

Covid-19 Impact on the Minority of Bangladesh in the Global Pandemic

Project Report

November-2020 to October 2021



Project: Covid-19 Impact on the Minority of Bangladesh in the Global Pandemic

Implemented by:
Council of Minorities & Safety & Rights Society (SRS)

Supported by:
Institution of Statelessness and Inclusion- ISI



Introduction:

This project, carried out by the Council of Minorities, was working towards understanding the impact of COVID-19 on the Urdu speaking community. By conducting research through a baseline survey the project has gained a better understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on the community. The research findings were being used to train paralegals and volunteers to become ‘rights defenders.’ Rights advocates undertake casework in which they have assisted community members through legal procedures, bridging the gap between the community and the government. Their work facilitates access to essential government services and provides support to the formerly stateless Bihari community, stateless persons or those at risk of stateless persons through a variety of social challenges such as domestic violence. This project aims were collaborate with legal organizations, engage with key stakeholders including District Commissioners and representatives of local government, the National Human Rights Commission, the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation, Members of Parliament and relevant UN Agencies, including UNHCR and UNDP. By working with and advocating before such stakeholders, the project aims to promote the prioritization of this community in COVID-19 relief and raise concerns regarding the 2016 Draft Citizenship Bill.

Community Background:

Approximately three hundred thousand Urdu-speaking Biharis, a linguistic minority, are living in 116 inhuman camps in Bangladesh. In Bangladesh they are identified in the local society by different nomenclatures, such as non-Bengalis, Biharis and Urdu- speaking. In 2008 the honorable High Court of Bangladesh confirmed their citizenship and gave their name as Urdu Speaking Bangladeshi. The history of the Urdu-speaking Bangladeshi community goes back to the partition of the Indian sub-continent.

In 1947 the sub-continent experienced two historical events: the creation of India and Pakistan and the mass migration of Hindus, Muslims and Sikh communities. When India was divided the creation of Pakistan forced many Indian Muslims to migrate from their original homeland to East and West Pakistan. Most of immigrants from the Indian States of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal came to East Pakistan (which is now Bangladesh). The majority of them were Urdu-speaking. They were called as “Mohajirs” meaning refugee, and later they became known as Biharis and Stranded Pakistani in Bangladesh.

In December 1971, Bengalis in East Pakistan won independence after fighting the nine-month war of liberation with the Pakistan Army. During the war a section of the Urdu-speaking Bihari community opposed the creation of Bangladesh. For that, after the emergence of Bangladesh in 16 December 1971, the Biharis became victims of political violence. About one hundred thousand Biharis were killed by Bengali freedom fighters. They lost their properties, services, jobs, and became homeless and stateless.

Over the past five decades, the Government of Bangladesh has made some effort to improve the rights and welfare of Biharis. In 2008, Bangladesh's Supreme Court recognized Bihari's right to citizenship in Bangladesh and called for their inclusion on voter rolls. However, the living conditions in Bihari camps remain poor. The Bangladesh Government has long promised to "rehabilitate" Biharis—to provide them housing outside the camps that is integrated into the Bangladeshi community. This has not occurred. Socially and politically, Biharis-Urdu Speaking is a marginalized community. Urdu Speaking camp dwellers are Bangladeshi citizens, however, they are not treated as a linguistic minority in Bangladesh. 49 years after the independence of Bangladesh the camp dwellers have now stayed over five decades in these settlements, which is a classic example of a subhuman lifestyle.

Objectives:

- 1) Research the impacts of COVID-19 on stateless persons and those at risk of statelessness in Dhaka, Chittagong and Saidpur.
- 2) Establish a rights advocate system to help affected persons access government services and address community and domestic issues.
- 3) Engage in national advocacy with Bangladesh Government and humanitarian actors to address the insufficiencies of the 2016 Draft Citizenship Bill.

