



Volume 3	Issue 1	February (2023)	DOI: 10.47540/ijias.v3i1.703	Page: 38 – 44
----------	---------	-----------------	------------------------------	---------------

Covid-19 Impacts on the Livelihoods and Mental Well-being of Rickshaw Pullers in Bangladesh

Mohaimenul Islam Jowarder

Department of Management Information System, Lamar University, United States

Corresponding Author: Mohaimenul Islam Jowarder; Email: mohaimenulislamvisa@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: Covid-19, Livelihoods, Mental Well-being; Rickshaw-Pullers.

Received : 29 October 2022

Revised : 02 February 2023

Accepted : 08 February 2023

ABSTRACT

The novel Covid-19 pandemic has affected people from all walks of life. While much research has been carried out to perceive the psychological effects on diverse aspects of society, the informal labor sector did not receive any recognition. In this research, rickshaw pullers in Bangladesh, an informal labor sector, who were severely affected by the novel pandemic were scientifically studied through a qualitative analysis followed by a purposive sampling methodology. This article features an in-depth interview conducted by 12 respondents about their experience during the Covid-19 Pandemic. The study revealed that the pandemic has increased the level of mental depression, anxiety, and loss of livelihood among rickshaw pullers. Access to livelihoods was impacted adversely in most scenarios as found evident by our analysis. We explored their understanding of this phenomenon and examined the effects on their livelihoods and mental well-being made by the Covid-19 pandemic. More studies should be conducted to perceive the psychological and societal impacts of informal labor in Bangladesh regarding this global pandemic aftermath.

INTRODUCTION

Rickshaw-Pullers in Bangladesh is the most vulnerable group of people who earn their livelihoods by transporting passengers from one end of the city to another. Despite the high volume of public transportation (Ahmed et al, 2020) such as buses, people significantly rely on the marginal community for their transportation (Asian Development Bank, 2012). Even after from early morning to late at night, without any breaks and all season around, the Rickshaw pullers barely earn the minimum livelihood to provide provisions for their respective families (Islam et al., 2016; Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2015). Historically (Finance, 2017), the peripheral group in Bangladesh has been ignored by all mainstream provisions (Mujeri, 2019; Omosa, 1998). The government has always emphasized mainstream sectors (Son, 2013; Hossain et al, 2018) which left this community such as the rickshaw pullers and garments sector (Uddin, 2013) also known as RMG being neglected (Raihan et al, 2018).

Rickshaw pullers have been all around the nation since the beginning of 1971 (Sadekin et al, 2014). While their methods have changed, the structure of receiving payment has not been upgraded for decades (Buheji et al, 2020), even in neighboring countries such as India as well (Chitlangia, 2020). Even during natural calamities, it has been observed that the poor populace is the least expected to receive aid (Ibrahim et al, 2020). While much research has been undertaken to perceive the existing scenario superficially (Paul et al, 2020; Shammi et al, 2020), no focus has been given to understanding how Rickshaw pullers are living their lives in the aftermath of Covid-19 (IECDR, 2020). As Rickshaw pullers live from hand to mouth, cutting down on their economic earnings significantly affected their living conditions during the pandemic (Mannan et al, 2021). Many vague researches even emerged citing there has been no shortage of food supply, while the world population was spending a day without eating adequate meals (Vos et al, 2020).

The novel coronavirus disease, globally known as Covid-19 (Obi, et al., 2020; Kashif, et al., 2020; Abd-Alrazaq et al, 2021; Cheng et al, 2021), began affecting people in the first quarter of 2020 severely (Gao et al, 2021) although it was initially identified in Wuhan China (Gao et al, 2020) in 2019 (Fan et al, 2020). In January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) identified this disease as a global pandemic and named it Covid-19 (World Health Organization, 2020a). To contain the spread of this pandemic, the government initiated a nationwide lockdown (Reza et al, 2020). As the streets became dramatically empty due to stringent lockdown measures, rickshaw pullers struggled to provide the minimum provisions (PPRC BIGD, 2020). The transportation system experienced a dramatic decline in all nations including Bangladesh (Karim et al, 2020) during this lockdown, and rickshaw pullers were no exception (Rahman, 2020). Since they have been left behind (Hossain et al, 2019), this article aimed to perceive the impacts on livelihoods and mental health on the lives of deprived and marginalized rickshaw pullers during the Covid-19 pandemic in Bangladesh.

