“While dismissing me, my employers said, ‘The Corona situation is worsening. The government has announced that no two people are allowed to go somewhere together, no outsiders would be allowed to get inside someone’s house. So, you should not come to work now. If we need a domestic worker later, we’ll call you.’ Then they dismissed me.”

—Halima, married, 27, secondary earner

The majority did not hear from their employers during the lockdown at all. They did not receive any offers of assistance or indication about resuming employment. Even where employers expressed their willingness to keep their workers on, they had little choice in the matter. Their building authorities forbade the entry of domestic workers in the building fearing that this would spread the infection to building residents. Instructions went out to keep the gates of apartment buildings locked as social and physical barriers between employers and their former employees.

“All of a sudden, the madam gave me my salary and told me, ‘You need not come from tomorrow.’ I asked, ‘Why?’ She explained what was going on and that there was a Corona [outbreak] in the country, so the gates would be locked for four or five days. And no domestic workers [*bu*a] would be allowed to get inside.”

—Rubina, separated, 25, sole earner

“They didn’t even allow me to get close to their door. They didn’t help us or call us to know how we were doing or how we were getting by. They paid me what they owed me and then dismissed me.”

—Salma, widow, 38, sole earner

So, whereas security guards in residential buildings had previously acted as gatekeepers to employment possibilities within the building, they now became gatekeepers to keep the virus out. As reported,

“They said, ‘No, we will not hire anyone. We can’t open the gate because outsiders might be carrying the virus. You may carry the virus because you go to work at others’ houses.’ And I replied, ‘Everyone is saying this. But how will I survive [if nobody hires me]? How will I get by? How will I pay the house rent?’”

—Fatema, widow, 34, main earner

The effects of losing work were more devastating for older women because they were afraid that they would not be re-employed because of their age.

“You see, I am older and do not have physical strength at all nowadays. Now, who will hire me again? I can’t sleep at night with these fearful thoughts.”

—Monoara Begum, widow, 60, sole earner

The effects were also devastating for women who were the sole earners, some of whom belonged to the older category. Firoza Begum, widow, 40, main earner, said that she would

have been prepared to continue working regardless of the risk of infection but was not given a choice:

“They dismissed me. I had no reason to quit. Rather, I wanted to continue doing the jobs. They fired me suddenly because of the Corona.”

Some in this category did continue to look for employment during the lockdown but without success.

“I looked for jobs in many places. I was even willing to work in distant areas, but even in those areas, people weren’t hiring. Nobody was hiring domestic workers. Rather people were dismissing their domestic workers.”

—Suborna, married, 27, secondary earner

The majority of domestic workers remained unemployed for at least two months of the lockdown, some for a more extended period. There was no work, and certainly none for domestic workers.

4.2.3. A Sudden Decline in Income

As we noted, domestic workers were the main breadwinners for most of the households in our sample, even where there were other earners. The loss of their jobs meant a total or substantial loss of income for at least two-thirds of our respondents. Because the lockdown had been declared at the end of the month (25 March), most workers were able to collect a whole month’s salary. Some employers were not able to pay the cash instantly and paid it later through mobile transfer. Some, however, did not get what they were owed. One employer, a salaried government servant, pleaded hardship:

“They paid half my salary because they claimed that they were in a difficult situation as there was a cut down on salaries of government employees too.”

—Morium Begum, married, 30, main earner

Another who used to work in a mess failed to track down all who owed her money.

“Some of the mess members paid me, but some had already left when I went. They weren’t there when I went to collect my dues. Several of them had left without paying me. At that time, I incurred a loss of about BDT 15,000–16,000.”

—Shelina, divorced, 26, sole earner

Households with more than one earner still saw their earnings plummet as most of these earners were in casual daily labour. One domestic worker whose husband was a rickshaw puller said that he continued to try and work when he could.

“During the lockdown, he would go to pull rickshaws occasionally, especially in the early morning. He tried to stay out of sight of the policemen but sometimes they would see him and chase him off the street or even hit him. That’s how he worked at that time. Before Corona, he could earn BDT 300, 200, or 400 a day. After Corona, he earned about BDT 150 or 200 a day.”

—Shefali Begum, married, 35, main earner

Another reported,

“My older son used to work at a garment factory. He lost his job two months ago, and the factory was closed due to Corona. He was paid half his salary during the period. He returned to the village to save money, but it meant that he was in the village when the factory resumed operations, so he didn’t get his job back.”

—Rozina, divorced, 45, main earner

The situation was most dire in households where the domestic worker was the only earner. Parvin Akter, separated, 28, sole earner, was one of these. She expressed her despair,

“The children can eat if I can work, otherwise not. We have no one in this world but Allah.”

Monoara Begum (widow, 60, sole earner) was supporting her daughter, young grandchildren, and son-in-law who refused to work regularly. She had been forced to beg during the lockdown.

“We were not allowed to work; we didn’t know what to do. We had to do something for our survival; we couldn’t just sit there and starve. Though it was a shameful thing to do, I covered myself and my face and began begging. What else could I do?”

4.2.4. A Crisis of Unknown Proportions

The fear of the virus, and the lockdown that came with it, was the fear of the unknown. People were uncertain about the nature of COVID-19—how it was transmitted and what its consequences were. They had heard about the global situation from the news, but the situation in Bangladesh was still unravelling. Those whose livelihoods depended on leaving their homes were grappling with other uncertainties: should they dare risk disobeying government orders and leaving their homes to search for work, and was the potential outcome worth whatever punishment that would be meted out to them?

For domestic workers, summary dismissal from work meant the summary loss of their primary means of survival. When they were asked about how they had received the news of the lockdown, some broke down in tears, recalling the fear and anxiety of that time. They were

accustomed to working long hours for little pay in harsh conditions to feed themselves and their families, but it was much better than no work. They had no idea what the future held for them, how they were going to feed their children and pay their rent. Faced with hard choices, they feared the consequences of the loss of livelihoods more than they feared the consequences of infection.

