Diminishing Inequalities? A Study on Reconstituted Gender Relations in Bangladeshi Households During the COVID-19 Crisis

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Abstract
This article explores the gendered impact of the COVID-19 crisis in Bangladesh by analysing everyday practices within the household. Conceptually, we have followed R.W. Connell's model of the structures of gender and Naila Kabeer's perspective on women's power to examine how a normative gender order involving heterosexual marital partners tends to be sustained during 'normal' times but can often be destabilised in the context of an unprecedented crisis. Based on an analysis of data collected through an online survey and in-depth interviews, our findings show that the COVID-19 crisis has generated an opportunity for challenging gender inequalities by diminishing the public-private divide and expanding the horizon of responsibility sharing between women and men. Facing this 'new normal' reality, some women have been able to consider life choices and revise unequal relationships with spouses. In contrast, others have reproduced pre-existing inequalities and continued life 'as usual' under the regime of men.

Keywords: COVID-19 Crisis, Gender Relations, Households, Marital Partners, Mixed Methodology.

Introduction
On March 8, 2020, Bangladesh, a South Asian country, announced its first confirmed novel coronavirus (COVID-19) case after three individuals tested positive (Hasan & Shaon, 2020). To halt the further spread of the virus, the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) has been implementing public health guidelines through travel restrictions, institutional and at-home quarantines, shutdowns, social distancing, stay-at-home directives, and social campaigns for personal health and public safety. On March 23, 2020, a countrywide lockdown, called a 'general holiday', was declared, which continued until May 30 (Mamun, 2020). The people of Bangladesh have thus been subjected to some forms of restriction since March 2020, which continues under a series of revised government decisions selectively allowing some public activities. Meanwhile, between March 8

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of 2020 and August 15 of 2021, the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases reached 1,418,902 including 24,175 deaths with a case fatality rate (CFR) of 1.7% (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021), although the actual numbers directly or indirectly tied to COVID-19 are thought to be much higher.

Notably, this pandemic appears to have created a critical moment of marking a discontinuity or break from 'normal' or 'linear' (Neuhauser, 2018) life, as experienced by the 167.2 million people of Bangladesh (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics [BBS], 2019) and their predecessors. It is not only a public health threat but also a social crisis, and it is from here that a journey toward a 'new normal' may be beginning.

There is ample empirical evidence to suggest that during a crisis or disaster, traditional gender roles may be re-emphasised, gender inequality in daily work can increase, and women and girls' vulnerability towards oppression and violence can worsen (Alon et al., 2020; Kapur, 2020; Le Masson et al., 2016; Rahman, 2013; Wisner et al., 2004). However, it is also possible that disruptions caused by disasters can open 'windows of opportunity' to work toward greater gender equality by challenging traditional boundaries of gender roles and norms (Bradshaw, 2013; Enarson, 2000; Luna et al., 2017).

Given these two divergent possibilities, there exists a gap in identifying empirically grounded realities in different social contexts (Neuhauser, 2018) and especially in understanding the varied impacts of a crisis on society and the control individuals can exert over choices and opportunities in the context of a crisis (Resurrección, 2013). With this in mind, this study examines how the traditional gendered division of labour and power in Bangladeshi families, shapes women's relationships with their marital partners and to what extent individual women have been able to reproduce or revise those structures while rebuilding life during the COVID-19 crisis. Before presenting our research findings, we will discuss the theoretical framework and research methodology in the following sections.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical orientation of this study emanates from the long-standing debate on structure vs agency that has enriched feminist thinking about gender relations in human societies. Drawing from the scholarship of R.W. Connell, who has contributed to this debate by theorising gender relations in a systematic manner, structures are seen as enduring and extensive patterns found in social relations. Connell argues that although one can never escape structure, structures are constituted through practice, and practice can always be turned against structure (Connell, 1987, p. 95).