According to WHO (World Health Organization, 2020b), the first reported and confirmed coronavirus case in Bangladesh officially occurred on March 8, 2020, in Dhaka City. The people of Bangladesh, regardless of societal status experienced mental disorders, anxiety, and even suicidal thoughts. Domestic violence reached alarmingly high during the lockdown periods. (Sifat, 2020a). Many studies have estimated that in Bangladesh, a quarter of the rickshaw-puller population suffers from severe mental disorders, anxiety, and traumas as they struggle to feed their families in their day-to-day lives. Health Experts opine that more than 300 million people worldwide have Covid-19 fear. They also forecasted that it increases mental trauma as people fear the loss of their livelihoods (Sifat, 2020b). Inevitably, failure to cope with the financial challenges to earn a livelihood has been found to directly contribute to mental traumas (Shah, 2020).

According to Sakamoto et al. (2020), the worst affected victims of the novel coronavirus pandemic are the slum dwellers. As most slum dwellers live on their daily earnings for their basic nutritional needs, it also has been hampered drastically. Renowned Bangladeshi newspaper, The Daily Star

(2020) reported that more than 14 percent of low-income wagers have no food in their home. The coronavirus has affected their ability to search for food and their livelihoods safely and independently due to lockdowns and many respondents also implied as rickshaw pullers are the worst victims of this scenario.

The urban poor population in Bangladesh earns less than 250 Bangladeshi Taka per day, which is equivalent to only 3 United States dollars, even after working more than 12 hours of a shift without lunch breaks. Most of this urban poor populace dwells in slum areas and they hold diverse occupations to support their families *The New York Times*, (2020), for instance, garment workers, bus drivers, or rickshaw-pullers. In one study, it has been found that rickshaw pullers are only earning 20 percent of their previous earnings during the Covid-19 pandemic (Monjour, 2020). The study also revealed that the majority of the rickshaw pullers were suffering from severe anxiety and mental traumas due to the low volume of passengers and were afraid for their safety in the empty streets during their rides. In a fateful turn of events, a young rickshaw-puller even took his own life on April 2020, after failing to provide for his family month after month which received international media attention portraying the pathetic livelihoods situations and mental stress of the Rickshaw-pullers in Bangladesh (Bhuiyan et al., 2020). As the global pandemic spread, the supply chain was restricted and the price of commodities increased rapidly, putting even more pressure on marginalized communities such as rickshaw pullers in Bangladesh (Kamal, 2020).

Unfortunately, no governments or private initiatives have been found to appropriately address this marginalized sector as they have been left behind to fend for themselves (Riaz, 2020). According to Sakamoto et al. (2020), the worst affected victims of the novel coronavirus pandemic are the slum dwellers. As most slum dwellers live on their daily earnings for their basic nutritional needs, it also has been hampered drastically. Renowned Bangladeshi newspaper, The Daily Star (2020) reported that more than 14 percent of low-income wagers have no food in their home. The coronavirus has affected their ability to search for food and their livelihoods safely and independently due to lockdowns and many respondents (Jowarder,

2022) also implied as rickshaw pullers the worst victims of this scenario.

METHODS

A qualitative study was carried out followed by a purposive sampling method. An extensive interview of 12 rickshaw pullers was carried out which demonstrated evidence based on inductive reasoning from the selected primary data. Furthermore, secondary data derived from materials such as government documents, newspapers, conference proceedings, reports, scholarly articles, and journals related to rickshaw pullers in Bangladesh have been thoroughly authenticated for data triangulation. Three Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) were carried out for more spontaneous participation of the respondents. Comparisons were identified by consistently balancing the perceptions of the participants throughout the study. The research maintained the precision of the rickshaw pullers' sufferings and their narratives through verbatim transcriptions. With the progress of the study, patterns and variations in data emerged which assisted the researcher to determine the precise situations of the livelihoods and mental well-being of rickshaw pullers during the Covid-19 pandemic.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results and The livelihoods of Rickshaw pullers were severely impacted by the global pandemic. As this is one of the most vulnerable communities in Bangladesh that lack access to basic commodities and government aid, coronavirus swept a devastating blow to their lives. Not only have they lost the majority of their livelihoods as social distancing began to coerce by the government, but the majority of the participants also reported they have lost their savings as well to support themselves during the unemployment period in the pandemic.