“We will not die from Corona, we will die from hunger.”

—Taramon Bibi, widow, 55, main earner

Hanifa, separated, 40, sole earner, recalled,

“I had never experienced any situation like this before. No, no, no! Not to have a job. And what if I can never find another job? What made me even more anxious was the thought of this Corona getting even worse. If that happens, it will be extremely difficult for us to survive.”

Rubina, separated, 25, sole earner, compared her feelings about the lockdown to what she had felt when her husband had left her without warning:

“The history of those two months of lockdown is a history that is only about suffering. I felt as helpless as I was back when my husband left me here all by myself with several months’ rent due. Those two months were so painful that they seemed like two years to me.”

But the 60-year-old woman supporting her daughter, her son-in-law, and their children felt that the pandemic was just one more crisis in their life marked by constant crises.

“Other women have husbands or children to look after them so they can get by one way or the other. My life is more complicated. My husband is not alive. My son cannot educate his children as he does not earn enough to feed them. And my son-in-law does not work, so my daughter has to suffer along with her two children.”

—Monoara Begum, widow, 60, sole earner

4.2.5. Strategizing for Survival During Lockdown

4.2.5.1. *Stay in the City or Return to the Village?*

Despite the fear about the future that descended on the workers after the lockdown was declared, they had to find ways to cope with the present. Their livelihood strategies during that period became concentrated on ways of bringing in money, with their normal livelihoods suspended, and ways of using this money to achieve the capabilities to meet their most

pressing needs: food and rent. With the city in lockdown and cut off from the rest of the country, the supply of grains and vegetables had dwindled, and their prices had risen.

Questions of food and rent were central to a significant dilemma the workers faced throughout the lockdown: whether to remain in the city or return to their villages. They would not have to pay rent in the village, and it was their major expense. But keeping accommodation in the city was essential for any future resumption of employment. On the other hand, food would definitely be easier to manage in the village as it would be cheaper, and they could forage for food if they had to.

“How could we live in Dhaka without any work? How could I pay the rent or eat? At least in the village, we would not die of hunger. Dhaka is a city of money: you can’t even get water without money there.”

—Rehana, married, 30, secondary earner

Another important reason to return was the desire to be close to their families during this period of intense uncertainty and fear of infection and death. They were isolated in the city: if they were infected, no one would look after them. Their village community embodied a generalized form of social capital, a set of relationships within which they could expect some minimum form of care.

“It wasn’t possible for me to live in Dhaka all by myself. How could I have stayed here under such circumstances? So, I decided that if I were to die, I would die in my village. Dhaka is a strange place, and we don’t have any familiar people around. We don’t have anyone to take care of us or get in touch with us. That’s why I decided to go back to my village home and leave the rest to fate.”

—Nazma, widow, 43, sole earner

Weighing these considerations, 11 of the 30 women in our study decided to return to their village, and the rest remained in the city. Most of those who returned to the village did so as soon as they heard about the lockdown as they feared that, with transport at a standstill, they would be stuck in the city. Those who delayed did so because they thought the lockdown would only last 10 days, and later migrated back to their villages by whatever means they could: truck, van, or on foot. They generally remained in their villages for at least two months as there was neither transportation to bring them back nor any prospect of employment.

However, some of those who returned to their village continued to pay rent on their accommodation in the city because it represented the prospect of return should their employer call them back to work.

“I couldn’t let go of my room because I didn’t know how the Corona situation might turn out to be. If I let it go and the Corona situation had got better, I couldn’t have immediately found somewhere else to live. I realized that the

salary they gave me was good enough to pay the rent, but if I went back to the village, I would be able to at least eat rice with some salt. I wouldn't need so much money for our daily needs."

—Maymuna, divorced, 28, sole earner

This desire to retain a foothold in the city was the main reason why most of the workers in our study opted to remain where they were. They feared that if they could not resume employment immediately should their employers call them back, someone else would get their job.

"I wanted to be readily available in case my employers asked me to re-join. I thought if we returned to the village, I might lose my jobs permanently, and then it would take longer for me to find another job."

—Halima, married, 27, main earner

A few workers decided to split up the family and send their children back while they remained in the city. This way, they would be sure that at least their children's basic needs could be met: As Morium Begum, married, 30, main earner explained,

"We decided to stay in Dhaka during the lockdown, but I sent my children back to the village because we were going through financial hardship. The children would at least have something to eat in the village, but here I was afraid we could not feed them."

In another case, it was the adult sons who stayed back in the city to take advantage of possible work opportunities while their mother returned home to the village, probably permanently. As one domestic worker explained,

"I have become old, and I have back pain and chest problems. You know what domestic work is like. I also have an eye problem and had to have surgery. I am not strong anymore. So, I returned to the village. My sons sent me back. They told me, 'Ma, go back to the village and say your prayers five times a day. Worship Allah. We will try to send you as much money as we can.'"

—Nargis Akter, widow, 60, secondary earner

Those who had lost their homes to river erosion or floods had nowhere to return. Mostly the migrants from the Bhola region in the south of Bangladesh had a similar reality. And for some, the whole rationale for leaving their villages was the dearth of employment opportunities there. They felt that to return to the village would be to return to the same lack of opportunities—and they would still have to return to the city to find work.

"Yes, the house rent was too high, but what else could I have done? Had I gone back to the village, sooner or later, I would have to return here. Staying here

gave us the hope that we would be able to get by even if it became difficult for us. But there was no scope for employment in the village.”

—Firoza Begum, widow, 40, main earner

4.2.5.2. *Managing With Less Money: The Capability to Feed Themselves and Pay the Rent*

With the loss of their jobs, the workers had to stretch what resources they had. Most had their last month’s salary to tide them over for a while; a few had managed to save small amounts of money each month, particularly if there were other earners in the household. A 50-year-old worker told us how her family had got by:

“By the end of the lockdown, I had totally run out of money. I had spent whatever I had managed to save. Idle consumption can empty even a king’s treasure, isn’t it right? But we managed to get by for three months on my savings.”