Activities as per objectives:

1. Establish Rights Defenders
2. Conducted a baseline survey on Covid-19 Impact on the community
3. Rights Defenders activities;
 - i) Daily door to door outreach
 - ii) Organize community group meeting
 - iii) Organize advocacy meeting

- iv) Covid-19 vaccination registration
- 4. National level advocacy on the impact of covid-19
- 5. Relief distribution
- 6. National Seminar;

Establish Rights Defenders:

At the beginning of this project we have selected 10 community rights defenders from Dhaka-Mohammadpur & Mirpur, Rangpur and Saidpur and after that we have organized a 3 days residential training on rights defenders. In the training we have trained them on human rights, gender, community activism, Covid-19 protection including vaccination and outreach message dissemination.



Conducted a baseline survey on Covid-19 Impact on the community:

The data collection for this study was conducted through an extensive survey conducted by 13 data collectors who were trained for interview data collection and research ethics. The geographical scope of the study spanned Dhaka, Rangpur and Saidpur where the Bihari camps are situated, having varying population sizes among



them. A total of 196 interviews were conducted and the number conducted in a given area was proportionate to the number of families in that region. The survey questionnaire is attached in the Annex and covered issues including levels of awareness and responses to COVID-19, impact of

the pandemic, role of the government and broader issues of identity and citizenship. The study also uses secondary data collected from government census, circulars, and reports, and documents produced by human rights organizations, civil society organizations, academic institutions, UN agencies and various media outlets.

Rights Defenders Activities:

Daily Door to Door Outreach

Our ten rights defenders did daily door to door outreach and they were committed to visit at list 10 houses inside the camp of their assigned area and disseminated the message of Covid-19, civil documentation, government scope regarding the Covid-19. They mobilized the camp community to maintain social distance inside and outside the camp, using face mask and also wash hands regularly. This was the first initiative from the defenders to aware the camp community from the Covid-19 as global pandemic. A total number of 11,629 door to door outreach have been done by the ten rights defenders in 4 working areas including 3,178 male and 8,451 female.



Door to door outreach

| Areas | Male | Female | Total |
|-------------|-------|--------|-------|
| Mohammadpur | 434 | 1,470 | 1,904 |
| Mirpur | 1,637 | 4,273 | 5,910 |
| Rangpur | 267 | 973 | 1,240 |



| | | | |
|---------|-------|-------|--------|
| Saidpur | 840 | 1,735 | 2,575 |
| Total | 3,178 | 8,451 | 11,629 |

Community Group Meeting:

Ten rights defenders in 4 working areas conducted a total number of 110 community group meetings. They invited 15 mix groups in each group meeting. A total number of 1,650 community people attended in the group meeting including 127 male and 1,523 female. Rights defenders disseminate the information of Covid-19, human rights, domestic violation and citizenship issue in the group meetings.

Group Meeting

| Areas | Total GM | Male | Female | Total |
|--------------|------------|------------|--------------|--------------|
| Mohammadpur | 44 | 22 | 638 | 660 |
| Mirpur | 44 | 60 | 600 | 660 |
| Rangpur | 11 | 20 | 145 | 165 |
| Saidpur | 11 | 25 | 140 | 165 |
| Total | 110 | 127 | 1,523 | 1,650 |



Advocacy Meeting:

In 4 working areas rights defenders organized 4 advocacy meetings. A total number of participants were 120 including 35 male and 85 female. In the meeting defenders briefly described about the project and baseline survey findings and also discussed about draft citizenship bill. Beside our advocacy meeting we have done national level advocacy on six month project impact report. We have translated and published the report and distributed to civil society national and international NGOs, UN and national human rights commission.