From the research, we have found that coronavirus has negatively impacted many aspects of livelihoods such as assistance, provision of public goods at a reduced price, and access to basic sanitary products as well. Many participants complained that they have been left over by the governments as not much public aid has reached them. Many also reported incidents where the allotted money for the slum dwellers, basically the

rickshaw pullers and other marginalized groups, have been absorbed by other public measures such as implementing isolation measures. The Employment Office also did not provide any help during the Covid-19 situation when the lockdown was imposed as pulling rickshaws is their only source of income. There has been causing them mental traumas as they are uncertain of their future.

From Riaz (2020) and World Health Organization (2020a), we can find there are five key aspects or pillars in the sustainable livelihoods approach which is the prerequisite for maintaining the basic standards of living for the populace experiencing chronic or long-term poverty or disadvantages. From the research, we have found that rickshaw pullers lost all channels to access the key aspects of livelihood which are Human Capital, Natural Capital, Physical Capital, and Financial Capital respectively. Social Capital, however, remained consistent throughout the pandemic period. Many respondents stated as they are poor and do not have a standard medium of banking such as a bank account or savings, they are always excluded from access to social capital.

One participant of 40-year-old rickshaw puller Abdur Rahman stated, "I have been pulling rickshaws throughout my life. It is my only source of income and I do not know any other skills. I could easily make around 400 takas but now my pulling job has been at a halt. During the Covid-19 pandemic, I had to sell my rickshaw for money to feed my family. At present, I do not know where to go and what to eat tomorrow as I have no income during the lockdown. I am now living off my savings. I could not buy any small tools which I can use to make something to earn money. I feel my access to physical capital has been cut off. I feel low every day and my mood is always distressed. I argue with my family over petty things."

Another young rickshaw puller Sadrul also mentioned his impact on livelihoods. According to his statement, Sadrul used to earn 500 takas per day before the pandemic. As the pandemic began and the lockdown was initiated, he only earns now 200 takas per day. He added that he could only pull his rickshaw within the narrow streets and avoid main roads due to law enforcement to avoid capture. He is always in fear of getting caught. It was evident from his words that his livelihoods were severely

impacted and his mental health was affected as well.

30-year-old Rickshaw puller Matin, explaining his mental health mentioned, "I used to go up every day and start pulling rickshaws for 18 hours. As the lockdown began, the owner has taken the rickshaw from us as we cannot give the daily rent. I am now working as a waiter in a restaurant in my locality to support my family. I cannot stand all day long serving the table. This hurts my back. The money I earn is pathetic but still, I must work. I have no idea where I will get the rent for my house. My physical health is degrading due to the excessive mental pressure I am taking every day. My son's school has been stopped and I do not know whether I can educate him. All these tensions are eating me inside out."

A young rickshaw puller, aged 25, Kamal Miah said, "Before the coronavirus pandemic, I was living happily with my family. I went out every day and earned money to buy the necessities. I could even visit public hospitals in an emergency. However, things took a turn for the worse as soon as the lockdown was implemented. My house rent began to get due, and the prices of groceries skyrocketed. I could not earn much during the lockdown and now I am sick with illness and bedridden with debts with nowhere to go and pull my rickshaw which would fetch me money. The government does not provide monetary benefits, but I have expenses. I am sick in my stomach thinking about money."

A startling discovery was made in this research when we began to go in-depth with the participants. Many rickshaw pullers admit to doing wrongdoings to earn money. Most of them have resorted to petty crimes to make their living. This is evident in the country as well when Bangladesh began to experience high-intensity of crimes in business and residential areas during the lockdown. When inquired if they have received any governments financial assistance during the period, all of them denied ever receiving any such assistance. They stated that the denial of public goods to the poor community has left them feeling deprived and unwanted in society. Many also explained that they are planning to move out of city areas and go back to their village since the living cost is rising every day due to the pandemic but earnings have come to a halt. Most of them stated they cannot take the

mental pressure being exerted onto them due to loss of livelihoods and unable to earn money. It was evident from the research that access to livelihood was severely impacted for this marginal community.

