

REPORT COVID-19 PANDEMIC
**MISINFORMATION AND
COMMUNICATION CRISIS
IN BANGLADESH**



BANGLADESH

*COVID-19 Pandemic
Misinformation and Communication crisis*

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PART 1

BACKGROUND

Context

Covid-19 pandemic has immensely affected almost all aspects of life and lives around every bit of the world. The world has become paralysed in terms of flow of information; and a large information gap has arisen. Most of the information relating to Covid-19 on social media has emerged as a major problem. The social media has opened up a new window to share the outcomes of documented and researched contents, but also created opportunity for some people to fill this space with misleading information and rumours. These include, about the cure and protection from corona virus, false reports, fabricated references and misleading videos. In response to the ongoing Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in Bangladesh, several government, non-government and civil society organisations have been providing various types of information in different ways. The rapid study is conducted to assess the credibility and reach of this information in all levels of society.

At the beginning of the pandemic in Bangladesh people were confused about certain terms and phrases that are being used internationally to deal

with the pandemic, such as “stay at home,” “social distancing,” “quarantine,” “sanitization,” and “lockdown.” Each of these terms meant different understandings to people of different socio-economic background. Most people also have had doubts and confusion about the standard procedure of “hand-washing” or they were not sure what the proper meaning of “sanitization” is. Moreover, the proper procedure of using masks and related information from different sources also were confusing or in some cases conflicting to each other. As a result, many people wore masks in inappropriate ways which didn’t provide them safeguard from the virus infection. The graphic microscopic images of the virus and its contamination to a human body shown on TV channels were also misinterpreted and many of media outlets often circulated a large amount of contradictory information.

On other side, false and misleading information is pervasive during Covid-19. These include, different views of cure from corona virus, false reports, fabricated references, widespread videos by Islamist commentators providing false and misleading information, that provoked ignorance of following rules of Govt. agencies like IEDCR (Institute of Epidemiology Disease Control and Research) and WHO in Bangladesh citing that there’s nothing to do with the Corona virus as it is given by God as a symbol of punishment because of misdeeds of human beings. As a result hundreds of

thousands of people, regardless of education and socio-economic class living in rural and urban landscapes took this information into cognizance and ignored protection measures like wearing masks, maintaining social distance, washing hands etc. Most significantly, this phenomenon has created a fictional-spiritual discourse and dilemma among large believer population on Covid-19, leading them to hardship to differentiate fact and fiction. The spread of misinformation and communication crisis triggered mass panic and adversely impacted individual health.

To deal with disease, fear, panic, and uncertainty during a pandemic, it is imperative to ensure that the information provided to people is accurate and properly communicated. Sometimes, however, how this information is delivered is even more important, since a pandemic not only creates a public health and economic crisis but also generates misinformation and severe communication crisis.

Thus, false news and disinformation creates huge panic among people and disrupts normal activities and put negative impact on both physical and mental health. Also, government's messages to people are unclear, vague which people can not translate into action due to lack of understanding the language properly which is also a communication problem. These areas are seen as the crisis of communications.

Objectives

The core focus of the study was to contribute to the effort to combat the spread of misinformation around COVID-19 and provide right information with trusted source of reference by analysing the existing forms of information and communications patterns. The research deeply looked into how target communities are dealing with COVID-19, what are the gaps in knowledge, what are the best ways to deal the communities to support the fight against the crisis.

The study mainly dealt with the crisis of communications (e.g. health misinformation ecosystem) on social media by categorizing and detecting content, how it spreads, motivations that drive the creation and distribution, and the effects of exposure on attitudes and people's health. This also looked into how to measure and conduct effective interventions and to see the need for developing appropriate and communicable messages both for proactive campaigns to promote positive online/offline health outcomes and defensive measures to limit the reach of misinformation.

Methodology

In the study qualitative research sampling techniques is used with maximum variations in respondents. We interviewed a panel of different

people from the sample size through a survey questionnaire back translated into Bengali for localization and contextualization of the scenario to the interviewee. Keeping the COVID-19 pandemic in consideration to maintain social distancing telephonic interview and online focus group discussion were conducted to build up the situation. However, as a flaw of the study, some respondents who does not use social media and don't have necessary devices to access the social media; we have to conduct interviews face to face. Scenario-based public perceptions were collected via a purposive sampling survey method through a questionnaire. Datasets were analysed through a set of statistical techniques including classical test theory and principal component analysis.

Data collection was conducted through,

- *Telephone Interview,*
- *Netnography — gathering information from digital space,*
- *Online FGDs and consultations*
- *Survey questionnaires*

Sample size:

- *Urban, semi urban dwellers (including garments workers)*
- *Outreach communities (e.g. living in the wet land).*

PART 2

COMMUNICATION CRISIS

Bangladesh confirmed first corona virus case on 8 March 2020. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) declared special “general leave” from 26 March in the name of “lockdown” and extended it up to 30 May 2020 in seven different time slots. Both the words “general leave” and “lockdown” created confusion among the most socio-economically vulnerable groups in the country. The so-called lockdown and the social distancing strategy in a densely populated country of more than 165 million did not work properly. After the 45 days of a lockdown or partial lockdown, Italy, Brazil, Spain and Bangladesh had shown more than 100 deaths from COVID-19 infection. Currently, Bangladesh is going through widespread community transmission, while the lockdown was withdrawn on 30 May 2020. As of 31 May 2020, after the 65 days of lockdown, Dhaka was normal as usual where no social distancing or any health guideline was maintained.¹

After a delay in realizing the situation, the government of Bangladesh finally declared a general

holiday in late March to prevent social contact in a bid to prevent the spread of the pandemic, but it largely misfired. Once it was announced, millions of people hurriedly left major cities for their village homes, commuting in large crowds through railways, buses, and ships.

As the World Health Organization and other international organizations instructed everyone to follow certain restrictions, rules, and norms to contain the pandemic, terms such as “lockdown,” “quarantine,” “social distancing,” and “isolation” came into being. These were not familiar to the people of many non-Western countries like Bangladesh, and have been misunderstood or at least not understood accordingly. For example, social distancing does not effectively work in Bangladesh. Thus, lockdown became flawed.

*Many Bangladeshi’s do not realize what “quarantine” means. To them the word **Ghorbondi** (home confinement) makes more sense. For instance, in March, a Bangladeshi returnee from abroad was directed to be quarantined at his home in the capital. On the second day, curious people were found gathering around the house just to see how a man quarantines himself in his home. There were a lot such incidents taken place across the country especially in rural areas. Therefore, the term for Bangladeshi people, should have been “safe distance” or “physical distance” in spite of “social distance” to correctly communicate the meaning.*

¹<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10668-020-00867-y#Tab1>

Our study found that the practice of washing hand and information specific to this have taken up a narrative of its own. Many people have misinterpreted the instructions to wash hands for 20 seconds in various ways. Some said that the government has asked them to wash their hands for 20 minutes, while others said that they have been asked to wash their hands 20 times a day. Apparently many people have had no concrete idea about self hygiene and or standard hand washing procedure, wearing masks and other personal protective gears as compared to global discourses to tackle the pandemic, particularly those who live in the world's most crowded slums and refugee camps. Workers in the informal economy face acute challenges to meet their daily basic needs, and have fewer options for maintaining proper hygiene to prevent the spread of the disease. Moreover, the government did not consider the impact of a lockdown on the non-salaried poor people largely working in informal sectors. Given that approximately 85 percent of people work in informal sectors (street vendors, rickshaw pullers, and day laborers), the result of the lockdown caused most of them to lose their jobs and income sources leading to poverty and starvation.