Extending this idea into the gender domain, Connell constructs a theory of gender relations by considering gender as a way of structuring social relations. For a more systematic exploration of gender relations, she offers a three-fold 'model of the structure of gender' by distinguishing relations of (i) power, (ii) labour, and (iii) cathexis (emotional attachments) (Connell, 1987). According to Connell, these structures—both material and ideological—are the major elements of any gender order or regime established at a particular period of time. Together they pattern social practices (including thought) and expose constraints on further practices. In this complex social terrain, restrictions on social practices operate through an interplay of power and an array of institutions that in many ways mirror and support each other, from the micro to the macro level. Based on this system, a gender order where men have power over women has come to prevail (Connell, 1987, 2005).

Connell nonetheless remains attentive to charges of over-generalisation by drawing attention to particular forms of the gender order. She has made it more compatible with contextual analysis by employing an intersectional lens and focusing on difference. According to Connell, the intersections of gender and other systems of difference (such as class, nationality, race, ethnicity, age, and other social divisions) shape the experience of both oppression and privilege. We find this analytical lens useful for this study because it helps locate different women and their experiences of relative gender equality and inequality, which may vary greatly among different individuals and groups of women (Moss, 2002).

Connell's theory also points out that an established gender regime may become destabilised by social change at any particular period. With this, she pays attention to historical moments of transformation. These moments may emerge following a significant shift in gender history (e.g., the emergence of a strong women's suffrage movement) or any broader socioeconomic move external to the gender system (e.g., the impact of neoliberal policies or the COVID-19 crisis considered here). She also mentions that change may also come from within gender relations. We consider this notion indicative of inventive and creative actors within these structures (Maharaj, 1995). Still, Connell's preference for focusing on macro factors or macro processes of change tends to deemphasise the power of subtle actors to shape the gender regime (Holmes, 2007). For this study, we have found that following the lens of Connell too strictly would make it difficult to understand how seemingly powerless women can struggle under patriarchal structures and trigger change (Apter & Garnsey, 1994; Wilson, 2008).

To focus explicitly on the influence of less visible women, we draw on the insights of feminist scholar Naila Kabeer, who defines women's power as the ability to make choices (Kabeer, 2003). According to Kabeer, women make choices given their life circumstances, but not all options are equally significant in terms of the consequences for women's lives. Some life choices can enable women to transgress patriarchal constraints in a strategic way, whereas some simply reflect practical gender interests (Molyneux, 1985). The latter may help women cope with sudden threats or structural conditions but do little to change oppressive structures and women's subordinate position to men.

Based on this theoretical framework, we consider the family or household a strategic site of reproducing and potentially revising gender relations. Within this framework, Connell's model of the structure of gender (1987) has been used to analyse how systems of gender relations are sustained or changed in different families once they are exposed to threats associated with the COVID-19 crisis. Our primary focus will be on the structure of labour relations, which, as Connell points out, is connected to and has significant influence over the structure of power. This article has touched upon Cathexis or emotional attachment, another focus of Connell's model, narrowly. It is discussed as part of the other two structures and in the context of men's sexual desire and women's emotional attachment to the family.

Following extensive feminist scholarship on women's labour (Elson, 2010; Folbre, 1994; Oakley, 1974), we have considered both productive and reproductive activities as work. Hence, the structure of labour includes a discussion of reproductive work, meaning unpaid work in families, and productive work, which refers to formal or informal income-generating activities. In addition, we have included a consideration of activities devoted to personal care (including personal grooming, exercise, gardening, and other activities carried out within the household) along with questions regarding the perceived value of women's and men's work. The structure of power is discussed in terms of authority in household decision-making, mechanisms of control over women, and their overt and covert contestations. We have examined continuities and changes

to these structures by comparing the experience of everyday struggles and choices of different women (and men) before and in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. The following section discusses the research methodology used in this study.

Methodology
The present study utilised a mixed-methods approach involving a questionnaire survey and in-depth interview methods. Considering the constraints on field visits in the context of an ongoing pandemic, we decided to collect data using cell phones and the internet (Zoom, Facebook, Skype, and others). The details of data collection and analysis are as follows.

