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Domestic Violence: Situation worsened due to lockdown constraints

Finds research conducted by BIGD

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Although domestic violence was pervasive in Bangladesh even before the pandemic, the situation has worsened due to lockdown-induced constraints in access to justice for survivors of domestic violence, found latest research.

The pandemic is responsible for limiting survivors' access to formal institutions during the "lockdown". Movement restrictions and halt of public transport made it extremely difficult for women to travel outside their homes and reach out for help, the in-depth research mentioned.

It also pointed to courts being shut and NGOs providing legal aid having to close their physical spaces.

Although local authorities became burdened with relief distribution, and police were implementing lockdown measures, they were eventually able to respond to women seeking assistance, it said.

The findings of the research titled "Access to Justice for Survivors of Domestic Violence During Covid-19" was presented at a webinar yesterday, jointly organised by Brac Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), Brac University and the Rule of Law Programme of GIZ Bangladesh, and was supported by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, and the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO).

The research was conducted by BIGD in collaboration with Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST), Brac Human Rights and Legal Aid Services (HRLS) and RDRS Bangladesh, and was commissioned by the Rule of Law Programme, which is supported by law ministry and home ministry.

According to the research, many government and non-government institutions adopted measures to provide services during the pandemic, such as district-level hotlines for providing psychosocial counselling and referral services.

Virtual courts were operational primarily for urgent matters such as bail hearings rather than for cases of domestic violence and family matters, it found.

Speaking as chief guest, Zinat Ara, former judge of the Appellate Division, said, "We need to consider operation of courts as an emergency service, similar to other emergency services that are active during the pandemic."

Senior district and sessions judge Ummey Kulsum -- also joint secretary (opinion) at Law and Justice Division, and national project director at GIZ Bangladesh -- said, "The findings will provide directions for future strategies for the judiciary and relevant institutions in ensuring access to justice for women and children, especially for victims of domestic violence, and for amending necessary laws and policies."

German Ambassador to Bangladesh Peter Fahrenholtz also joined the webinar and said, "We believe that women's and girls' recovery from the pandemic will need to be addressed as early as possible. I sincerely hope that both government and non-government actors will work together to find ways to better support women and girls in accessing justice."

Rule of Law Programme Head Promita Sengupta said, "As Bangladesh attempts to recover its health and economy during Covid, all planning and actions toward relief, recovery, rebuilding and rehabilitation must therefore be modelled in such a way as to support and strengthen women's choices, safety, autonomy and development."

Dr Imran Matin, executive director of BIGD; Judith Herbertson, development director of FCDO Bangladesh; Jenefa Jabbar, director of Brac's HRLS, Social Compliance and Safeguarding; Sara Hossain, honorary executive director of BLAST; and Mazbahun Nahar, project coordinator of JPR Project and focal of Women's Rights Unit, RDRS Bangladesh, were present at the webinar.

The event was moderated by Barrister Manzoor Hasan, executive director of Brac University's Centre for Peace and Justice.