Government's COVID-19 initiatives and Crisis of Communication

Government had a Preparedness Planning for health emergencies due to COVID 19 that aimed to reduce the burden associated with the health threat in terms of mortality and morbidity, hospitalizations and demand for health care goods and services; to maintain essential services, protect vulnerable groups, minimize economic and social disturbance and enable a quick return to normal conditions. The goal of the plan was the prevention and control of COVID-19 in Bangladesh to reduce impact on the health, wellbeing and economy of the country; subsequently prevention of entry of the disease in the country and in case of importation to prevent or limit local transmission. However, the goal of preventing importation and community transmission jeopardized the planning due to many reasons; and communication crisis is a paramount one among others.

In Bangladesh, as of November 09 there are 421921 COVID-19 positive cases and 6092 officially confirmed death cases. And the pandemic has spread in all of 64 districts in the country. The trend of transmission was at peak during June-July and then a steady drop until end of October with a rising curve since then; however the death rate is declining. Therefore, the initiatives taken by the government and Public-

Private Partnership, like medical interventions and economic stimulus and other measures were not effective to resist the spread and transmission of the pandemic in the country. There are several underlying reasons of this failure, among them the miscommunication and wrong perception of messages is a vital one; that led to ineffectiveness and problems in testing, identification, resisting community transmission and as well reaching economic stimulus/subsidy package benefits to the people. These issues are briefly discussed further ahead. However, comparing to other countries within the region and overall world trend Bangladesh is less affected in terms of health fatality and COVID positive cases even being the most densely populated country in the world. There must have some reasons behind this which requires further investigation.

Health Interventions to tackle COVID 19 and communication Crisis

Government of Bangladesh has taken different health initiatives to tackle COVID 19 that includes, COVID dedicated hospitals, testing centers, COVID dedicated health professionals, National Health hot lines and Tele-medicine services and a central COVID-19 information and assistance web portal.

Since the detection of the virus and first three months many of these services weren't available. Due to this there were huge information gap regarding the testing and treatment of COVID 19 that created a panic among

general public and even among the health professionals. No hospitals were ready to treat the patients, and gap in communication led to several deaths in earlier months of detection just because of dipping the patients and force them to move around from one hospital to other for treatment. There are certain examples that, in April, May and June in COVID dedicated hospitals, patients died without receiving any treatment in different forms; like they were denied entry to hospital, or sent one to other hospitals, delayed treatment and absence of doctors etc.

This public panic scenario was created and still persistent though comparatively at a lower rate than before, just because there were no focal point of information dissemination and coordination. Ministry of Health and Directorate of Health blamed each other, chaos was in media, and even the situation was like everybody blamed everybody. Later on, A National Health Emergency Advisory Committee were formed, they formulated guidelines and procedures that helped bit to come out of chaos. Additionally, at early stage due to lack of proper information and standard dissemination process, contradictory information were provided by different mainstream media on health and safety procedures created further confusion and chaos. Subsequently, COVID safety messages were perceived differently among people. That led to a greater chaos and a large number of people ignored the

correct messages from government, private and media organizations at later stages.

Economic Recovery packages, other initiatives and communication crisis

The government has so far announced 19 stimulus packages worth over \$12.11 billion (Tk 1, 02,957 cores) which is 3.7 per cent of total GDP to offset the COVID-19 shock on various sectors and minimize the sufferings of the people hit hard by the nationwide shutdown imposed to curb the spread of the deadly virus.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on May 14 launched the disbursement of Tk 12.5 billion (Tk 1,250 core) cash assistance among five million poor families hit hard amid the COVID-19 pandemic. These economic packages weren't properly distributed because of corruption among political leaders and government officials who used communication gap as a tool to repress the intended beneficiaries. Consequently, a large number of people, according to a media report around 50,000 people left the Capital city due to economic burden who was employed in informal sectors.

There was a 10 point directive from the PM to the people to contain the spread of the pandemic which was also largely misunderstood by the people especially, poor and less aware community of the country. Government called the Army to enforce the social distancing alongside regular police force which also didn't work properly largely

because of lack of proper channel of dissemination of information.

Private Sector health intervention, communication gap and health crisis

There were serious flaws from private sector hospitals in case of testing and treatment. Firstly, there was information gap regarding the testing and treatment of COVID 19 in private hospitals as no directive was provided from government to them to test and treat the disease. And, using this loop almost all private sector hospitals remained unresponsive to the crisis. Large number of people went to the private hospitals to test for COVID, they were denied access, and large number of health professionals were absent and many denied providing service due to the fear of transmission, because they didn't know what to do.

Two private organizations; one private hospital (Regent Hospital) and one health research organization (JKG Healthcare) provided thousands of fake COVID testing results and certificates to the people, which later were identified and now they are under legal proceedings. Initially, due to the communication and intervention gap these two fraud organizations took the opportunity and seek government permission to test COVID, government provided them permission on the ground that no other private healthcare organization showed interest in the issue. Therefore, these two organizations best used the information crisis as a weapon and

provided thousands of fake reports, which later was traced when people travelled abroad with these fake certificates and re-testing detected the COVID.

Statements of Ministers, government health body officials and Confusion

Political leaders and designated government officials have also been giving largely misleading statements that created large confusion among greater public. This research finds that public perception on the remarks of the politicians over COVID-19 is not satisfactory. Nearly 80 percent respondents consider their reaction as least satisfactory. These politicians meant to be in general; government, neutral and opposition. Only 3 percent respondents believe that politicians' activities depicted responsible behaviour. Bangladeshi ministers including the Health Minister have been alleged with questionable remarks. One of the ministers has told that Bangladesh is far stronger than COVID-19 and less than 1 percent respondents of this study believe his statement is rational. Another minister remarked that Bangladeshi hospitals are completely ready for fighting COVID-19 and only 9 percent respondents think his statement correct; 99 percent and 91 percent disagreement respectively over the ministers' remark illustrates that their remarks are vague, not data driven and public perception is quite negative towards

their statements.² In addition to the initiatives of government and nongovernmental organizations, social institutions have also weighed in. Among them, religion is perhaps the most powerful influence. While minimizing physical contact can help prevent disease, some religious practices such as congregation for prayer, encourage behavior in conflict with that recommendation. Religious leaders (such as imam, mawlana) could guide their followers to maintain the required physical distance by suggesting that they avoid crowded religious prayers at mosques.³