This study reflects the context of rickshaw pullers in Bangladesh, a group that is poor and marginalized, and systematically neglected by society. It should be noted that rickshaw pullers are one of the most vulnerable and socioeconomically disadvantaged groups in the context of Bangladesh. They do not have the means nor the assistance to provide for themselves unless they can pull their rickshaws. This community is cut off from the social safety net and they are affected drastically.

All the respondents in this study spoke spontaneously about their sufferings related to livelihoods. It is of utmost significance that this fear of losing employment is also causing them mental trauma and distress. This forgotten community suffers from anxiety, mental trauma, depression, and even sleep deprivation. Many young rickshaw pullers said they cannot sleep thinking about how they are going to make money. As this job is physically demanding, most of them require staying physically fit by consuming fresh groceries. Since the pandemic, they are out of jobs and the money earned is all spent on the house rent, let alone properly buying groceries. This malnutrition is causing them to become physically weak and they fear whether they can pull rickshaws to their fullest potential if the situation improves.

Rickshaw pullers belong to the informal labor group in society. Commonly, they do not get any government privileges as the other groups do. In this global pandemic, society did not look upon themselves and assisted to go through this extreme situation. Most participants in the Focused Group Discussions stated they felt like unwanted visitors instead of citizens who belong to this motherland. This had made them pass many sleepless nights. Usually, they are the only breadwinners in the family. Hence rickshaw pullers are worried and always tense thinking about the bleak future.

Before the Covid-19 outbreak, rickshaw pullers were living happily and had adequate monetary access to provide for the minimum quality of life. Though they are on the periphery of society, they were content with what they have. Most of them earned 500 to 800 takes depending on the

volume and area of passengers but they were all without thinking of uncertainty and anxiety. Many had their sons going to school but all changed with the beginning of the pandemic. The implementation of the lockdown cut off their livelihoods completely. With the stringent lockdown initiation, many tried to pull rickshaws covertly but with no vein as they cannot find passengers. The loss of livelihoods began to negatively affect their mental well-being as well. Many began to have depression, anxiety, and even suicides become common among them (Islam et al., 2016). Hence, the rickshaw pullers have reduced freedom, reduced livelihood opportunities, and even have greater negative impacts on the mental well-being of their health.

CONCLUSION

This scientific study provides a holistic perception of the rickshaw pullers community in Bangladesh and the impacts of Covid-19 on their livelihoods as well as on their mental well-being. In addition to that, consistent clinical assistance through trained professionals should be rendered to rickshaw pullers during hardships. It is the responsibility of the policymakers, NGOs, and think tanks as well to reform and rebuild the economy and society with a more multidimensional inclusive theory rather than a conventional growth-centric theory to ensure their access to basic amenities. Widespread awareness is needed for mental well-being as it is considered taboo in our society. The government should provide free counseling services and financial assistance to rickshaw pullers to support themselves in distress. It is also recommended to develop basic need programs under social safety programs for the rickshaw pullers. Further empirical studies are encouraged to explore this phenomenon and plausible resolutions.