But saving was not an option open to sole earners.

“How could I save any money while I hardly earned enough to get by with the bare minimum?”

—Khadiza, separated, 65, main earner

As we noted, the most important priorities were food and rent. Meals were economized on one meal a day instead of two or three.

“We couldn’t step outside our houses, couldn’t do any work, so how else could we have managed food? If we had managed to eat one square meal, we had to skip the next meal. That’s how it was. If we had rice for one meal, we had bread for the next, and we skipped the last meal.

—Halima, married, 27, main earner

Diet was simplified: the occasional consumption of meat or fish was cut out, and people ate rice with lentils or vegetables or sometimes just salt. They also purchased old or rotten vegetables, which also helped them save money. Taramon Bibi, widow, 55, main earner, described how she fed her family:

“I would go around the bushes to find some leafy vegetables. I would go to the stalls and beg them for a few dried chillies. I would tell them I had managed to find rice to cook, but I needed some dried chillies to eat with it. We could not even dream about fish or meat, let alone have those items with our meals!”

One 40-year-old domestic worker whose husband had left her during the pandemic said that she survived daily on a cup of tea which cost her BDT 2, and some puffed rice which cost her another BDT 2. That was all she ate during the lockdown period so that she had enough to feed her son. Some days, her neighbours would offer her some food.

It was a particularly tough time for the domestic workers who had elderly and sick members in the family. They had to stop giving them the kinds of nutritious food they tried to provide for them in regular time, such as milk and fruit. Mothers tried to prioritize children's needs but found it hard to explain why they were eating the same food every day and why they could not have the food they liked.

“We had to cut down on some of our expenses to have money for other purposes. Suppose my daughter said something like, ‘Ma, you need to buy me this today.’ If it is essential for us to buy, we buy it. I buy her the things that she needs the most. And if she can manage without something, I don't buy it. What else can I do?”

—Rozina, separated, 40, main earner

While rent was not within their control, there was some scope for at least delaying payment. They paid what they could out of their savings, but most could not afford the total amount they owed. Some faced abuse and threats from landlords who threatened to seize their belongings.

“Yes, I fell behind on the rent. The house owner said a lot of things, swore at me. I paid what I could out of my savings.”

—Nurun Nahar, married, 60, secondary earner

But in many cases, landlords let them retain their rooms on the understanding that they would pay what they owed after the lockdown. They understood that the workers had no money coming in, and in any case, it would have been difficult to find new tenants during the lockdown. Firoza, 50, sole earner, spoke of her negotiation with her landlord, but also her bitterness at the kind of accommodation she was paying the rent for.

“I implored the landlord, telling him that I didn't have any means to pay the rent, but he said I must pay at least half the amount. When my employer would send me BDT 500, 1,000, or 300, I used that to pay the rent rather than buy food to meet our hunger. We don't have any other place to go. We can't afford to live anywhere else because in other places the rent will be higher. So, we have to live in this tiny rented room in this slum. When it gets dark, the mosquitoes start biting. We don't get to eat three square meals a day and, have clothes to wear, and we cannot afford to buy a mosquito net.”

—Shahnaz, widow, 35, main earner

Those who have been living in a place for a more extended period felt that they had a special relationship with the landlord and received more sympathy.

“The house owner hasn’t complained about it because we have been living here for many years. It’s been 7 or 8 years. I mean, we have been living here since we moved to this place. Since we are old tenants and have been living here for more than 4 or 5 years, the house owner doesn’t make a ruckus about it [paying the due rent].”

—Rubina, separated, 25, sole earner

Only one worker spoke of a landlord who had let them off the rent for two months. She said,

“He was not very rich, but he was a very good person. He spared us from paying two months’ rent at the beginning of the lockdown.”

—Parvin Akter, separated, 28, sole earner

A small number of workers spoke of borrowing from close families. One had borrowed BDT 20,000 from her brother.

“Because it was getting more difficult for us to get by we borrowed money so we could spend it for our needs [part of these needs was the rent].”

—Khodeza, married, 40, secondary earner

There were also several domestic workers who had been buying groceries from their neighbourhood store long enough to have established a relationship of trust. Many had been buying from them on credit in the past and were now able to do so during the lockdown.

“The store owner sold me items on credit. You see, we have been buying groceries from that same store ever since we got here in Dhaka. We always buy groceries on credit from there, and pay back later. That’s how it has been. We now owe the store owner BDT 8,000.”

—Salma, widow, 38, sole earner

But the majority did not avail any loan. In the first place, getting loans during the crisis was difficult since there was no confidence about loans being repaid. They were also reluctant to take loans for fear they would not be able to repay.

“Nobody would have agreed to lend me money if I asked them. Had I asked them to lend me money, they would have thought something like, ‘She doesn’t earn enough, how would she pay me back?’ No, nobody lent us any money. You see, nobody cares about whether we are starving or not.”

—Shefali Begum, married, 35, main earner

“No, we didn’t borrow money during the lockdown as we knew that we didn’t have enough income to repay. We don’t have the financial ability to repay a loan either. So, keeping that in mind, I starved occasionally rather than borrowing money to meet our hunger.”

—Monoara Begum, widow, 60, sole earner

During the lockdown, domestic workers who migrated to their village coped with their straitened circumstances by gathering wild greens and fishing. Having the support of an able-bodied man in the family was an advantage as they could go further afield searching for food. Khodeza, 40, secondary earner, said,

“We didn’t have any stock of food at our village home. We have many canals and rivers in our village. So, after moving back to the village, my husband and my older son would catch fish. I would collect leafy vegetables from the surroundings.”