In the time of pandemic government and other agencies couldn't do enough awareness activity which next lead to the dangerous community transmission stage – an epidemic of fear and hatred has also been surging in the country. Not just in Bangladesh, Covid-19 positive patients across the world have reportedly suffered social stigma – hatred, xenophobia and denial of treatment. There are some notable incidents taken place which are certain instances supporting the argument, is discussed below,

- *After the decision was made by the government that bodies of the patients who died from Covid-19 will be buried at*

² COVID-19 and Bangladesh: A study of the public perception on the measures taken by the government
³https://www.anthropology-news.org/index.php/2020/05/20/the-meaning-of-lockdown-in-bangladesh/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=the-meaning-of-lockdown-in-bangladesh

Khilgaon-Taltola graveyard, the locals protested and put up a notice at the entrance gate asking the government not to bury the bodies there and instead to find some 'safer' place outside of Dhaka.

- *On March 21, when the second victim of covid-19 died in Mirpur. No burial has taken place at the graveyard.*
- *A female doctor working at Dhaka Medical College received an ultimatum from her landlord and neighbouring apartment owners in Old Dhaka to leave the apartment or the job – otherwise, they threatened to throw her out of the building.*
- *The apartment owners also put up a notice beside the building elevator that reads, "Doctors and nurses are prohibited from using the elevator," as reported by Medivoice, an online portal run by some dedicated health professionals.*
- *In the face of massive public protests, the government had to cancel its plans to set up a quarantine centre in Uttara's Diabari.*
- *Except for a few dedicated public hospitals, the majority of the hospitals are rejecting patients with flu, cough, sneeze, breathing problems, and other symptoms related to Covid-19.*
- *In August Dhaka city was preparing to enforce the lockdown into red, green and*

yellow zones right after when general countrywide lockdown didn't work based on consideration of the Covid-19 infection rate. The Ministry of Public Administration declared holidays in the red zones upward then. But the government could bring expected outputs with the plan as there were lack of information and coordination for specific zoning in the map. This type of lack of coordination is misled the people.

- *Many people who are very confident that they will not contract Covid-19 because they are honest and Muslims. It is very tough to convince them that in sermons some logics are not true. They are not convinced that sickness is for everyone.*
- *The government made an arrangement with Regent Hospital in Uttara to treat coronavirus patients. On March 22, in fear of the virus transmission, Uttara residents laid siege to the hospital; however, later government found out this hospital was conducting fake COVID tests and currently being prosecuted.⁴*

As there was lack of proper information flow and guidelines

⁴<https://tbsnews.net/thoughts/fear-hatred-and-stigmatization-grip-bangladesh-amid-covid-19-outbreak-61129>

numbers of misinformation was flying through social media and spreading like fire across the country. Thus, false news and disinformation creates huge panic among people and disrupts normal activities and put negative impact on both physical and mental health. Many groups in social media, mainly in Facebook spread fake news surging public confusion and panic. Also, government's messages to people were unclear, vague which people can not translate into action due to lack of understanding the language properly. These issues combined but not limited to created a large vacuum of correct information and its proper dissemination leading towards a crisis of communications.

Garment workers awkward situation for communication crisis

The fashion industry contributes 84.21% of the country's total exports and 20% of the GDP. Four-point-one million workers are engaged among this industry. However, the COVID-19 pandemic hit this sector very hard and lowered the employment rate in an alarming way. A 10 day countrywide shutdown from 24 March to 4 April as first response for preventing community transmission of COVID 19 was largely miss-communicated. This announcement led to people, including fashion workers leaving the capital for their village homes in droves as they perceived it as a general leave/vacation. The shutdown

was supposed to end on 4 April; many workers came back to the capital under the assumption that they have to return to work on 5 April. However, after their arrival, they learned that the shutdown had been extended until 12 April. Due to this lack of coordination between the garment sector and the government, factories did not reopen, which caused garment workers immense suffering from coming and going back to villages back and forth due to the lack of transportation, lodging, and food amidst the lockdown. On 10 April, Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) and Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA) announced in a joint statement that the RMG factories would remain closed until 25 April. During one month of lockdown (26 March to 25 April), China and Vietnam opened their factories. BGMEA feared the loss of their markets, so they decided to partially reopen factories starting from 26 April 2020 in a phased manner by maintaining the necessary health protocols. Still, BGMEA failed to control the number of factories reopening and, on the very first day, almost half of the RMG factories in Dhaka reopened, with the number increasing daily. However, it was not evident to what extent safety and social distancing measures were being maintained inside the factory. According to media reports, 97 RMG workers had become infected by 8

May, and 52% of them were infected after the reopening.

Slum dwellers thoughts gap on COVID 19 for communication crisis

During the primary data collection we interviewed Sahara Khatun, who lives in Korail Slum which is one of the largest urban ghettos in Dhaka city accommodating around 500,000 people. In evening in the Korail slum everything was normal; children were playing, adults were gossiping at roadside tea stalls and many people were wandering around without wearing a mask. Sahara Khatun is living around 22 years in the slum. Despite being scared of the novel corona virus, she does not care wearing a mask while outdoors in and around the slum area. When we questioned about it, she simply answered with a smile, "I do not have my mask with me right now, I left it at home".

In fact, there have been very few reports of Covid-19 positive and death cases in the slum areas. Most of the slum dwellers have no COVID 19 symptoms; and even if they are affected they are asymptotic and may have developed immunity. As like Sahara khatun majority of the slum dwellers in Dhaka think COVID 19 can't harm them and believe these diseases are for rich people. There are several socio-cultural and socio-economic reasons behind it, briefly these include,

- *Religious and cultural factors strongly influence belief system of poor and less mobilized community around the country including urban ghettos. They believe god will save them from all harms.*
- *As mentioned earlier they also believe that COVID like diseases are for rich people as a means of punishment of god.*
- *And a large information gap and lack of community awareness programs they didn't correctly communicate with the health awareness and safety measures to protect them from the Virus. That includes, the terminology used for containing the pandemic like, Lockdown, Social distancing and correct use of masks, hand washing etc.*
- *Moreover, being the poor and low income class of people they can't sit idle at home for months after months. They have to restore the normal livelihoods in order to avail food and daily necessity. There are large numbers of instances, during the first couple of months of lockdown a large number of these low income group people has to starve just because they can't earn daily due to lockdown.*

Additionally, they have very limited access to healthcare facilities for many reasons, like lack of education and awareness, affordability, access to healthcare facilities are long

persistence socio-economic causes; and this pandemic is a burden on top of all these. However, these densely populated slums are not affected as it's supposed to be. There might have many reasons but it's believed that these daily hard working people have natural agility to fight with any viruses.

