

# BNPS fights COVID-19 pandemic

2020



**Bangladesh Narti Progati Sangha (BNPS)**

## ***Background***

As an activist women organization Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha (BNPS) has been fighting for women's equality from its inception in 1986. However, across the life of the organization, BNPS has always responded in every humanitarian crisis because women are most vulnerable during natural and human made disaster. BNPS has wide-ranging experiences to operate gender sensitive emergency program in Dhaka in 1988 and Sandwip in 1991. Later on, it's worked on relief and rehabilitation program at Dhaka in 1998 and at Netrakona in 2001. During the time of humanitarian program at Sandwip, BNPS learned how natural disaster affects women and man differently. That was the first time BNPS identified women's special strategic need in disaster situation and started gender sensitive humanitarian approach in disaster response. This operation was funded by the then ODA (now FCDO) and France Embassy along with SDC. BNPS documented case studies of affected women of Sandwip visiting door to door and taking in-depth interview and presented the findings at the World Disaster Management Forum in 1995 in Japan.

BNPS is actively involved with different national and regional networks and forums. Bangladesh Women's Humanitarian Platform (BWHP), Start Fund Bangladesh Steering Committee and Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group (GiHA WG) are some of them. In addition, as part of multi country program, BNPS has been implementing a project since 2010 funded by Oxfam on climate change and DRR in Haor region of Bangladesh with special emphasis on developing resilience and coping strategy to reduce vulnerability of women during disaster.

Considering the situation of COVID 19 and learning of Chinese experience, BNPS started working before the outbreak in Bangladesh. At the initial stage, the organization focuses on awareness raising activities, later on initiated distribution of food and hygiene kits in coordination with local government, district and Upazila administration, involving villagers, BNPS organized group members, CBOs and also through partner NGOs working in a number of districts. BNPS considers three main dimensions of the problems i.e health, social and economic. As a woman focused organization, BNPS priorities women and girls.

With limited resources, BNPS quickly responded to the COVID-19 crisis with innovative ideas. When everybody was talking about hand washing, many of the organizations were not aware about ability of poor and extreme poor of procuring soaps, suggesting to stay at home but not thinking on how the people will manage daily living those need to work every day to earn. Agencies were not considering contamination of pond water rather putting emphasis on distribution of mask, talking social transmission of deadly virus, how many people affected, how many died but not sharing the information where to get testing and treatment.

At the program side the pandemic has been seriously affecting the plan of actions to implement regular program activities. By this time, BNPS has communicated with the donor agencies to inform them about the situation. BNPS has also developed contingency plan based on two scenarios. Firstly, if the crisis gets over within a short period of time, how we will achieve the target set in each program within the stipulated period. Secondly, no cost extension of the project period to cover the activities. In this case the organization has forecasted a deficit of fund because the staff salaries have to be paid during the pandemic period when the staff are involved with

emergency lifesaving activities. Cost of program activities will be unspent but we need staff to carry out the activities once the situation gets improved.

As per the government decision, BNPS staff started working full time in office from the 4th of May 2020 after 66 days working from home, maintaining health measures to ensure safety of staff and stakeholders. BNPS set mandatory rule to check temperature of every staff at the entrance by thermal scanner and allocate more budget than normal time to purchase liquid soap, hand sanitizer, facial tissue, antiseptic spray, covered bin and other accessories to meet safety measure at the offices. To maintain physical distance the policy of attending 50% of the staff in office in each day is adopted.



*Ms. Morsheda Khatun, Additional Superintendent of Police, Sadar Circle, Netrakona delivering her speech before inaugurating the dignity kits distribution at Netrakona Centre of BNPS*

### **BNPS initiatives**

BNPS organized emergency meeting on 20 February 2020 with all staff at central office to orient them about COVID 19, how it spread, what should be preventive measure and how should we respond to the crisis to share the preventive messages among the people in rural areas and urban slums, among the ethnic minorities in CHT and adapt ourselves with the new situation. At the meeting it was decided that we need to ensure safety of our staff, stakeholders, program participants and volunteers. BNPS advised to refrain its staff from organizing and attending meeting, training, workshops and avoid mass gathering during the crisis period and advised to follow alternative ways to keep contact with women group leaders, leaders of Narider Adda (women platforms at the villages and urban slums). In order to avoid face to face contact with the people for program purposes staff are advised to organize/attend online meeting for program planning, monitoring, data collection, sharing feedback and contact group leaders over

mobile phone to share preventive messages about COVID 19 among the women group members and program information among the community people.