It was also more accessible for men to find work as daily wage labour in rural areas.

4.2.5.3. *Informal Networks and Official Support*

The domestic workers spoke of some of the external support they had received, which, however small it had been and whatever was the source, they spoke of with gratitude because it had been invaluable in a time of crucial need.

A number of workers had received formal support in the form of essential items, such as rice, lentils, onion, soap, and hand wash from the government. These were workers fortunate enough to have National Identity (NID) cards. Halima, married, 27, secondary earner, had been able to buy subsidized rice under the open market sales program.

“I was able to buy 10 kilograms of 10-taka-per-kg rice once. Aside from that, I have never received any support since the start of Corona till now. We submitted photocopies of the NID cards of my husband and me at various places.”

But many were excluded because they did not have NID cards.

“Sister, everyone received some sort of support, but we didn’t receive anything at all because we couldn’t show any NID card. We don’t have them. Everyone who was able to show [submit] their NID cards received support.”

—Shefali Begum, married, 35, main earner

Some had spent their precious money on photocopying their NID cards in response to the promise of support but did not receive it.

“During that crisis, BDT 5 was a big deal for us. Many people from many different places came to collect photocopies of our NID cards, but we never received anything anywhere. It cost us BDT 5 to get a photocopy of the NID card. Yet, we gave those photocopies to people in the hope that we would receive at least something to eat. But we didn’t receive anything at all. And when we went to them to ask about it, they said, ‘We submitted it [copy of NID], but we are yet to receive it [support].’ They would give those lame excuses.”

—Suborna, married, 27, main earner

It was evident from the interviews that the most valuable form of social capital to access government support were contacts with the local party leaders. Many workers had not lived in the city long enough to have made such contacts. Only the few who had lived in the same locality for a long time or had male household members who socialized with the local party or local community leaders reaped the benefit. One worker told us,

“There was a leader named Shamim or something. He came and collected names going from quarter to quarter. After that, he went back and returned later to distribute 10 kilograms of rice, lentil, potato, and oil to each family. We haven’t received anything else except for these items.”

—Rozina, separated, 40, main earner

A few mentioned that they received support from NGOs, including sanitation and hygiene products, which had helped them for some time. Three had received small cash transfers from BRAC linked to the purchase of groceries from local stores.

“I couldn’t cash out the money I received via bKash, because if I did, they would have stopped giving me the support. That money was meant for grocery shopping. With Allah’s mercy, I am at least getting some help from BRAC, no? Allah willing, I am getting to manage food for eating.”

—Taramon Bibi, widow, 55, main earner

Other respondents had also got one-time support with grocery and soap from various local NGOs, but they did not know their names.

Others had received informal support from employers, relatives, or affluent persons of the community, while some received money from their village. A few had called their employers to describe their suffering and ask for help. Some were successful. They would be called to the residence gates and given money or food.

“During and after the lockdown, I continued looking for work. I even called the madams [employers] and told them, ‘Madam, it’s been three months, I have not been able to work. How can I survive with my five children? Madam, I can’t maintain my family like this. Please help me.’ Then the madams sent me some rice and vegetables. But they wouldn’t let me get inside their houses. They would give it to the gateman, and the gateman would pass it to me. When they gave me the food, I brought it back home and ate it with my family. That’s how we managed to survive.”

—Rubina, separated, 25, sole earner

“During Corona, the families, for which we had been working, gave us some support. They gave some oil, rice, lentils, and potatoes. Some families gave money. That’s how we managed.”

—Khodeza, married, 40, secondary earner

They believe this generosity reflected the length of time they had worked for an employer and the degree of emotional attachment that had developed.

“You see, we had a great understanding between us. I was by their side when they were in trouble, and they were by our side when we were in trouble. When my children got sick, they understood my problem. When I didn’t have food at home, they gave it to us. They showed their love by giving me money and food, while I loved them with my heart. They paid me BDT 5,000 during the lockdown period every month. Yes, they would also give me food and clothes. Yes, they showed that much care for us.”

—Ayesha, widow, 40, sole earner

Others did not feel they could ask for help, nor did their employers reach out to them.

“No, what’s the point of asking for such assistance from my previous employer? There’s no point in asking for help from someone who already knows what you are going through and yet doesn’t offer to help you in any way.”

—Nurun Nahar, married, 60, secondary earner

Neighbours could sometimes provide support. Those with food to spare would send some over. Sometimes the workers would earn food from neighbours by doing some small chores around the house. As one worker described her experience,

“I would go to my neighbours and say, ‘Sister, if you have dirty dishes, let me help you wash them.’ I helped them with their dirty dishes, and they gave me some food. Or I might visit someone’s house, and she would say, ‘Will you help

me cut these fish?’ So, I would cut the fish for her, and she offered me some snacks. This helped me to survive those two months.”

—Hanifa Bibi, separated, 40, sole earner

But there were also some workers who said that they had not received any form of support—not from the government or NGOs or employers or neighbours. They had heard that people were getting support from the government and NGOs but did not have the networks and contacts to know how to avail themselves of the support.

“I haven’t received any support from anyone. Who would bring us support from the government? In this Dhaka city, who is there to provide any support?”

—Shahnaz, widow, 35, main earner

One of the workers expressed her bitterness at how domestic workers were treated by their government, that when they did receive any support, it was as poor people, not as working citizens.

Another compared the casual indifference with which their work was regarded compared with the value attached to garment or office workers.

“Nobody helped me during the Corona. Garment factories and banks can’t fire a worker so randomly. Because we do odd jobs, we don’t have any value. Poor people are not valued. Garment factory workers can’t be fired like we were because they have money. People who have money have everything. My employers never called me or said anything like, ‘You are unemployed now. It must have been difficult for you. Please come to my home. I will give you BDT 500 or 1,000 so you can feed your children.’”