Questionnaire Survey
Guided by the broader literature (Bryman, 2016; Lahiri-Dutt et al., 2020), we drafted a survey questionnaire using Google Forms (https://docs.google.com/forms). The questionnaire was given to 10 individuals for a pilot test. We incorporated a few changes to the initial draft based on a review of the responses and reactions given by those 10 individuals.

The questionnaire included questions related to the residential location and socioeconomic and demographic status of the participants and their families (defined as male- or female-headed households). We also incorporated questions regarding the types of tasks performed by an individual (reproductive, productive, and personal care-related activities); allotted time for work vs leisure; gender segregation vs cooperation in paid and unpaid work; and the configuration of the power relationships during and before the COVID-19 crisis.

We followed a snowball sampling method to reach out to potential research participants. The survey started with posting the questionnaire on the personal Facebook account of the first and second authors of this study. It was an open call for all to participate in the survey, and a link was forwarded to potential participants. Starting from May 15, we were able to get 466 responses (270 women and 196 men) within two weeks. Among the respondents, 58% of women and 56% of men belonged to nuclear households. Others (42% of women and 44% of men) resided in a joint family (i.e., an extended family, with more generations than a nuclear family). Most of the survey participants (95% of women and 87% of men) were from urban areas. About 90% of all respondents belonged to middle-class households, which might be a true reflection of our (the authors') own socioeconomic backgrounds that drew us to add similar people to the social networks used for this study. It, however, represents a limitation of this study, and future studies may attempt to incorporate individuals from more diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, including participants who do not use social media such as Facebook.

Interviews
The questionnaire survey provided us with a glimpse of the respondents' everyday lives. Most importantly, the similarities and differences across genders, urban-rural locations, and occupations became evident in the summary sheet of the Google Form. We conducted unstructured in-depth interviews from May 25 to July 31, 2020, among selected participants to obtain more in-depth information. The selection was made with potential participants expressing interest in participating through the Google Form that was circulated. We were mindful of reaching out to diverse experiences, and with this in mind, we selected 24 individuals (16 women and eight men). During the survey period, they were all married individuals and were from different types of families (12 nuclear and 12 joint families) and residential locations (19 urban and five rural). The

participants covered a wide age range (22-74 years) and educational statuses (eighth grade to PhD). Among the female participants, five described themselves as homemakers (four had no independent income source, and one earned a small amount as a home-based worker). Ten women out of the 16 women participants had a formal job, and one was a casual worker. In contrast, all the male participants had single or multiple sources of income, and they were involved in business (three), government service (four), and informal work (one).

We contacted the research participants by telephone or messenger to obtain their verbal consent before the audio-visual (Zoom, Skype) or telephone interviews. During interviews, the motives behind the research were explained clearly. The participants were informed of their rights to maintain privacy and withdraw at any time, and they were asked to choose a place of their convenience for the interviews that would allow them to speak freely.

The interview participants were requested to share their experience of lockdown and prolonged pandemic periods, reflecting on the aspects of their everyday work responsibilities that changed (or did not change) and how those changes and continuities influenced their power relations with marital partners. We also sought individual opinions on the possibility of sustaining the changes (on both personal and societal levels) that they observed under the crisis conditions. While conducting the interviews, we reflected on our personal experiences of the crisis. It helped us build rapport with participants and prompting spontaneous discussions. Each session was of a maximum one-hour length, and we conducted more than one session if required. With the permission of the participants, all conversations were recorded. They were later transcribed and translated into English for analysis. We conducted a brief follow-up session with the participants in December 2020 to better understand the long-term effects of the crisis.