BNPS field staff were involved with collecting information on movement of the people supposed to be on “home quarantine”, through the group leaders because of their movement outside homes was risky in transmitting Coronavirus among others at the community. If there were such cases, BNPS volunteers informed the village chiefs and elected public representatives to ensure home quarantine.

BNPS advised its staff, volunteers and the people we work with to avoid social events such as marriage ceremony, reduce going to the market, tea stall and maintain physical distance while meeting people.

BNPS central office staff were responsible for maintaining regular contact with field staff over phone and email to collect COVID 19 related information at the working areas, institutions, factories particularly garment factories where majority of the workers are women and they are the most vulnerable due to lack of awareness about Coronavirus, absence of adequate wash facilities and congested work place. BNPS staffs have maintained contact with trade union leaders to share the message of prevention among the garment workers.

BNPS staff at the central office-maintained communication with the donor agencies, ensured submission of the program and financial reports, developed and approved plan of emergency relief activities and conducted online meeting with the field staff, distributed food and hygiene kits among 50,891 vulnerable people of 12,000 households. BNPS shared COVID 19 preventive awareness raising messages among around one million people of 189,550 households in different districts.

BNPS provided food items (rice, flour, dal, cooking oil, salt, potato, onion, sugar) and non-food items (washing soap, hand sanitizer, mask and dignity kits) to poor people to help meeting their immediate needs. Besides, in Mohongonj area BNPS also addressed the community need by setting up community-based hand washing facilities, repaired existing WASH system and provided support to the food banks. BNPS provided PPE for the response workers for their protection.

### ***Countered misinformation***

Generally, people share misinformation with best of intentions. People learn something and they think it is useful and pass through others. This is particularly true with health advice. People who pass misinformation about Coronavirus think they are helping people to stay safe. However, the information they share neither recommended by WHO nor approved by the ministry of Health and based on wrong analysis of religious preaching which is counterproductive to prevent the spread of deadly virus. In Bangladesh, at the initial stage of Corona outbreak, there were huge misinformation, propaganda and rumor surfaced among the people, especially in the rural areas and urban slums where the literacy rate is low and access to accurate information is limited. For example, people said that no one can protect themselves from death related to Coronavirus, therefore no need to follow the health advisory. Also propagated that spreading of COVID 19 will be stopped when a star called “Suraiya” will appear on the sky on 12<sup>th</sup> of May 2020. A vested group propagated ‘if you are a Muslim, you will not get Coronavirus’. When Muslim countries got

affected then they said 'if you pray five times, will not get the virus'. After that when some people those prayed five times got affected then they said 'those people did not have full trust on Islam'.

It was a challenge of countering such kind of propaganda as majority of the rural people believe the religious preaching. BNPS took strategy to refer WHO and ministry of health directives to get space to share accurate and scientific information. BNPS distributed government leaflet and used loudspeaker to disseminate information about prevention of COVID 19 pandemic because in many cases people cannot read the leaflets.

Moreover, people at the villages and urban slums did not understand what is "isolation, quarantine, lockdown, physical distancing", therefore, BNPS translated those words into local language/dialect to simplify for easy to understand by the mass people. BNPS staff also shared information with the people to refrain from sneezing, coughing and spitting in public.

The unique steps BNPS had taken to engage local people to disseminate preventive information in local languages in Chittagong Hill Tracts (there are 11 language speaking groups in the region) when all other actors announced the information in Bangla language which was not understood by the local indigenous people especially by the women.