—Rozina, separated, 40, main earner

4.3. An Uncertain Recovery (Jun 2020–Jan 2021)

We turn to the months after May 2020 when the lockdown was lifted and explore how domestic workers adjusted as they emerged from lockdown and could, in principle, resume their livelihood activities. Paradoxically, conditions did not improve for most workers and indeed deteriorated for many. The lifting of the lockdown saw the end of government relief for the poor. As inadequate as it had been, it had been an enormous help to the workers who received it. Sanitation and hygiene supplies from different NGOs provided during the lockdown were also suspended. The dwindling of the support reflected the widespread assumption that people would start earning immediately with the lifting of the lockdown and that the worst was over. But this proved not to be the case for domestic workers.

Furthermore, the lockdown had depleted their savings, the concessions made by landlords and shopkeepers diminished, and informal assistance became more erratic. Channels of support thus ended or petered out with the lifting of lockdown, but unemployment among domestic workers continued for some time after. We examine how they coped with this new reality. Some of their responses were a continuation of older strategies, but some were made possible to find work by the change in circumstances.

4.3.1. Renewing the Search for Work

A small number of domestic workers, desperate for some means of survival, had continued to look for work while the lockdown was still in place but with little success. Others who had stayed back in the city during the lockdown had remained mainly at home and immediately began their search for work once lockdown was lifted. The majority of those who had returned to their villages started moving back to the city as soon as the public transportation was resumed, some borrowing money for the bus fare. But a few remained in the village because they had no jobs to come back to or were not confident that they would be able to find jobs, particularly those who were older.

As we noted from the PPRC/BIGD study, domestic workers not only reported the highest rates of job loss after lockdown, but they were least likely to be re-employed when the lockdown was lifted. Of the workers in our study, nine of those who had remained in the city were fortunate enough to return to their old jobs, although most now worked in fewer homes than they had worked before the lockdowns and hence earned less money than they had before the lockdown. Seven got new jobs 3–4 months after the onset of the lockdown, and four domestic workers got jobs 5–6 months later. Eight workers were still without jobs when we interviewed them in January, of whom five were sole earners in their households. Of the remaining two, one had started to sell cooked food, while Firoza, 50, sole earner, who had resorted to begging during the lockdown, now switched to waste picking, collecting paper and empty bottles from the streets to sell to a trader.

There were many reasons for the continued high rates of unemployment among domestic workers and the reduced number of homes for those who did return to domestic work. Most importantly, of course, the virus had not gone away. Physical distancing was impossible to maintain between domestic workers and the families they worked for, and employers remained cautious. Then there were employers who had been themselves hard hit economically and had not yet recovered financially. They either resisted hiring domestic workers or, if they were compelled to, were not willing to pay as much for each task as they had before.

Furthermore, many offices had not been re-opened, and children's schools were also closed. Family members had continued to stay at home and do the housework themselves. One finding that emerged was that the lockdown had taught many of these families to do without outside help and to divide household chores amongst themselves. Those who could afford to had begun buying labour-saving devices, such as vacuum cleaners, washing machines, and blenders.

The rise in the sale of home and kitchen appliances, particularly of local brands like Walton and cheaper brands like Singer, was tremendous. For instance, on 8 March 2021, *The Daily Star* reported a 40% increase in Walton's washing machine sales in 2020.

The search for work was also renewed by other members of the domestic workers' families who could earn. Rickshaws and vans started moving, street vendors started selling, small grocery stores and tea stalls reopened, and construction work started again. This created an opportunity, especially for men, to start work. In some families, the interruption of schooling during the lockdown and their reduced financial circumstances meant that a number of them did not resume their children's education when schools opened but sent them to earn a living. One tried to combine both:

"I told my son to attend school for half the day and work for a store that installs filters on walls during the other half of the day. I put him to work at that store."

—Ayesha, 40, sole earner

The boy earned just BDT 50 a day, but the job was still considered worthwhile, given their present circumstances.

For women who stayed back in the village, there was little opportunity for work. It was their husbands or children who sought work, either in the village or by returning to the city. They continued to cope with their food shortage by foraging for food from surrounding fields and rivers.

4.3.2. Continued Household Austerity

Survival needs remained the most urgent priority of the domestic workers in the post-lockdown period. They had spent some or all their savings during two months of complete inactivity. Some had found employment but earned less while others remained unemployed. Food remained the area in which they sought to continue with their earlier strategies, cutting down on the number of meals and other food-related expenses and continuing to buy low quality and rotten vegetables long after lockdown had been lifted.

"I go to the market at night when vegetables are almost sold out and all that is left are mostly the ones that are rotten or with marks or defects on them. I get to buy those vegetables for less."

—Ayesha, 40, sole earner

Households with children or elderly people reported the greatest stresses around food. The workers could not provide them with the quality, quantity, or variety of food desired by children or needed by the elderly. Fatema, 34, primary earner, told us that she fed her mother a rice gruel as she could not afford to buy the food she needed for her health.

“It’s been almost five or six years that she has been bedridden. She is almost like a paralyzed person. She has acidity, so she can’t eat rice. I used to bring her juices or milk before. She has suffered more than we did because we didn’t have work and couldn’t feed her well. I had to mash the rice, mix water with it, and use a spoon to feed her.”

—Fatema, 34, sole earner

Levels of deprivation reduced somewhat for those who started earning again, and some were able to give their children small amounts of money to buy treats for themselves.

Accommodation has become an increasing problem. During the lockdown, landlords had been quite flexible about the rent, allowing workers to pay in smaller instalments, deferring the rest until they got jobs. But after the lockdown was lifted, this attitude disappeared as they saw no reason why the women could not start working straight away. There was now enormous pressure on the domestic workers to pay off the backlog of their rent along with their current rent. Some workers moved to a cheaper place within the vicinity, but this meant poorer quality and more cramped accommodation, prone to flooding and unreliable supply of gas, water, and electricity. Three workers opted to share accommodation. Two moved in with their relatives and one with her co-workers. This allowed them to reduce their burden of house rent while enabling them to stay in the city.