REFERENCES

1. Abd-Alrazaq A, Schneider J, Mifsud B, Alam T, Househ M, Hamdi M, Shah Z. (2021). A comprehensive overview of the Covid-19 literature: machine learning-based bibliometric analysis. *J Med Internet Res.*, 23(3), e23703.
2. Asian Development Bank. (2012). *The informal sector and informal employment in Bangladesh*. ADB.
3. Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. (2015). *Population distribution and internal migration in Bangladesh* (Population Monogram: Vol. 6). Ministry of Planning, Government of Bangladesh.
4. Bhuiyan, A. K. M. I., Sakib, N., Pakpour, A. H., Griffiths, M. D., & Mamun, M. A. (2020). Covid-19-related suicides in Bangladesh due to lockdown and economic factors: Case study evidence from media reports. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, 1–6.
5. Buheji, M., da Costa Cunha, K., Beka, G., Mavric, B., Leandro do Carmo de Souza, Y., Souza da Costa Silva, S., 'Hanafi, M. and Chetia Yein, T. (2020), "The extent of Covid-19 pandemic socio-economic impact on global poverty. a global integrative multidisciplinary review", *American Journal of Economics*, 4, 213-224.
6. Cheng X, Zhou MT, Tang L, Wang GY(2020). Same pandemic but different studies: an exploration of Covid-19 research at the early stage. *Eur Rev Med Pharmacol Sci.* 24 (23), 12545–57.
7. Chitlangia, R.(2020). *Coronavirus Update 'How Will We Survive?' Delhi's Rickshaw-Pullers Hit Hard amid Lockdown*. Hindustan Time.
8. Fan J, Gao Y, Zhao N, Dai R, Zhang H, Feng X. (2020). Hambly BD. Bibliometric analysis on Covid-19: a comparison of research between English and Chinese studies. *Front Public Health*, (8), 477.
9. Finance, Ministry of, Bangladesh., Government of (2017). *Bangladesh Economic Review 2017* Chapter. 7.
10. Gao M, Yang L, Chen X, Deng Y, Yang S, Xu H, Gao X. (2020). A study on infectivity of asymptomatic SARS-CoV-2 carriers. *Respir Med.* (169), 106026.
11. Gao Z, Xu Y, Sun C, Wang X, Guo Y, Qiu S, Ma K. (2021). A systematic review of asymptomatic infections with Covid-19. *J Microbiol Immunol Infect.*, 54(1), 12–6.
12. Hossain, M., Banu, R., Khan, M.R.H., Chakraborty, S., Siddique, A.B., Sharmin, N., Ahmed, M.A. (2019). Socio-economic survey of rickshaw pullers in Dhaka, Bangladesh. *Int. J. Inf. Bus. Manag.* (11), 1–7.
13. Hossain, M.S., Hossain, M.M., Hossain, M.S., Rony, M.J.I. (2018). Analysis of Socio-Economic Conditions of Rickshaw Pullers in