Data Analysis

We completed simple descriptive and inferential statistical analyses in Microsoft Excel 2019 and Minitab (version 16) using the survey data involving frequency count, graph construction, and *t*-test. The conventional content analysis method was followed for qualitative data analysis. The interview transcripts were thoroughly read and coded manually, deriving categories directly from the text. Once all transcripts had been coded, we combined some codes and split others into sub-categories. The coded themes and sub-themes were then compared to distinguish similarities and differences between different cases. These categories were also compared with Connell's (1987) model and Kabeer's (2003) concepts to highlight connections and distinctions between theory and empirical data. The following section presents the findings of the study.

Structures of Gender Relations in Bangladeshi Households: The Pre-COVID-19 Context
Unpaid Family Care and Domestic Work

The field investigation carried out for this study indicated that before the COVID-19 crisis, the task of home or family management went principally to the wife in the household, whether she had a formal job or not. The research participants helped us identify 27 types of tasks performed by women as part of their daily household chores that broadly included cooking, cleaning, washing, and looking after children, elders, and occasional guests. However, it is notable that around three-fourths of the surveyed women had part-time or full-time domestic workers. They helped with heavier and more time-consuming tasks (e.g., cleaning the house, washing dishes, chopping vegetables, and grinding spices manually). In most cases, wives were responsible

primarily for daily cooking and handling the wide range of needs of children, elderly parents-in-law, and above all, their husbands with the utmost attention. They were also in charge of providing support to relatives and friends who might live apart or stay temporarily with the family. In this way, married women drew on physical, emotional, and sexual labour (Folbre, 1994; Oakley, 1974) to fulfil the responsibilities of a dutiful wife.

In contrast, married men tended to avoid doing what was socially seen as women's unpaid work. They were chiefly involved in purchasing groceries on a weekly basis, and sometimes (especially in nuclear families), they offered help in tutoring children, washing dishes, or chopping vegetables in the absence of domestic helpers. It was only occasional help, and men were seldom moved by a sense of equality or empathy for their wives. Interview participants pointed out that society prohibited men's participation in women's work. As one man (in a nuclear family) who worked in government service explained:

> A man is not taught from childhood that household work is everyone's work and that it is his work as well. And the men whose partners are housewives are even more reluctant to do household work. A mindset of non-cooperation [for these tasks] and the patriarchal society are responsible for this. Some of my colleagues make fun of me [for helping his wife occasionally].

The unavailability of men's labour made married women engage heavily in the domestic sector. They were expected to remain busy with their family '24 hours a day, 365 days a year'. However, there were variations among women across different occupations and families. The homemakers who participated in the study (30%) remained occupied from early morning until late at night, with hardly any break in their daily routine. Similarly, women holding a job or business (70%) also had an immense load of housework. Still, they had a routine life and could take a break from monotonous household activities during office hours. Nonetheless, this group of women had to face a double burden of home and office work.

The women we interviewed noted that very few married women in rural joint families, even if they had a paid job, could share household chores with hired domestic helpers. Family members, including their husbands, expected them to shoulder it alone. Despite this, compared to women in rural areas, women living in urban areas were found to have encountered more difficulties managing such tasks as dropping off and picking children up from school due to the lack of convenient public transportation and heavy traffic jams on the road. Most of the urban employed mothers who participated in interviews reported that childcare was the greatest challenge they faced due to the absence of day-care services at their offices or schools. For this reason, they stressed that it was common to see women deciding to give up their formal jobs.

Despite all of these sacrifices and the heavy toil reported in interviews, every woman mentioned that they received almost no recognition from the family and society for their unpaid contribution because it was not valued as 'real' work. An urban homemaker from a joint family stated:

> I have no break. No time. […] As a mother, I do everything for my sons with responsibility, love, and joy. […] They [husband, relatives, and acquaintances] feel that I sit idle all the time and enjoy a luxurious life.

It is important to note that, as reflected in the above statement, women often said that they did household chores and unpaid family care in a loving and dedicated way. It aided in developing a strong bond with their families, especially with their children, and it proved themselves to be the embodiment of a 'good woman'. Interestingly, we noticed a desire among relatively young professional women (those below 40 years of age) to share the burden of home management with men. However, they failed because their marital partners were neither 'interested' nor 'capable' of doing this, and they had no time. Given these constraints, every woman interviewed favoured a strategy of hiring inexpensive domestic help and learning how to accomplish the needed household work more efficiently.