Advocacy Meeting:

| Areas | Total AM | Male | Female | Total |
|-------------|----------|------|--------|-------|
| Mohammadpur | 1 | 2 | 28 | 30 |
| Mirpur | 1 | 6 | 24 | 30 |



| | | | | |
|--------------|----------|-----------|-----------|------------|
| Rangpur | 1 | 6 | 24 | 30 |
| Saidpur | 1 | 21 | 9 | 30 |
| Total | 4 | 35 | 85 | 120 |

Covid-19 Vaccination Registration:

From January, 2021 Bangladesh government has started vaccination for its nationals. In the

first phase they announced 40 year old and above 40 years old citizens can register their name for Covid-19 Vaccination, however the process of registration was difficult it was online basis so that many of citizens faced difficulties to register their name. Bihari camp dwellers are Bangladeshi citizens and they have national identity card so they can do their registration no any legal barrier, but they need device, internet and printer for print out the vaccine card. At the middle of our project our rights defenders have started vaccine registration work inside the camps. Initially they face challenges to register the camp dwellers name because camp dwellers were not willing to get vaccine, they were afraid for its side effect then after our rights defenders started awareness on vaccination inside the camps and they mobilized them to register their name for vaccination. A total 582 camp dwellers registered and vaccinated two does vaccine including 279 male and 303 female.

Vaccination Registration:

| Areas | Male | Female | Total |
|--------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Mohammadpur | 166 | 168 | 324 |
| Mirpur | 69 | 90 | 159 |
| Rangpur | 19 | 25 | 44 |
| Saidpur | 25 | 20 | 45 |
| Total | 279 | 303 | 582 |



Covid-19 Emergency Relief Distribution:

Covid-19 is a global pandemic and its impact has been experienced by globally. As a part of global pandemic, Bangladesh also faced difficulties during the first and second wave of Covid-19. In 2020 and 2021 Bangladesh government has shutdown the country several times. Camp based Bihari community engage in informal sector of work; mainly they are day labor, barber, butcher, rickshawpuller and handy craft worker. Even they are living in under poverty line. During the country lockdown camp dwellers did not get access to go out and work. It was very difficult times for the camp people. They did not get government relief food. Under this project we have distributed emergency food relief to the 800 families in 4 working areas in Mohammadpur, Mirpur, Rangpur and Saidpur camps.



National Seminar:

At the end of the project we have organized a national seminar on 27 of October, 2021 in Dhaka. A total number of 60 participants attended the meeting. All the representatives from different camp described the current situation of the camps and citizenship issues.

Discussion on the meeting;

Mrs. Kajol Rekha a Geneva Camp resident said, I born in this country and I own Bangladesh, I am not stranded Pakistani.

Mrs. Ruma Parveen said, according to 2008 high court judgement we are Bangladeshi citizens then why Prime Minister said that we are burden in Bangladesh, we are not burden because we are hard working community and contributing Bangladeshi economy.

Humayoun Kabir, a representative from Khulna, urged the authorities concerned to ensure proper recognition of the disadvantaged community. "We all are Bangladeshis, not stranded Pakistanis," he said.

Mofidul Hoque, a trustee of the liberation war museum, said the young generation of the community had ownership of the country. "You have the same rights in Bangladesh as other citizens and you should also raise the issue of war criminals. We are determined that all war criminals be punished in this land. I support your cause and believe you all are Bangladeshi citizens."

Speaking as the chief guest of the event, Sultana Kamal, a lawyer and human rights activist, said, "I'm happy to be here and I believe you are a part of this country. But if someone claims to be a stranded Pakistani, they too have their rights and as a human rights activist, I will support them to go back to their country," she said. "If you, however, believe this is your country, then your rights cannot be taken by anyone," she said.



Project Impact:

During the global pandemic this project was super impactful for the camp based Bihari community in Bangladesh. Before this project camp dwellers were not much aware about the Covid-19 and its protection mechanisms. A large number of camp dwellers were aware under this project. Around 14,838 people life have been touch through this project.

Next Step:

After the successful completion of this project we realize that we need more policy level advocacy and more research on citizenship practice and evaluation of 2008 high court judgment. Biharis are Bangladeshi citizens but without any benefits so that need more awareness on their citizenship issue and for that we think we need to make some documentary film photo exhibition on the life of the camp dwellers. Even during the project we realize that working on gender issue is very important for this community.