Traditional Channels of information circulation

In Bangladesh traditionally information is circulated through various channels, such as,

- **One-to-one communication-** *individuals in the family, community and greater society transfers information from one another*
- **Group communication-** *information is circulated in group discussions, social gatherings. For instance, close groups like family and friends, open groups mainly tea stall gossiping.*
- **Religious gathering-** *Through religious gathering a large part of information is shared in Bangladeshi communities. For instance, in the mosque during prayer times, especially during Friday (Jumm'a- a special friday midday prayer) where a large amount of people mainly believers and Islamic groups gather for prayer and listen to Imam's Khutba (Speech by Imam who is the religious leader). And in waz mahfils (Large Islamic gathering to listen Clerics speeches) a very large amount of people gathers especially during dry seasons where misinformation and hate speech is spread significantly.*
- **Political gatherings-** *Information is also circulated through Political gatherings like meetings and assemblies, which carries trust among people.*
- **Social Media-** *In the time of digital technology one of the single largest channels of information circulation is social media (mainly Facebook and YouTube). Currently 103.2 million people use internet and social media in Bangladesh. Misinformation and hate speech spread in a rocketed speed through social media which often instigates social, religious and political violence.*
- **Mainstream Media-** *Mainly TV channels, newspapers and in some parts community radio is one of the important ways to disseminate information. Although, mainstream media is a potential source of correct information, they circulated various misinformations about COVID 19 during the early period of the pandemic.*
- **Social/Political Clubs-** *Social and political clubs have strong influence on communities and information is circulated through them.*
- **NGOs/GOs community programs-** *NGOs and GOs have many community intervention and*

awareness programs through which and also in general they circulate information such as community Health services etc.

- **Educational Institutions-**
Educational institutions especially, primary, secondary and higher secondary level institutions play a big role to disseminate information in every corner of the country through communicating their pupils and guardians.

Leverage traditional channels to disseminate correct information

To disseminate correct information using the institutional channels of circulating information is very important as it carries public trust and validity. For instance, using educational institutions and the teachers, Mosques' Imams, community clubs, NGOs/GOs community workers and activists, influential political and social personalities is a potential way to circulate correct and valid information that people will trust and perceive. And, circulating correct information through mainstream media using vivid audio-visuals, infographics as mainstream media enjoys the privilege of trust among mass people. Additionally, it's important to fact-check the information flooded in social media to restrict the spread of misinformation.

PART 3

MISINFORMATION

As the corona virus cases have rose in Bangladesh creating panic everyday; misinformation and infodemic has made panic in same rhythm. While rumor and misleading information have flooded on internet. Mainstream media lost the track to trace and report authentic information.

Misinformation, myth and perceived reality

Generally, misinformation influences how people perceive reality. It creates a state of emotions, sets of perception and expectations that distort the real information. In Bangladesh society socio-religious and socio-cultural factors shapes the believe system which influences the perceived reality of information and leads various myths and misinformation.



Diagram 1: Relational dynamics of misinformation, myth and perceived reality in Bangladesh

Relational dynamics of misinformation, myth and perceived reality in Bangladesh society is visualized in above diagram.

From the start of general holiday in Bangladesh a rumour regarding waiving house rent, postponing bank loan and electricity bill for three months and a one-month holiday in all offices is being made viral through Facebook. Most of this information was completely false and fabricated. Many examples of disinformation on Covid-19 have had impacts on Bangladeshi society heavily. As like,

- Rumours and misinformation spread right after the first death caused by corona virus in Bangladesh on March 18.*
- Law enforcers arrested a physician for allegedly spreading rumours over corona virus via Facebook messenger in Chittagong. In an audio that went viral, the doctor blamed the government for hiding 18/19 deaths from corona virus in Chittagong.*
- Interestingly, many people started to believe such rumours. Another example is that drinking the juice of Thankuni leaves (a local medicinal herb), and frequently drinking tea or hot water with ginger or garlic can cure corona virus. Particularly, in the villages of Kotalipara and Kashiani upazilas in adjunct districts to the capital, the rumour has spread widely. It was told that eating three Thankuni*

leaves is enough to fight corona virus. Even thousands of posts in social media posted justifying its fruitfulness and effectiveness against corona virus.

- *Miking has been done in the mosques to eat Thankuni leaves as a curing medicine from corona virus. On the night of March 17; many people ate Thankuni leaves in Kotalipara Upazila in the faith that they would not be infected with corona virus.*
- *At least 60 Islamic scholars have come up with various unscientific comments and disinformation during sermons at different times since the corona virus pandemic made inroads into the country. They spread a surge of misinformation stating that corona virus only affects non-Muslims.*
- *After this rumour spread, the price of ginger and garlic shot up in the market and a certain crisis of these products occurred. Similarly, in the middle of April, some websites started spreading rumours that around 20 lakh people will die from coronavirus in Bangladesh.*
- *Various medicines were announced as the antidote for the virus and thus the prices went up and some medicines went out of stock.*
- *For instance, the price of a drug called "doxycycline" increased from BDT 220 to 300/350 soon after it was identified as an*

effective medicine against Covid-19.

- *The Newspapers Association of Bangladesh (NOAB), the platform of media owners, issued a statement saying: "Corona virus cannot be transmitted through papers," a claim which is yet to be proved scientifically. All the newspapers published the NOAB statement on their front pages daily in a bid to keep their circulation intact.*

As we all know cyber space is a vast "Ocean of Information." And the easiest part is anyone can produce information in digital platform. Government's mission is to make a digital Bangladesh due to digital convenience more people has access to Internet that is the reason we found three main reasons why misinformation is spreading rapidly.

- i. *More and more people are moving towards digital platform and media and number are growing every day without proper monitoring and authenticity of the information they are delivering. For instance, anyone is opening YouTube channels and uploading videos with controversial contents regarding COVID 19, even anything they wish they are putting and these videos are going viral.*
- ii. *For significant amount of people digital platform became main source of information. They are not concerned about the*

- authenticity of the news/information.
- iii. Interestingly people with educated background have also believed and shared these information and Mainstream media considerably failed to fill these gaps.

Bangladesh silencing voices

Press freedom has been alarmingly decreasing long before the corona virus came to our geographic area. The Bangladesh government has been cracking down on free speech as COVID-19 hits the country silencing those who express concern over the government's handling of the epidemic. The authorities targeted journalists, Doctors, Teachers, Students and Civilians of any kind who were raising their concerns regarding the handling of corona virus.