BNPS promoted awareness not to take bath themselves and bring their cattle for bathing at the same pond and river to protect water from contamination. Rather people can take water from those places using jar for household works and bathing.

Through the awareness raising initiatives, BNPS reached in total 843,961 populations of 201,550 households.

### ***Responding to GBV in the context of COVID 19***

At the village level sharing of COVID 19 information on preventive measures were not usually women friendly. The way the message is broadcasted through television, newspapers and using loudspeaker at the market places not necessarily reached the women effectively. Women in rural area, especially in *Haor and hilly* region, do not have access to newspapers; poor women do not get scope to watch television (most of them do not either have it) so that they are dependent on men to get information. The way men narrated the information (specially the illiterate men) with their spouses was a question to understand how much it was effective to control the virus transmission and the role women can play. Moreover, women lack access to mask, hand sanitizer, soap to use for protection. One to one communication with illiterate women could have better results but there was no such provision. Some vested groups shared negative messages on COVID 19 through social media, distributed leaflets using religion which is totally against of the WHO and government directives. The illiterate people quickly became motivated due to propaganda using religion and spread the same message with their spouses.

Women headed poor households those live on daily income are still in severe condition. They do not have scope to earn from any other sources; neither can go out to look for jobs because all the activities outside homes were completely stopped. Men can borrow money from their friends but for poor women, it was really a challenge. Staying at home has increased unpaid care workload on women. The male members those usually go out to work are now at home. They

ask women to serve tea, food on time, washing clothes, taking care of elderly and started finding faults of their spouses.

Response to COVID 19, considering the context and prevention of GBV, the following intervention/activities have been taken among the youths, CBO leaders, women and girls in the working areas:

- Oriented staff, youth volunteers, CBO leaders (male & female), women and girls on GBV situation due to COVID 19;
- Shared the government hotline numbers to the staff, youths, CBO leaders, women and girls to make them equipped on complaining against GBV, linking for psycho-social support and treatment;
- Provided online counseling support to the victims of GBV.
- Sensitized family members & couples through sharing the messages on the burden of unpaid care work of women and necessity of equal sharing of household chores;
- The female volunteers advised pregnant and lactating mothers on the prevention and importance of maintaining personal hygiene;
- Created a fund by community volunteers of BNPS to support pregnant GBV victims for safe delivery; and
- BNPS women group members formed human chains maintaining safety protocol to protest rape and murder cases.

***Contributed to addressing girl's need: distributed dignity kits***

During Covid 19 pandemic women and girls of reproductive age have been facing huge difficulties in getting access to sanitary napkin and other related necessities due to lack of supply and money. It is evident in BNPS working areas where majority of girls are from poor households. Since BNPS care for the girl's need of managing menstruation, provided dignity kits to 980 girls in Dhaka, Mymensingh and Netrakona districts where the packages include sanitary napkin, bathing soap, hand sanitizer, under garments (panty) and detergent. The kits helped girls to maintain hygiene.

***Responded to need of women workers***

There is internal and external migration in the country. The government report says around a million external migrant worker came back to country due to the pandemic in the countries they were, not sure how many of them are men and how many of them are women. But it is obvious that women migrant workers also came back to country. As per government decision returnee migrants should be at home in separate rooms for 14 days. In many cases those returnee migrant women workers do not have separate rooms and they need to get involve with households' chores, taking care of children and family members. The situation was really not helpful for the returnee migrant women at their families.

At the same time, a huge number of women and men aspiring migrant workers those were ready to go to other countries to work but the receiving countries asked for COVID-19 test report. As the country lack facilities of testing and having limited number of kits those are using for

suspected cases so that aspiring migrants do not get tested. Moreover, shut down of air travel stopped them going out of the country. In recent time the government has set up special booth for migrant workers to get COVID test.