Workers were also expected to pay for the provisions they had taken on credit from local shops. Additional credit was refused until they had done so. One woman described her predicament:

“I bought stuff on credit from stores during the lockdown and borrowed some money from a relative too. Altogether, I have a debt of BDT 15,000 to pay. But they don’t sell goods on credit to me anymore because I don’t have income. They will sell things on credit when my son starts making money by selling clothes. I never borrowed from a microfinance organization; they don’t lend us money.”

—Salma Akter, 38, sole earner

While some workers took their children out of school and sent them to work, others struggled hard not to compromise their children’s education, allocating what limited resources they could to it. It is worth noting that schools in Bangladesh have still not re-opened fully. The government also introduced classes on television, but many of our respondents’ children did not have access to that. Instead, we found that some domestic workers were sending their children to coaching centres or hiring private tutors to minimize learning loss.

“We hired a private tutor for them. So, we had to pay their salary. Yes, but the teacher wouldn’t come to our home to teach them. They would go to the

teacher. I had to pay their teacher's salary. The teacher's salary was originally BDT 1,000. But they lowered it by BDT 500 due to the Corona."

—Suborna, 27, secondary earner

A number of domestic workers who migrated back to the village switched their children to religious education provided at the local *maktab*,⁵ as this was based in the local mosque and was open during the pandemic.

4.3.3. Shifting Migration Strategies

Migration continued to operate as a coping strategy in the post-lockdown period. The lifting of lockdown saw renewed waves of migration, this time in both directions. Some workers who had stayed in the city left because they did not have work or money to survive in the city, while others who had gone to the village returned to the town, hoping to re-join their previous employment or find new work. However, not everyone who returned to the city found a job. After spending the last of their savings while looking for a job, they permanently migrated back to the village.

A critical insight from their accounts was that migration was a flexible strategy in searching for livelihoods among informal workers, not easily categorized as temporary or permanent. In the kind of uncertain lives that most domestic workers led, it allowed them to shift locations according to where their opportunities appeared greatest, or their costs appeared least.

4.3.4. Facing an Uncertain Future

The PPRC-BIGD survey found that pessimism about the future and the likelihood of income recovery was high among different categories of workers: it was over 80% for most informal workers (including domestic workers), which declined to 68% among factory workers and 53% among salaried workers. Anxiety about their livelihoods meant that the majority agreed with the lifting of the lockdown and saw no other option. Only a minority worried about infection.

Our study suggested that most domestic workers and their families were resigned in the face of the pandemic. They did not hold anyone responsible for this situation, and they did not see what anyone could do about it.

"It had gotten very difficult for us to get by during that period. But what was there to do about it? We got by somehow as Allah intended us to."

—Nazma, 45, sole earner

⁵ A traditional Islamic elementary school, primarily teaching literacy and the Quran.

While exacerbation of intra-household conflict and domestic violence has been widely reported in studies on COVID-19 in other countries (Kabeer et al., 2020), this was not the case in our study. The conflict did not disappear. The most frequent source of conflict appeared to be over male breadwinning irresponsibility. Men in these households had to engage in physically demanding labour which may explain why so many seemed to be reluctant to go to work, content to leave it to women in the family to manage with their earnings. But we did not come across the heightened levels of domestic violence during the pandemic reported in other contexts (Kabeer et al., 2020). Only 10 of the workers were currently married. Domestic workers whose husbands had been physically violent before the pandemic continued to display physical violence, but the rest reported no increase in violence.

It may have been that people were not comfortable about sharing such experiences in telephone interviews. Instead, they were more willing to tell us about their efforts to keep conflict from escalating, often leaving the house to cool off. As Shefali Begum, 35, secondary earner, said,

“When I started complaining, he kept quiet. And when he started complaining, I kept quiet. Occasionally, I would leave the room angrily. I would only return after spending some time outside.”

Khodeza, 40, secondary earner, commented on relations within her family:

“There wasn’t any change in our understanding of each other. We didn’t engage in fighting with each other either. Whatever happened, happened because Allah willed it. It’s true that everything was shut down, but fighting among ourselves wouldn’t have changed anything.”

A number of themes emerged as workers talked about their experience of COVID-19 and how they saw their future. For many, religion was a major source of strength. They worried that their incomes and savings were coming to an end, and they were not sure how they would feed themselves, so they turned to God to help them. Parvin Akter, 28, sole earner, like other poor people like her, prayed that any future lockdown would only affect the rich and that the poor would be spared.

“‘Forgive us, Allah! May we never have such a lockdown again!’ After performing my morning prayer every day, I would pray to Allah to save poor people from such lockdowns! ‘Allah, bring such lockdowns on rich people but not on poor people!’ I always prayed for that, sister. Allah helped me get by, sister. Allah helped me get by.”

—Parvin Akter, 28, sole earner

Some of the workers maintained the hope that they would soon find the job they desperately needed, a hope that gave them the strength to carry on. It was evident from the accounts of

these women that paid work held the key to food, security, and peace. Shahnaz, 35, main earner, said,

“I wanted to resume working straight away due to our financial hardship. It would have allowed me to provide better food and clothes for my children. It is also about our own peace and happiness.”

Fatema, 34, secondary earner, was optimistic:

“It’s not like there is no job out there, but it has gotten a bit difficult to find one. I will have to look for a job now. If I start looking for a job using the right channel, I will get one. Besides, if this Corona goes away, or if the situation improves, then people will start hiring domestic workers.”

But there was also a large number of women, the older ones in particular, who had not been able to persuade themselves that the future would be brighter. They did not believe that they had the skills and capacity to do jobs aside from domestic work or related activities, such as cooking in small restaurants or “messes.”