There are number of instances of repressing media to freely report on COVID issues and irregularities. There were restrictions put in the way of journalists covering daily briefings from the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) on COVID infection status around the country. A report by ProthomAlo (a leading Bengali national daily) was published on April 30 charted the changes in the DGHS' media engagement policy that show how the government has been restricting access to information about the coronavirus. Second, the journalists were robbed of the

opportunity to ask questions when, on April 8, the online media briefings were repackaged as "daily health bulletins". It is well known to everyone that questions in press release are an essential part of any press briefing. They didn't help journalists glean necessary information, challenge statements and demand clarifications if needed. But these live "bulletins", conducted by a top health official, basically offer a bland, pre-scripted communiqué that demands blind faith on the part of the audience, there was no recourse to verification and evidence. Then, starting April 11, information on the government's stock of testing kits was airbrushed from the bulletins. From April 24 onwards, information on daily sample collection in each testing laboratory within the country (there are 153 now) was removed as well. Question is should people take the statements from the administration—which has been roundly criticized from many sections of the society for its failure to expand testing, ensure adequate safety gear for all frontline health workers, check irregularities in relief distribution, enforce social distancing regulations. And Interesting fact is where health minister said “Bangladesh will be corona virus-free very soon. I don't know if we'll even need vaccines. Nevertheless, we have taken all the preparations; we have also made preparations for the vaccine.”

Criminalising freedom of expression

The circumstances created by Covid-19, Bangladesh's struggle more with press freedom has become constant challenge. In this year's World Press Freedom Index released by the Reporters Without Borders, the country has ranked 151st out of 180 countries, while its position was 150th last year. This is evident that the situation of press freedom in the country is being repressed in a larger extent day by day. This is precisely why journalism is more vital now than ever before. The Covid-19 pandemic has placed independent media front and centre in providing reliable, fact-checked and potentially life-saving information. An independent press can ensure our leaders and officials remain accountable and their measures are scrutinised. This will only help improve the government's response to the crisis—as will an emboldened citizenry free to voice their legitimate concerns and grievances. The opposite of it, as they say, is "pure, unadulterated chaos".

Since pandemic started in country the authorities have apparently arrested at least 81 people, including a doctor, opposition activists, students, and normal civilian for their comments about corona virus, most of them under the Digital Security Act. On March 25, the government issued a circular assigning 15 officials to monitor each television channel for

"rumors" and "propaganda" regarding Covid-19. In the face of a huge outcry, the information ministry cancelled its circular assigning 15 officials to monitor if private television channels were running any propaganda or rumours about the novel corona virus outbreak. Besides law enforcing agencies Education Ministry also took action against teachers who were vocal against the nature of handling of COVID situation in the country. The facet is 63 cases were filed under the act in 2019. A comparative analysis shows that the number was surpassed and almost became doubled within the first six months (January to June) of 2020 with 108 cases. Police Headquarters officials failed to inform in a journalistic enquiry on how many cases were lodged and how many people were charged under the Digital Security Act between March and June. According to their information 1,135 people were arrested in 632 cases in an overall basis under the Digital Security Act in 2019 compared to the first two months of this year, 339 people were arrested in 165 cases. The data shows that 30% of arrests and 26% of cases compared to last year has crossed within the first two months of this year.

Nearly 2000 cases have been filed under the DSA since its enactment on 8 October 2018, according to data from the Bangladeshi government's Cyber Crime Tribunal. This includes more than 800 cases filed in the first nine months of 2020 alone, with many of the country's most prominent editors and senior journalists being increasingly targeted.

The Anti Corruption Commission (ACC) has commenced inquiries against 94 Union Parishad members, including 30 chairmen, for their alleged involvement in corruption and irregularities during the Covid-19 relief programs. This government has been accused of muzzling the press and trying to prevent journalists from reporting the public about the severity of the corona virus pandemic in the country. In the absence of free flow of information, not only will the people be confused and panicked, but also the government plan for management and recovery from the fallout of the crisis and its implementation is misinformed, inappropriate and distorted. During this period of pandemic, there have been several incidents of repressing journalists from January to August. Throughout the country 198 journalist were harassed in some way for doing news on corruption, spread and handling of corona virus, and irregularities on relief aids by political party leaders.

Digital Platform and Misinformation

At the Beginning Facebook was the platform to connect people across borders and distances, but now it has turned into a large disposal ground of misleading facts, rumors and wrong information especially during Covid-19 pandemic. The way of Facebook tackling this problem should be dissected and examined to understand the issue rhetorically.

Facebook's digital inspectors is not good enough

With huge flow of data Facebook uses artificial intelligence (AI) to flag posts as spam, inappropriate, etc. and it's enough to say, AI is not perfect. The crisis becomes even more fatalistic as Facebook's human moderators are under lockdown and cannot work at normal efficiency. The spread of misinformation has been so widespread and the data traffic being so much that even sometime Facebook's tech has failed. The result was the activation of a kill-switch that deleted most Covid-19 posts-factual and misleading. This created an information vacuum. Many private Facebook groups have been formed with an invite-only entry where Facebook puts little to no inspection. The problem has certainly gone out of control in the pandemic and to a point where government leaders and tech experts are urging Facebook's users to stop sharing false information.

WhatsApp, a trend continued

WhatsApp, one of Facebook's joint ventures, does not have a good track record either. One of WhatsApp strengths end-to-end message encryption between users is now its weakness as these messages can't be monitored for reducing the spread of fake news and misinformation. The problem becomes worse when some messages (hoaxes) are not shared from pages, but are rather organic and composed by person itself. But WhatsApp has appointed employees

for policing within large groups and also has a dedicated chat to provide correct information to its users. Its effectiveness is yet to be seen.

Public indifference:

People generally tend to believe things that confirm their prejudices no matter how bizarre they're. This is where often all the problem begins. In the era of social media, which breaks the traditional notion of gate-keeping in the flow of information, one has to be much more cautious in relying on content found online. People need to be their own gatekeepers. They should control their predispositions and take time to verify a claim or information and knowledge from random online sources before passing it on. But this opposite is happening in most cases. Even people with advanced academic backgrounds did not bother to take down their social media posts despite being notified, with evidence, that those were fake news stories. This indifference among the public to get rid of political, ideological, religious and other prejudices is playing a big part in keeping the fake news industry booming. Fostering critical thinking is key to tackling this problem. However, in Bangladeshi culture and education system, critical thinking is something not welcomed and oriented. Students are brought up and taught, at home and in classrooms, not to ask questions, and sometimes questioning unusual things and practices could be deemed offensive.

Indifference of the media:

The mainstream media is partly responsible for the current surge in misinformation. The media has been steadily losing its credibility due to its partisan role in crucial issues. In Bangladesh there is no data available to say anything about people's trust in media. But if one takes the increasing shrinking of media freedom into consideration, it can be said that the situation is even worse here. Gradually losing trust in the mainstream media, people have been in search of alternatives, and social media emerged as an option for them. With confirmation bias among the masses proliferating, unfiltered social media and purposefully erected "online portals" filled the vacuum that was created by the erosion of trust in mainstream media. Increasing self-censorship in the Bangladeshi media landscape is a sign that the media itself is apathetic about regaining its trust. This plays into the hands of the peddlers of fake news. Moreover, there is no visible effort in the mainstream media to fight online misinformation, rather top news outlets fall for fake news on a daily basis leaving the readers bamboozled, which is further contributing to eroding trust in media.