Those migrants' workers have come back to the country and those were aspiring to go but cannot, are in uncertainty about their jobs and getting money back that they paid to the recruiting agencies by selling out assets. In this case, women are more sufferer for losing their assets as well as all the blames are on to them. This has increased family conflict. Moreover, around 385,000 Garment workers over 80% of them are women already lost their jobs due to industry layoff.

To address these problems BNPS took following initiatives:

- Published a number of articles on the popular daily newspapers on labor rights in this crucial time to attract attention of the policy makers to the need of poor female garment workers those were not paid salary on top of that terminated from their jobs due to shutdown of the factories.
- BNPS issued several press releases on labor rights;
- BNPS ED talked to the policy makers to address labor issues which has link with food security in the country; and
- Work with trade unions for protecting workers rights.

### ***Contributing at the national level***

BNPS is always active on advocacy activities. At the pandemic situation the Executive Director has taken up different approaches to work on advocacy at the national level. She has promoted voices of the marginalized affected by lock down through electronic media, published number of articles on the daily newspapers on labor rights, issued press release and talked to the policy makers over telephone to address concerned issues.

The ED attended a television talk show at DBC on COVID 19 and gender-based violence. This was part of awareness raising activities through electronic media where she was the only speaker invited by television program producer considering her effective role as women leader at the national level and her contribution on gender equality in the country. She focused on women's rights, men's responsibilities to support their spouses while at homes, spoke about peaceful coexistence and gender-based violence.

The Executive Director analyzed the stimulus packages declared by the government for different private and public sectors to address post COVID 19 situations. She noticed, there was no allocation for the extreme poor, vulnerable women those do not have asset for mortgage to accessing institutional loans. She issued a press release demanding special allocation for those groups mentioned above. The press release was published on the Bangla and English dailies and online portals. The government afterwards, declared BDT 300 million stimulus packages for extreme poor, vulnerable women headed households and other excluded groups.

As the *Haor* regions (low lying flood affected area) had challenges for harvesting their rice (only one agriculture product for whole year) due to shortage of labor. Every year, labors come to the

*Haor* region from the northern part of the country but due to COVID 19 pandemic transport was stopped so that labor could not come by themselves at the *Haor* region to work. The government instructed the District Commissioners to arrange labor for harvesting rice and arrange transport for them but the result of this initiatives was very limited. The government officials either did not contact with the labors in the villages or they failed to manage works at several fronts at the same time. The end result was, *Haor* region did not have required number of laborers even when rain and flood water was approaching the land. During that crucial moment the Executive Director talked to the members of the parliament from *Haor* region, suggested them directly contact with the district administration of the labor surplus districts, arrange transport by the MPs to bring labor maintaining social distancing and other health and hygiene protocols. As per her suggestions the MPs took steps to mitigate labor crisis at the *Haor* region.

In addition, BNPS team has been collecting information from national and international sources about COVID 19, its nature, how it spreads, its socioeconomic impact, gender dimension of the crisis and suggestions of the experts and sharing these with BNPS staff, partner NGOs, networks and encouraged ADAB to share the messages with the member organizations.



*Mr. Golam Morshed, UNO of Barhatta Upazila inaugurated emergency support distribution initiative at Barhatta*

### ***Involvement of BNPS organized group members***

BNPS youth groups, community forums and CBOs were engaged with relief distribution, awareness raising and liaising with the local government to enlist the poor women for

government support. They also shared the health department hotline numbers with the villagers and slum dwellers.

Information of the field was that people do not follow social distancing in the villages especially during weekly market days so BNPS staff and member of Community Forums, youth groups worked with the market committees to share preventive information and importance of maintaining social distance. The market (Haat) committees encouraged people not to come to the market everyday rather to buy daily necessities from village level small shops.

Village and ward level volunteers of BNPS also supported the Members and Chairpersons of UP, Councilors of the City Corporations and municipality to include extreme poor and other vulnerable people for the government support.

BNPS group members mobilized fund from the community and public sources to help extremely vulnerable women. Through this way they provided support to 37,104 persons of 8,817 extreme poor households.