One major source of their anxiety was their awareness of how many potential employers had turned to labour-saving technologies during the lockdown. Many more houses now had washing machines, microwave ovens, and blenders, making housework much easier for the household members to do it themselves. Whereas a worker might have previously hoped to earn BDT 600 for washing clothes, 600 for mopping the floor, and 600 for washing dishes, all in the same house, now she might no longer be required to wash clothes. Earlier, she might have earned extra for grinding spices into a paste; now, it could be done with a blender. The range of tasks they are required for is getting narrower. And the other unexpected challenge these workers were facing was that many more women now seeking domestic work. In particular, those who lost jobs in the garment industry had now turned to what remained as one of the easiest jobs available to women.

5. Discussion of Findings and Concluding Reflections

5.1. Livelihoods, Capitals, and Capabilities

Some of the strategies used by the domestic workers to respond to and survive the shock of the lockdown and the post-COVID situation were similar to those used by poor people more generally in times of crisis, such as cutting back on non-essential expenditures and focusing on the essential. But this was also a crisis unlike any other: not only was it more generalized than most, but it also cut off one of the key strategies that poor households resort to at such times:

intensifying and diversifying their income-earning efforts. As we noted, the threat to their livelihoods was a far greater source of stress and uncertainty than the threat to health.

Our focus in this paper has been on a group of workers who were extremely vulnerable even in normal times, who were the first to lose their jobs because of the threat they were seen to present to the health of their employers' families, who did not earn enough to have savings to fall back on, and who were largely outside the government's social protection schemes, even those intended for the poor. These workers also found it more difficult than many others to be re-employed when the lockdown was lifted as the fear that they would bring infection into the home persisted for some time.

Our study focused on the various capitals at the disposal of these workers and the extent to which they served to enhance their basic survival capabilities, those that came to the forefront during the crisis. When we look at the kinds of capital that these workers were able to mobilize during and after the crisis, we see that the family's human capital was the most critical endowments. Households that had more than one earner, particularly able-bodied (and responsible) male earners, were more favourably positioned than the rest as they could diversify their efforts to survive and expect at least one or more income flows to start coming in once lockdown was lifted.

In terms of formal channels, there was the distribution of government relief for the urban poor, which reached some of the domestic workers. But lack of NID cards and contacts with influential community members made accessing it very difficult and impossible for some. Having male members in the household who socialize more freely in the community was perhaps more effective as a conduit for receiving official relief. The government's response in terms of increasing allotment for social protection for the ultra-poor and the urban poor was woefully inadequate in any case.

Social capital in various forms emerged as a critical source of assistance. Connections with government officials or local party leaders helped some of them to access government transfer schemes. Those who had longer-standing relationships with their employers or knew the neighbourhood grocery shop owner were able to benefit from the occasional assistance or the ability to buy on credit. The sympathy of landlords, during the lockdown at least, reduced the pressure to pay rent, but, of course, this accumulated as a backlog which they had to pay later.

The other key form of capital that they could draw had a locational dimension. Returning to their villages brought them closer to others who could provide them with some support as well as the possibility of feeding themselves by gathering wild greens or fishing from local rivers and ponds. For those who had a home to return to, their village homes embodied a certain degree of security.

But domestic workers had almost no symbolic capital at all. They did not have status or respect that would lead others to provide reliable support in times of crisis. They relied on the kindness and charity of those around them for which they expressed a great deal of gratitude, but it depended on the whims of others. The lack of symbolic value attached to their identity in

contrast to garment workers kept them out of the limelight of media, national, political, or international focus.

Domestic workers received relief mainly as poor people, not on the basis of their identity as a worker. Our interviews with key informants revealed no extension of support to domestic workers by trade unions or other labour organizations though a trade union for domestic workers and a network of organizations working for the rights of domestic workers exist. The relief that they received from NGOs were as part of the urban poor. There was no recognition and, therefore, no strategy particularly aimed towards them.

5.2. The Future of Domestic Work as a Source of Livelihood: Exploited, Undervalued, and Dispensable?

While in a poor, labour-abundant and largely informal economy like Bangladesh, women are likely to continue seeking some form of livelihood in highly gender-segmented labour markets, and domestic work may continue to represent one of the easiest options for them. The future of urban domestic work as a form of livelihood may be limited, much more so for live-in workers as urban households move to apartment living than those living in their own accommodation and working for multiple employers.

The pandemic revealed further reasons for concern as we see that domestic workers were the first to be dismissed and the last to be rehired. It suggests that we may need to make a distinction between essential work and essential workers. A great deal of the work that domestic workers do are routine physical chores that require some strength but few skills—one reason why it is easy entry work. Other elements, such as looking after children or the elderly, require certain emotional qualities which may be harder to find. What the crisis revealed was that much of the work that domestic workers had been doing was replaceable, by family members and with the increasing help of labour-saving domestic technologies. The work has remained essential, but not all the workers.

5.3. Policy Reflections

The 8th five-year plan of Bangladesh (2021) adopted specific stimulus packages for formal sector workers, but domestic workers, along with other informal workers, were to be addressed through the horizontal expansion of a safety net program consisting of a one-time cash transfer of BDT 2,500 to five million informal workers. This had not been implemented in September 2020 (WIEGO, 2020). In any case, it is restricted to vulnerable citizens living below the poverty line in the 100 most poverty-stricken sub-districts. The budget for social protection increased to 2% of GDP from 1.2%, but the percentage of poor has increased during COVID-19 with a newly poor category of 24.5 million added to the previous 40 million poor people (PPRC-BIGD, 2021). Given this context, we consider three broad areas where coordinated action by the state, civil society, and international organizations could improve the future for domestic workers.