Indifference of government:

We often hear government officials asking people not to fall for "gujob" or rumours—in other words, "fake news"—and sometimes issuing warnings to those who play with

people's ignorance and emotion. There are lots of examples where the government appears to be a "fierce anti-fake news" actor. However, the reality says otherwise. In December 2018, Facebook and Twitter said they had "removed accounts and fake news pages linked to the Bangladesh government that had posted anti-opposition content," days ahead of the national election. But many fake news stories spread online by people linked to the government, and even sometimes ministers peddled misinformation targeting the opposition (the opposition groups too targeted the government and the ruling party). To put it precisely, the people in power are vocal against some sort of fake news, but they are evidently reluctant to fight the monster as a whole. Such unresponsiveness from these three stakeholders—the general public, the media and the government—cannot help but embolden the epidemic of falsity in the digital sphere.

Digital Literacy Matters:

To combat the disinformation problem, some countries are trying to formulate new laws and some have already done so. But such laws can be used to aggravate the current fragile free speech situation in developing democracies. The best weapon is education. Media literacy and digital literacy are a must to combat fake news. Finland has recently topped a list of European countries deemed to be the most resilient against disinformation thanks to its

increasing digital literacy initiatives. They are teaching digital literacy in classrooms. Quite recently, government schools in India's Kerala state started a similar campaign. Bangladesh can and should follow such strategies, too.

Preliminary tips for detecting misinformation on digital platform

Check the URL: Before clicking on a link in your newsfeed, check the URL first. It can be a "mimic" of a renowned news organisation just replacing one or two "characters", which you may not spot at first sight. If the name of the website is not familiar to you, search the name in Google and confirm the matter.

Know the publisher: After reading an article with "extraordinary" claims or information on a not "so-well-known" website, do not forget to verify what it is about. Is it a satirical publication? Or a blog? Or ideological propaganda website? Check the "About Us" section and take help from Google to know more about the publisher. "Who.is" can help you determine the owner of the domain.

Check the date: It's a common mistake while reading online articles. Sometimes old stories resurface and can be taken out of context that amounts to misinformation.

Don't be excited: After seeing a social media post containing extraordinary information that stunned you, control

your emotion before clicking on the Share button. Simply Google the keywords or names mentioned in the story to find “news” in a reliable news outlet.

Notice the Ads: *If you notice any social media post, no matter what stunning information or photo it contains, asking people to “spread it”, be careful. Such promotional content often contains misinformation designed to attract people to their platforms.*

Beware of excessive adjectives: *While reading news stories or social media posts, notice the use of adjectives. Professional news reporting does not contain excessive adjectives (negative or positive) to describe any characters; fake news and propaganda stories do.*

Spelling is helpful: *Grammatical and spelling mistakes in online articles are also indicators of non-professional work that cannot be relied on.*

Reverse Image Search: *If a photo or video clip makes you confused about the claims it associated with, just use Google Reverse Image Search to come to a conclusion. You should enable the add-ons in your android handset or computer and follow through with the direction.*

Fake news is now a global problem. But in societies like ours, this evil can do much more damage than anywhere else just because people here are less critical and more prone to believe any kind of campaign or propaganda. At

a time when the reader him/herself has to play the role of gate-keeping in the ocean of unverified information about what to believe and what not to, fostering critical thinking is a must. The government has many things to do in this regard. And the people should equip themselves with adequate media literacy and digital education to save them from falling prey to fake news.

Misinformation spread by Islamic groups

At least 60 so-called Islamic scholars have come up with various unscientific comments and disinformation during sermons at different times since the corona virus pandemic made inroads into the country. Neither the Ministry of Religious Affairs nor Bangladesh Police has taken any initiative to refrain them from circulating "fear-provoking" information and "bigotry" on the outbreak of the novel corona virus. Having been misguided by their misleading speeches, a large number of people are also spreading Covid-19 falsehoods on social media. We have found many people who are very confident that they will not be affected by Covid-19 because they are honest and Muslims. It is very tough to convince them in rural areas that these sermons are not true.

For instance, Md. Aslam Hossain residence of Mirpur (a neighborhood in the Capital) does not wear a mask or any such safety gear because he

has seen many videos of Mufti Amir Hamza an influential Islamic commentator, and learnt that nothing will happen to true Muslims. That is why does not wear a mask or wash hands.

According to the Bangladesh Police Headquarters and the Islamic Foundation, they are only observing these religious scholars spreading disinformation without taking any legal actions against them. Mir Sohel Rana, Assistant Inspector General and spokesman of Bangladesh Police, said the home ministry has made a list of 15 preachers only for their derogatory comments and hate speeches, but no list has been made yet for spreading misleading information regarding Covid-19. They are closely monitoring their activities and speeches. If they find something fishy, they will take legal actions against them. However, no action has been taken whatsoever until a written complaint is lodged they can't do anything.

Meanwhile, a broadcast journalist has received an online death threat for reporting the spread of such misinformation through sermons. The journalist works in a private television channel, filed a general diary with Tejgaon Police Station in the capital city. Immediately after the reports were broadcasted, several users posted death threats against him online. A preacher named M Hasibur Rahman threatened him during one of his sermons. Police is still investigating the case and trying

to trace the people who posted the death threats. Surprisingly misinformation and fabricated stories on a fake magic cure for the novel corona virus across the globe are being disseminated through many sermons on the internet. In fact, such sermons were spreading panic and confusion among the people instead of contributing to placating fear in this grave situation. The lectures centered on bigotry are misrepresenting Islam, the religion of harmony and peace. The contents of these sermons are hateful and such irrational beliefs usually create bigots, according to some Islamic experts.

- *Soon after the outbreak of Covid-19 in China in mid-December 2019, some religious preachers came up with some comments linking the fatal virus with the alleged repression of Muslim minorities in China's Xinjiang province. A speaker at a sermon said the corona virus was the result of Chinese authorities' subjugation of Uighur Muslims and divine retribution for shutting down mosques.*
- *Tarek Monowar another popular Islamic commentator, in another recent sermon, told an audience that a singer who criticised Azan has recently visited Bangladesh and performed at a stadium. The virus is now searching for people who hold anti-Muslim ideologies and would soon wreak havoc on them.*
- *Another speaker Kazi Ibrahim, whose sermon went viral on the*

social media platform, claimed that he had interviewed the corona virus in a dream and invented the formula to cure people of the disease. He also claimed that his formula to combat the virus sparked huge reactions in the US and scientists there started studying his interview and formula.

- Another speaker claimed that only Muslims would be spared from the corona virus and the rest of humanity will face the consequences.

Maulana Farid Uddin Masud, leading and noted Islamic scholars think that such fabricated sermons are actually misrepresenting Islam. People who do not have any knowledge about the issue are giving opinions in such sermons. Islam prohibits spreading panic and fear-provoking information, but these preachers were only spreading terror and bigotry among people. The scholar said some preachers are trying to draw people's attention and increase their popularity by taking the opportunity of the situation. Their tools are religious prejudice and intolerance.