### ***Provided support to the government***

BNPS staff have supported government activities engaging with local administration on food distribution through identifying most vulnerable people in Dhaka, Netrakona, Mymensingh and Chattogram districts, took part in distributing items and worked together with other NGOs in the field. The government initiatives through BNPS benefitted 120,000 people those were previously left out from the relief support by any agencies. Besides, BNPS cooperated 'Market for one-minute activity' of Bangladesh Army, Region 2, in Chittagong for selecting beneficiaries, preparing distribution plan and providing volunteer support to distribute relief items among the vulnerable people.

### ***Management of the initiatives***

BNPS formed a central level committee involving Senior Management Team (SMT) headed by the Executive Director to analyze the situation and take lead to work hand in hand in coordination with the local government, district and upazila administration, BNPS field offices, NGOs, local doctors and community leaders. The organization has provided orientation to the staff, volunteers and youth group members on COVID 19 pandemic, preventive measures, social responsibilities and personal safety. In addition, a "COVID-19 Crisis Management Team" has been formed at the central offices comprising member of senior and mid-level managers to collect field level information on regular basis and advice the SMT.

Following the directives of WHO and GoB, a transparent guideline provided to the field offices to follow during the information dissemination and distribution of food and hygiene items.

For purchasing food and hygiene kits all the center offices formed committees following the organizational procurement policy. BNPS field teams at different project locations of the country got fully involve with humanitarian activities.

### ***Involvement with local government and CSOs***

BNPS informed and invited local administrations (District Commissioner, Upazila Nirbahi Officer, Social Welfare Officer etc.), police stations (Additional Superintendent of Police, Officer in Charge

of police station), elected representatives (Mayor, Ward Councilor, Union Parishad Chairman, Member, etc.) journalists and influential CSO members to attend the venue during distribution of goods among the community people. Many places they attended and supported. In some places BNPS included them as a member of the distribution committee.

DC of Netrakona inaugurated food item distribution program & ASP (Sadar Circle) inaugurated dignity kit distribution where UNO & Mayor were informed about the events and they provided support. In Barhatta upazila UNO attended the distribution program and inaugurated the event. Three UP members attended at Mohongonj upazila, UNO and the UP Chairman attended the event at Sandwip upazila and two UP Chairman and three Karbaris attended the event at Khagrachari district. In Rayerbazar event Social Welfare Officer of DSCC, two police officers from Hagaribagh thana, Ward Councilor of the Ward number 14 and Ward number 34 and a senior journalist attended the event.

**Table of achievement:**

Regions covered		
<b>District</b>	8	Dhaka, Netrakona, Mymensingh, Chattogram, Bandarban, Khagrachori, Kishoreganj and Habiganj
<b>City Corporation</b>	4	Dhaka North City Corporation, Dhaka South City Corporation, Chattogram City Corporation, Mymensingh City Corporation
<b>Municipality</b>	2	Netrakona Municipality and Patiya Municipality
<b>Upazila</b>	12	Netrakona Sadar, Barhatta, Mohanganj, Mymensingh Sadar, Patiya, Sandwip, Kishoreganj Sadar, Pakundia, Chunarughat, Madhabpur, Khagrachari Sadar and Bandarban Sadar

Area covered by BNPS emergency response						
Type of interventions	District	Upazila	City Corporation/ Municipality	Wards	Unions	Village/ Mohalla
Food and hygiene kits distribution by BNPS using donor's fund.	6	10	4 CC & 1 Municipality	19	29	135
Food and sanitizing materials distribution by BNPS organized group's fund	2	2	2 CC & 1 Municipality	3	3	24
Food and sanitizing materials distribution by BNPS organized groups using fund collected by themselves from different sources	5	7	2 CC & 1 Municipality	12	28	134
<b>Total</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>4 CC &amp; 2 Municipality</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>179</b>
Information dissemination and others initiatives by BNPS	3	8	3 CC & 1 Municipality	14	2	24
<b>Grand total</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>4 CC &amp; 2 Municipality</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>179</b>