- the Capital City of Bangladesh. *Eur. J. Bus. Manag.* (10), 7–15.
14. Ibrahim, A., Kabir, N., Khan, A.K., Manzur, S.N. and Reaz, M.M. (2020), “To open or not to open: lockdown exit strategies can help”,
 15. Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR) (2020), “Bangladesh Covid-19 update”, 24 May 2020.
 16. Islam, K.J.; Sarker, R.K. (2008). Causes and Consequences of Seasonal Migration of Rickshaw Pullers. In *The Human Resources Development Studies; Bangladesh Institute of Professional Studies (BIPS): Dhaka, Bangladesh*, (1), 1–7.
 17. Islam, M. S., Hakim, M. A., Kamruzzaman, M., Safeuzzaman, Haque, M. S., & Alam, M. K. (2016). Socioeconomic profile and health status of rickshaw-pullers in Rural Bangladesh. *American Journal of Food Science and Health*, 2(4), 32–38.
 18. Jowarder, M. I. (2022). Aftermath of Uvalde Shooting: An account of Psychological Trauma of Survivor Children. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 1-11.
 19. Kamal, R. S. (2020). *Fear, hatred and stigmatization grip Bangladesh amid Covid-19 out-break*. The Business Standard.
 20. Karim, M.; Salam, K.A. (2019). *Organising the Informal Economy Workers: A Study of Rickshaw Pullers in Dhaka City*. BILS-LO-FTF Project. Bangladesh Institute of Labor Studies-(BILS).
 21. Kashif, M., Aziz-Ur-Rehman, Muhammad Kashan Javed, & Pandey, D. (2020). A Surge in Cyber-Crime during Covid-19. *Indonesian Journal of Social and Environmental Issues (IJSEI)*, 1(2), 48-52.
 22. Mannan, S., Shaheen, M.A. and Saha, R. (2021). “Covid-19: Chittagong port and aftermath”, *WMU Journal of Maritime Affairs*, (20), 247-264.
 23. Monjur, R. (2020). How can we tackle the mental health epidemic? Dhaka
 24. Mujeri, M. K. (2019). *Informality in the formal economy of Bangladesh*. The Financial Express.
 25. Obi, S. E., Yunusa, T., Ezeogueri-Oyewole A. N., Sekpe, S. S., Egwemi, E., & Isiaka, A. S. (2020). The Socio-Economic Impact of Covid-19 on The Economic Activities of Selected States in Nigeria. *Indonesian Journal of Social and Environmental Issues (IJSEI)*, 1(2), 39-47.
 26. Omosa, M. (1998). Re-conceptualising food security. Interlocking strategies, unfolding choices and rural livelihoods in Kisii District, Kenya.
 27. Paul, A., Nath, T.K., Mahanta, J., Sultana, N.N., Kayes, A.S.M.I., Noon, S.J., Javed, M.A., Podder, S. and Paul, S. (2020), “Psychological and livelihood impacts of Covid-19 on Bangladeshi lower income people”, *Asia Pacific Journal of Public Health*, 33(1), 100-108.
 28. PPRC BIGD. (2020). *Livelihoods, coping and support during Covid-19 crisis*. PPRC-BIGD Rapid Response Research.
 29. Rahman, M. (2020, April 1). Coronavirus: The agony of Dhaka’s rickshaw-pullers. Dhaka Tribune.
 30. Raihan, S., Bidisha, S. H. (2018). Female employment stagnation in Bangladesh. The Asia Foundation
 31. Reza, F., Kawsar, E., Mahabub, T. M. (2020). Covid-19 impact and responses: Bangladesh.
 32. Riaz, A. (2020). Bangladesh’s Covid-19 stimulus: Leaving the most vulnerable behind. Atlantic Council.
 33. Sadekin, M.N., Aktar, M.A., Pulok, M.H. (2014). Socioeconomic Analysis of the Migrated Rickshaw Pullers in Comilla City of Bangladesh. *Int. J. Innov. Appl. Stud.* (8), 1142–1147.
 34. Sakamoto, M., Begum, S., Ahmed, T. (2020). Vulnerabilities to Covid-19 in Bangladesh and a reconsideration of sustainable development goals. *Sustainability*, 12(13).
 35. Shah, P. (2020). *Psychological well-being: A challenge in Covid-19 regime*. The Financial Express.
 36. Shammi, M., Bodrud-Doza, M., Islam, A.R. and Rahman, M.M. (2020), “Covid-19 pandemic, socioeconomic crisis and human stress in resource-limited settings: a case from Bangladesh”, *Heliyon*, (22), e04063.
 37. Sifat, R. I. (2020a). Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on domestic violence in Bangladesh. *Asian Journal of Psychiatry*, (53), 102393.
 38. Sifat, R. I. (2020b). Covid-19 pandemic: Mental stress, depression, anxiety among the

- university students in Bangladesh. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 1–2.
39. Son, H. H. (2013). Inequality of human opportunities in developing Asia. *Asian Development Review*, 30(2), 110–130.
 40. The Daily Star. (2020). BRAC survey: 14 percent of low-income respondents have no food at home. The Daily Star.
 41. The New York Times. (2020). Instead of coronavirus, the hunger will kill us.’ A global food crisis loom.
 42. Uddin, J. (2020, August). Vietnam overtakes Bangladesh in RMG export. The Business Standard.
 43. Vos, R., Martin, W. and Laborde, D. (2020), “As Covid-19 spreads, no major concern for global food security yet”, available at: <https://www.ifpri.org/blog/covid-19-spreads-no-major-concern-global-food-security-yet>
 44. World Health Organization. (2020a). Mental health and psychosocial considerations during the Covid-19 outbreak. Retrieved from https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/mental-health-considerations.pdf?sfvrsn=6d3578af_2
 45. World Health Organization. (2020b). WHO Bangladesh Covid-19 Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Update. Retrieved from https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/searo/bangladesh/covid-19-who-bangladesh-situation-reports/who-update-25-20200817.pdf?sfvrsn=500afa3b_2