As several Muslim majority countries have been severely affected by the deadly virus, there is no scope for speculation that Muslims were any less vulnerable to the disease. Warnings if such sermons were not checked immediately, it could cause more panic and lead to much confusion about the virus in the county.

Covid 19 Fact Checking Bangladesh

There is thousands of fallacious news about corona virus that pop up on Facebook, WhatsApp or other social media platforms every day.

Identifying a fake story is so though, especially when it speared in Bengali as we don't have a powerful Bangla search engine. There are minimal Bengali contents available to confirm a claim. BD FactCheck, a nonpartisan and non-profit organization has the indentation to reduce the level of deception and confusion regarding all kinds of national and international news in Bangladesh by debunking those.

Fact checking and media literacy and this type of urgency is often absent in our media. There are three fact-checking organizations, Jachai⁵, BDFactcheck⁶, and Fact Watch⁷, have been around for the past few years operating with a scrappy team of fact-checkers, little equipment, and trying to raise awareness towards misinformation.

BD FactCheck is actively trying to fill this information gap and playing a crucial role in tackling the spread of propagandas. BD FactCheck has faced several challenges during corona pandemic. The first one is the stocking of the resources as our archival system is very poor, and most of the governmental documents can't

⁵ <https://www.jachai.org/>

⁶ <https://bdfactcheck.com/>

⁷ <https://www.fact-watch.org/web/>

be found online, it is much harder to conduct such research. Lack of sources and contents in Bengali and less powerful Bangla search engines are other important challenges. Developed tools like Artificial intelligence, social bots, and automation don't work in Bengali, which makes this whole fact-checking process difficult and less effective. Currently, they can only check the authenticity of the news upon the request through message on their Facebook page 'BD FactCheck' or by posting the link on their Facebook group 'BD FactCheck Community'.

Moreover, Facebook also launched its third-party fact-checking programme in Bangladesh as part of its ongoing integrity efforts to reduce the spread of misinformation and improve the quality and defend the fake news people find online. Facebook is partnered with BOOM, which has been certified by the Poynter Institute's non-partisan international fact checking network and BOOM will review and rate the accuracy of stories on Facebook, including photos and videos in Bangladesh. It launches for corona virus fact-checking information to contain misinformation.

PART 4

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

In the survey we found that 98.3% people are aware about the disease in different extent and the fractional remaining percentage (1.7%) has no idea about the disease. And among the people, who are aware of COVID 19, a large percentage (59%) has first heard about it from television and only 15% of them learned it from social media. And 11% of them learned about it from other mediums, like learning from friends, relatives and neighbors.

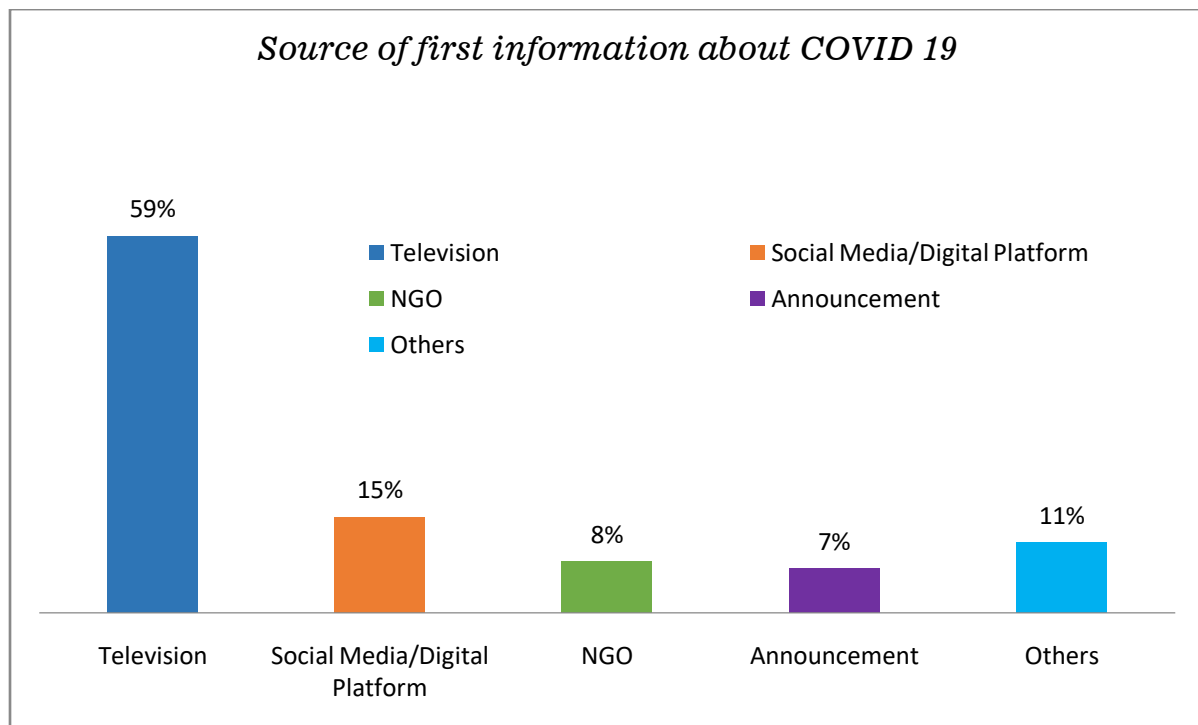


Chart 1: Source of first information about COVID 19

In response of question on the perception of possible way of cure from COVID 19, majority of the people (35%) believe that God will cure it as it's given by him. Second highest percentage (22%) of people think it would be cured if treated in hospitals while 18% people think isolation/quarantine is the best possible way of curing from COVID-19. And 13% people believe it will be automatically cured while 12% people have no idea on the cure.