<b>Type of awareness campaign and household coverage</b>					
<b>District</b>	<b>Upazila/City Corporation</b>	<b>Using loudspeaker</b>	<b>Individual communication</b>	<b>Mobile phone communication</b>	<b>Leaflet Distribution</b>
Netrakona	Netrakona Sadar	40,000	600	200	300
	Barhatta	40,000	600	250	
	Mohanganj	21,000	800	300	
Dhaka	DNCC and DSCC		1,200	550	500
Chattogram	CCC	50,000	550	150	300
	Patiya	20,000	300	50	300
	Sandwip	10,000	800	350	450
<b>Household covered</b>		<b>181,000</b>	<b>4,850</b>	<b>1,850</b>	<b>1,850</b>
<b>Total</b>		<b>189550</b>			

<b>Total population covered</b>		
<b>Types of interventions</b>	<b>Household</b>	<b>Recipient</b>
Food and hygiene kits distribution by BNPS using donor's fund	3183	13787
Food and sanitizing materials distribution by BNPS organized groups own fund	1769	7502
Food and sanitizing materials distribution by BNPS organized groups using fund collected from different sources.	7048	29602
<b>Total</b>	<b>12000</b>	<b>50891</b>
Information dissemination and others initiatives by BNPS	189550	793070
<b>Total</b>	<b>201,550</b>	<b>843,961</b>

### ***Current situation of women***

Increased GBV, especially domestic violence, child marriage, abuse, exploitation, neglect to the elderly people is evident in the society. People from low-income groups, especially women, have been facing economic hardship, food insecurity, and have become victims of domestic violence amid "stay-at-home" to control Covid-19 transmission.

A study conducted by icddr'b (August 2020) showed that the shutdown has put women at risk of experiencing deteriorating mental health. The same research found that frustration among the women of the low-income groups have increased. Around 68 percent of the respondents said their levels of anxiety have increased. More than half of the women who had previous experiences of mental and physical torture in family surroundings said such torture had increased during the shutdown.

In addition, 49.2% of women and girls at households feel safety and security is an issue due to the lockdown and loss of livelihoods. Impact of COVID-19 putting adolescent girls at higher risk

with insufficient access to sexual and reproductive health services and child marriage. Referrals system are not well functioning as police, health and social services are diverted to COVID 19 response (UNDP 2020).

According to a study by The Bangladesh Nari Sramik Kendra (BNSK) on internal migrant female workers, almost 94% of workers in Dhaka faced domestic violence for the lack of income during the pandemic. Majority of women (88%) in the survey worked in informal jobs such as domestic help, street vendor and cleaner; and the remaining 12% were garment workers. Respondents from the study reported their husbands tortured them due to mental stress followed by economic insecurity caused by job losses.



*Part of the BNPS's emergency support receivers from indigenous communities of Bandarban Hill district*

### ***Panic in Pandemic: Making Profit out of RMG Workers Pocket***

Due to COVID-19 pandemic the government of Bangladesh declared public holidays from March 25, 2020. This decision was taken to stop outside movement of the people so that transmission of deadly virus can be contained. During this period all the garment factories in the country stopped working claiming that they have been following the government directives of general holidays. But later on, it was revealed that, notices were hanged at the factory gate mentioning the rules 12, 16 and 20 of the labor laws, that says, the employers can terminate employment of any employees without giving prior notice. Using this provision, the factory owners terminated employment of the workers working for less than a year. Although the government asked the factory owners do not terminate any workers in this pandemic situation but the employers of Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector did not listen to that advice. In this situation the government approved BDT 500 million stimulus package for the sector to pay at least 3 months wages to the workers even though the factory owners did not stop termination.

Due to closer of the factories, the workers went back to their native villages. From April 25, 2020, RMG factory owners decided to start working again and communicated with the workers to come back to work, if failed to join on time they will lose their jobs. There was no transport available to travel so that women and men workers walked miles after miles to reach their destinations to secure their jobs. At the same time, the employers informed selected number of workers that they can join the works later on. Believing the message, those workers did not come back to the factories on April 25,2020. The factory owners took this as an opportunity to show the workers were absent from works therefore terminated them.