The first, and perhaps the most ambitious, would be to promote employment, and women's employment, across the economy. Bangladesh has made considerable progress by investing in human development, but much more could be done. It has been increasingly recognized that investment in human capital and capabilities not only contributes to broad-based growth but also to resilience in the face of change. Greater investment in health, education, and care provision would have the added benefit of generating jobs for women. And certainly greater investment in the quality of these services would make them far more effective in achieving these broader goals. Overseas migration can expand the outlets for the supply of domestic work, but the government would need to regulate the process much more than it does and ensure that workers are treated with dignity when they are working abroad.

The second would be to both strengthen and implement existing policies. One would be to bring domestic workers under the coverage of social protection, at least as committed by the government during the COVID-19 period. Another would be to implement Domestic Worker Protection and Welfare Policy 2015. A number of countries, such as South Africa and Brazil, have introduced a minimum wage for domestic workers—an hourly minimum wage could be considered for Bangladesh. On its own, this might be difficult to enforce, but it would have an initial symbolic significance that all labour merit some minimum level of material recognition and, in the longer run, it would provide a basic principle around which domestic workers could organize. Signing a convention does not mean ratifying, and ratifying does not mean respecting it. Nevertheless, Bangladesh's failure to ratify the ILO Code 189 on the rights of domestic workers sends out a clear signal about the value it gives to these workers. Ratification is essential if a group of workers who constitute the most vulnerable and devalued population in the economy are to be extended a minimal degree of recognition—and, as with minimum wage legislation, a platform around which to organize for implementation.

And critical to these efforts is to promote the organization of domestic workers. The National Domestic Workers Union is a promising start, and with its international networks, it would help link domestic workers in Bangladesh to the struggle of workers in other countries. But it is seriously under-resourced. This is where we might think about the possibility of international funders interested in promoting the solidarity and strength of informal workers, providing the kind of support that the union would need. We might also think of ways to build its networks with other unions in the country.

Third, while there be a declining demand for certain aspects of paid domestic labour, there is likely to be a continued demand for more professional forms of paid care—for children, for the elderly, for the sick. But this would require creating the kind of centres that could train people to provide this form of care. We need to think of ways to formalize and professionalize domestic service, which would allow employers to confidently recruit domestic workers (especially at the time of this pandemic) and provide domestic workers with secure employment at times of crisis, along with protection of rights against sudden dismissals. The legislative architecture discussed here would help the formalization process.

There are several promising initiatives in the private sector. For example, “Hello Task” is a digital platform for on-demand domestic worker service in Dhaka, which began in 2017, basing itself on the Uber model. It is a private agency that supplies domestic workers registered with them to clients’ doorstep through the medium of the digital app. Through “Hello Task,” the domestic workers receive training from the partner organizations of this agency, such as BRAC and Oxfam. The training includes teaching them the operation of digital apps and digital financial services, operation of household electronic gadgets, and professionalism. The agency provides the workers with contracts, uniforms, and identity cards. Supporting and mainstreaming such initiatives could be an effective way of bringing domestic workers into the formal sector.

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Annex-1

Description of the Sample of Domestic Workers

Sl. no	Name	Age	Marital status	Education	Type of earner	Reason for migration
1	Shefali Begum	35	Married	Class 3	Main earner	Has debts in village
2	Nazma	45	Widowed	No education/less than primary	Sole earner	Has loan in the village due to losing money in business/self-employed (small business)
3	Rozina	40	Widowed	No education	Main earner	Husband died and has no income earner in the family at the time
4	Khadiza	65	Abandoned	No education	Main earner	Migrated from Pakistan, two years before the liberation war
5	Sahanaz	35	Widowed	Secondary	Main earner	Migrated due to marriage
6	Nurun Nahar	60	Married	No education	Secondary earner	Migrated due to marriage
7	Monoara Begum	60	Widowed	No education	Sole earner	Migrated because of river erosion
8	Khodeza	40	Married	No education/less than primary	Secondary earner	Migrated due to marriage
9	Taramon Bibi	55	Widowed	No education/less than primary	Main earner	Before the flood in 1988, migrated for better income-earning opportunities
10	Momotaz	45	Widowed	No education/less than primary	Main earner	Lost everything in river erosion
11	Dilruba	40	Widowed	No education/less than primary	Sole earner	Husband died and has no other income earner
12	Nargis Akter	50	Widowed	No education/less than primary	Secondary earner	Husband died and has no other income earner
13	Firoza begum	40	Widowed	No education/less than primary	Main earner	Financial crisis
14	Ayesha	40	Widowed	No education/less than primary	Sole earner	Migrated because of husband's torture
15	Parvin Akter	28	Separated	No education	Sole earner	Migrated as child
16	Hanifa Bibi	40	Separated	Class 5	Sole earner	Migrated with husband
17	Lotifa	32	Widowed	No education/less than primary	Main earner	Financial hardship in village
18	Rubina	25	Separated	No education/less than primary	Sole Earner	Migrated with husband
19	Fatema	34	Widowed	No education/less than primary	Main earner	Migrated with parents
20	Salma Akter	38	Widowed	No education/less than primary	Sole earner	Poverty in village

21	Mazeda	35	Married	No education/less than primary	Secondary earner	Migrated with husband for ready-made garments (RMG) work
22	Suborna	27	Married	No education/less than primary	Secondary earner	Financial crisis in village
23	Morium begum	30	Married	No education/less than primary	Secondary earner	Less income in village
24	Halima	27	Married	No education/less than primary	Secondary earner	Had no income in village
25	Rehena	30	Married	No education/less than primary	Secondary earner	Had loans in village and could not repay
26	Sapna	25	Separated	No education	Sole earner	Migrated with husband
27	Shelina	26	Divorced	No education/less than primary	Sole earner	Migrated single for RMG work
28	Ratna Akter	30	Married	No education/less than primary	Secondary earner	Migrated with husband
29	Rahela Akter	25	Married	No education	Secondary earner	Migrated as a child for domestic work
30	Shahinur	25	Married	No education/less than primary	Secondary earner	Migrated as a child for domestic work