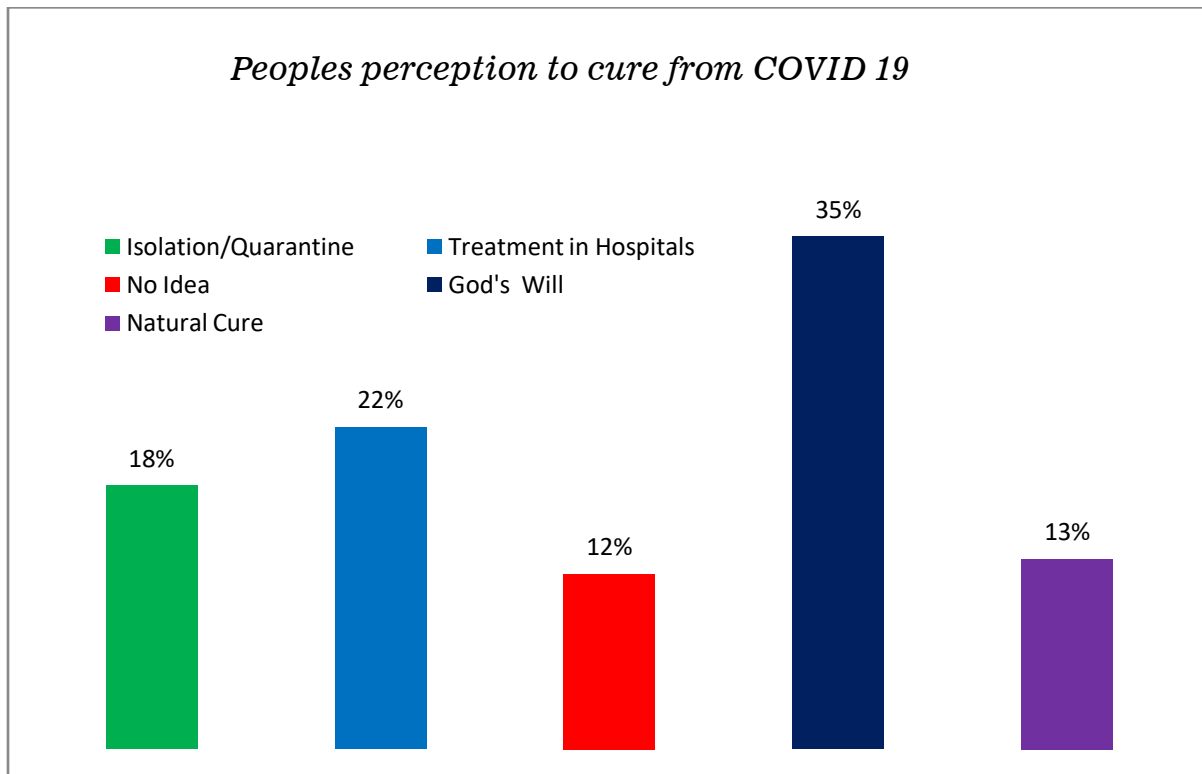


Chart 2: People's perception to cure from COVID 19

Among the respondents 61% male are informed about whom to contact or what to do if one gets infected by corona virus compared to a 39% of female.

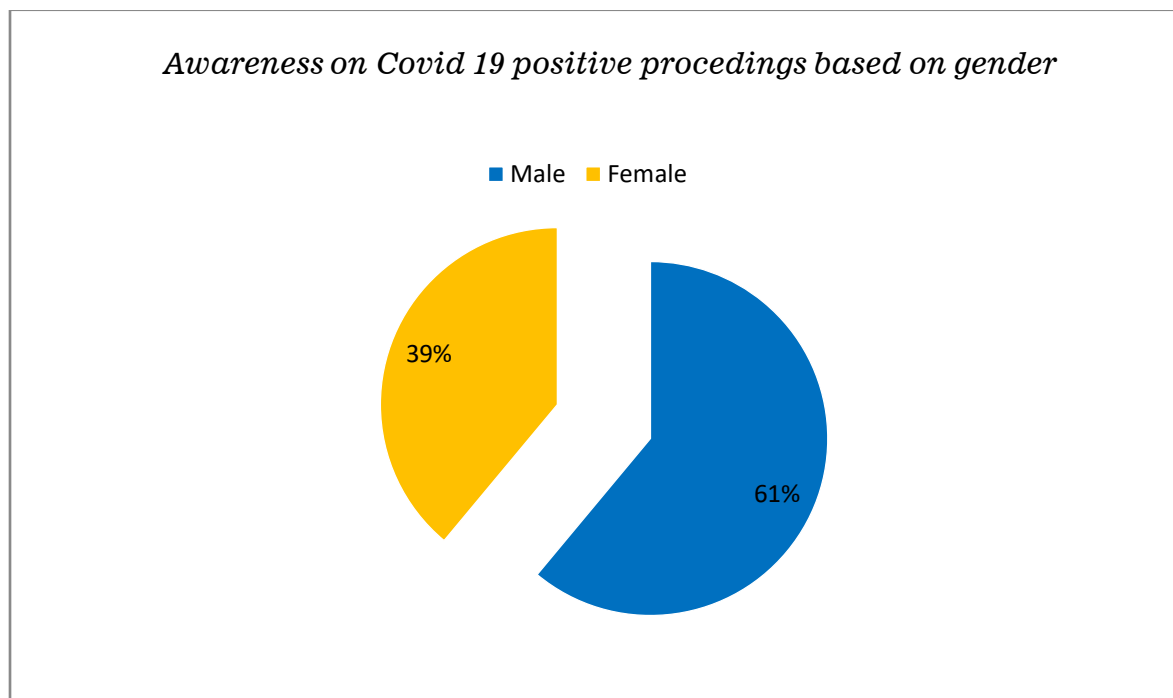


Chart 3: Awareness of COVID 19 positive proceedings based on gender

In Focus Group Discussions we asked the respondents ‘Do you find any problem of understanding the messages developed and circulated by government and or other agencies?’ Many consider the messages around symptoms of the virus, and correct time for test is totally confusing and misleading. The government was not sincere to update general mass with accurate figures of contamination and fatality, which is a part of messaging to aware people with correct information. To instate political will of the government to inform right picture to the common

masses is the only measure, which includes taking measures against the responsible persons who were commenting grossly inappropriate statements.

Recommendations

Communication crisis occurs when the correct information is not disseminated and understood by the people. Communication gap and spread of misinformation leads towards a communication crisis and thus two broader recommendations is important. One, development of correct, credible and easily communicative messages and their effective dissemination; and other is to limit, trace and reduce the spread of misinformation. Therefore, the specific recommendations are outlined below,

- Developing correct, credible, vivid and easily understandable textual and graphical message/ BEC/BCC materials and contextualizing them in terms of geographical locations and ethnic language that the message is understood uniformly.*
- Making the dissemination process of this information effective and engaging through multi-stake involvement of Government agencies, NGOs, CSOs, media organizations, community organizations, local elected bodies, community works etc.*

- Disseminating the developed message focusing on low educated, low income and socially less mobilized communities, e.g. slum dwellers, daily laborers, garments works that the message is understood uniformly.*
- Develop an integrated monitoring system to track the dissemination process of the messages that no communication crisis arises.*
- To limit the spread of misinformation strengthening the use of scientific tools to check and trace the misinformation.*
- Promoting Responsible Behaviour for social media through national, regional and community awareness programs engaging the public, educational institutions, community clubs, media, NGOs, CSOs and local government bodies.*
- Increasing media literacy and combating the social stigma, hatred and fear through national and regional campaign.*

At last, it's very important that the government also should think of formalizing media literacy education at the secondary level syllabus as Bangladeshi society has transformed into digitalization for quite a long time to build a responsible generation towards a digital society.



design- Zayed Siddiki