In April, the workers of some of the factories those did not get monthly wages and used rules 12, 16 and 20 of the labor laws by the factory owners to terminate them started protesting the decision and the factory owners filed cases against them alleging of agitation, organizing illegal protest and threatening security of the factories. Using the cases, the factory owners again terminated the workers those were senior and had a bit higher salary and replaced the positions with new recruits with less salaries. Around 15% of the senior workers have already lost their jobs. Applying these techniques factory owners accumulated more profit out of workers' pocket.

Some trade union leaders are associated with Bangladesh Garment Manufacturer and Exporter Association (BGMEA) leaders and using this connection, the factory owners paying lump sum amount to the terminated workers. If they protest the decision, factory owners threatened them saying, there will be more police cases against them.

BNPS has undertaken a program to work with the RMG workers, trade unions, factory owners and labor offices to address the challenges through training to the trade union leaders and workers to develop negotiation skill and linking them with the employers and the government departments for support.

### ***Peasant perception of COVID-19***

COVID-19 spread all over the country from cities to towns, villages and hilly areas affecting people irrespective of socioeconomic status but it seems the pandemic infected middle class and the rich more than the poor, elderly than the youth, men than the women. Despite huge effort on raising preventive awareness by the government, non-government agencies and the media, people's perception on COVID-19 varies and may not necessarily their understanding have scientific evidence, neither have any relation with virus transmission.

Our colleagues attended program meetings in the villages, urban slums, hilly areas and during the discussion they asked the participating women about COVID-19 situation in their localities. They noticed different perceptions among the people about the pandemic. In Dhaka and Chottogram slums the poor women think, rich people get infected by COVID-19 specially those have high rise building; this disease is not for the poor people. Some perceived, those people have become rich through corruption they are affected by COVID-19. We are hardworking people, work in the sun, carry out physical labor, we will not get infected by Coronavirus. A participant says look, how many people at our slum died due to COVID-19, none, the rich people are dying because they always try to maintain personal hygiene so that they get COVID-19.

The villagers perceived; people do not follow religious practices now a days therefore Allah has sent COVID-19 to punish them. Coronavirus will not affect poor people because Allah helps them.

People also said, if we wear face mask and sit idle how we will manage our food? We need to work so that we do not use mask. In a sub district close to Dhaka our staff found all the women attending meeting wore red thread ribbon at their hands. The staff asked the women why all of you wear the same colored thread at your lower parts of the arm. The women said, this thread is purified by a traditional healer using *Mantra* at their village so that they will not be affected by Corona virus. Some people say, only sinners will be affected. Another group mention, CORONA is a media issue only. We watch the death-toll on television every day, but before CORONA people also died for many reasons. This is wrath from God to bring back the people from wrong doing.

It has been noticed there are huge number of new graves at the graveyards in the villages and the people said, due to seasonal flue or heart attack many people died in their communities but no one died due to COVID-19.

In Chittagong hill tracks indigenous people stated, their traditional ayurvedic medicine is enough to prevent from COVID-19. They said initially we were more afraid, now it has reduced a bit because it seems that the power of the virus has weakened. Some people said, we live with different type of viruses every day, so this virus has adapted to our bodies. Everyone has to die one day, so there is nothing to be worried about Corona virus- a group of women seemingly believe. The indigenous people said, Corona virus has not affected us because of drinking a mixture of local plant herbs and alcohol. Some perceived, drinking warm water will protect them from being infected, another group mentioned, homeopathic medicines are effective in preventing corona virus. Some said, indigenous people are less affected by corona virus because of eating dry fish and Nappi (made of shrimp, different fish).

It might happen that the perception of women on COVID-19 pandemic developed based on information got from the male members of their families, influenced by the traditional healers, local religious leaders, illiteracy or awareness raising messages was not women friendly or sharing strategies was not appropriate.

### ***Lessons learned***

COVID-19 has further widened inequality in resource holding among the people. This could promote violence and anarchy in the society. A recent study (PPRC, BIGD-August 2020) found 15% people could not afford to have 3 meals in a day, new poor has contributed to doubling the pre COVID figures that is 40.2% of the total 165 million people and income of women headed households reduced by 80%. Unemployment rate has increased from 9% to 25%, 2.5 million people already lost their jobs and around 10 million are at risk of losing work opportunities, most of them are from informal sector and majority of them are women. If the situation is unaddressed, there will be tremendous negative effect on social and economic sector in the country.

In Bangladesh, there is reverse migration of poor people from urban to rural areas because of higher living costs in the cities and closing of income earning opportunities. Development activities focused on urban centers which has created serious imbalance of job opportunities as a result, rural areas do not have capacity to absorb additional labor force. But the urban informal workers, professionals, returnee expatriates converging on ill prepared villages.

The worst hit of the pandemic are women and girls, GBV is on the rise, divorce cases have been increasing, schools are still closed but can predict higher drop outs of girls due to economic inability of the parents, trafficking, exploitation of women, exerting dowries and increase number of child marriage, child labor. Joblessness, mental pressure could have psychological effect on the people specially women and children.

COVID-19 revealed the weaknesses of overall governance in the country particularly inefficiency in health sector, economic inability to manage severe and long-term crisis with own resources and exposes some well-placed people those have tried to make own fortune using the crisis. It is evident that developing countries like Bangladesh can hardly manage any crisis like COVID -19 with own resources at best for six months and then the countries need external support.

COVID-19 has exposed and exacerbated existing inequalities. Women's rights in particular have suffered under the new reality, and there are serious threats of being rolled back the gain of women empowerment, equality and gender justice. A strong women's rights movement is needed for transformative change and to support the rising needs of vulnerable women and girls during and post-crises

However, as time passes, it becomes difficult to understand what would be the scenario of donor's priorities, modalities of funding but BNPS felt that rehabilitation programs are necessary to engage women with economic activities, reduce girls drop out from the schools, preventing GBV in new normal. In that case tailor-made approach based on need assessment would be appropriate for effectiveness of the interventions.

### ***What need to be done***

1. A Multi-cluster Rapid Need Assessment has to be done immediately to identify the situation and the needs. Nonetheless, all assessments should be gender sensitive taking particular account of the needs of women and girls.
2. Subsidy on fertilizer and distribution of seeds, loan with low interest rate if appropriately implemented will benefit the people having land (middle class or upper middle class) but the poor landless people or having a small piece of land might not benefit from this initiative. Specially designed stimulus package for extreme poor linking with skill development and income generation is necessary
3. BNPS believes, prevention and mitigation led by women and youth supported by the community leaders, public and private sectors can have quick and impactful results. To improve the situation, it is necessary to increase institutional and community capacities and counter discrimination based on sex, ethnicity and religion. Ensuring continued functioning of small producers, informal workers and SMEs across the sectors is vital to continue production and safeguarding access of vulnerable women to food and other goods and services. To do this, the situation should be analysed using equity lens to ensure gender equality in all the services including incomes and employment. Special effort needs to be placed on stopping VAW/G and child marriage.
4. Youth focused awareness raising activities are needed because they are not following health safety protocol such as reluctant to use face mask, meet friends for socialisation

without following physical distance mantra, hanging out with friends and bringing the virus at homes that affect the elderly people and women those are staying back at homes.

5. Massive programs on rebuilding livelihood opportunities in rural and urban slums are necessary to facilitate employment and income of the poor particularly poor women. At the same time activities on social cohesion, inclusion, prevention of GBV, promotion of secularism and diversity together with peace building in the community is of urgent need. Special effort needs to be placed to check drop out of girls and child labor through creating income support mechanism for the parents.
6. Greater coordination with the government departments, NGOs, CSOs, local government and communities is necessary to have need-based programs and addressing the loopholes of the mainstream system.