Difficulties in Balancing Paid and Unpaid Work

According to research participants, traditionally Bangladeshi men, unlike women, have been socialised from early childhood to become household heads and shoulder income-generating activities on their own (i.e., without women's help). Despite this, the reality was different: most of the women surveyed (70%) were active in income-generating activities before the COVID-19 crisis. In fact, about five per cent of them had been contributing more than their husbands to the household income. Still, the women we interviewed complained that men were assumed to be the only people in the family who are money-earners. Field data revealed that this belief allowed men to stay outside the home for long hours and concentrate fully on career development or economic gains. They, therefore, did not have time to spend on family, children, wives, and even personal care. As reflected in the narrative of a real-state business owner (a member of a joint family):

> I need to think about how to earn more income. I need to think about how to achieve more financial solvency. It is the reason I work so hard all day long […]. When I'm at the office, I can use my time productively. I can utilise each hour of my day well. At home, I find myself a little less productive.

Interviews with homemakers indicated that as financially dependent wives, they highly valued the monetary contribution of their partners. For this reason, they felt obligated to accept a husband's decisions and were willing to pay extra attention to his everyday needs and demands. However, women earning incomes also thought they did not receive recognition or cooperation from family members. They were strongly discouraged to continue with or devote more time to paid work. A rural schoolteacher (in a joint family) said:

> I have been serving as the school principal for more than ten years. Despite this, my family [especially her husband] and relatives have complaints about me being so busy with office work. […] My husband expects me to give more time to taking care of the family.

Participating in interviews, women also reported that considering family obligations, they tried to choose 'light' professions (e.g., teaching) that allowed greater flexibility and less time in the office. Moreover, they tended to quit their jobs during pregnancy or in the face of any family emergency. To many of them, home-based work was a viable option to strike a balance between family and income-generating activities. Still, they felt hesitant to start something because they did not have adequate time and confidence to explore this avenue.

In sum, the field findings presented above illustrate paid and unpaid work-related struggles and sacrifices of married women across different occupations, joint and nuclear families, and urban and rural locations. Although individual women had developed strategies to cope with everyday challenges, overall, the multiple and time-consuming responsibilities at home directly or indirectly hampered their potential to participate in the public sphere and economic activities (Chant, 2014; Kabeer, 2003). It is also a fact that whatever kind of work women did, paid or unpaid, they were likely to be given little or no recognition for their efforts. At the same time, the patriarchal family structure allowed men to explore the public domain and receive high praise for their income-generating work. This gender division of labour had further implications for unequal power relations between married couples, as will be explored below.

Power Inequalities, Contestations, and Bargains
Empirical data reflect that classic forms of patriarchy prevailed in most joint families where married women were bound to live under several gatekeepers. Women participants reported that in a very conservative family, a wife would encounter her husband's aggression (scolding, battering, the threat of getting a divorce or marrying another woman) frequently if any fault was detected with her household responsibilities or physical beauty. Family members, especially mother-in-laws, were said to safeguard their sons' interests by keeping a watchful eye on daughter-in-laws. A rural casual worker (in a joint family) narrated her experience in this way:

> When a woman loses her beauty, she also loses her value in the eyes of her husband and in-laws. […] His [her husband's] words made me really sad. He said to me, 'No matter what I do with you, you don't have any other way to go. Considering the current condition of your physical features, no one will take you. Even if you go to a brothel, no one will pay to sleep with you.'

Despite feeling like a 'torn piece of cloth', shackled, or extremely tired, the women we interviewed reported not wanting to break up the marriage and family structure. An urban cooperative auditor (living in a joint family) pointed to the multiple obstacles of being a married woman:

> She [her mother-in-law] keeps telling me it should be done this way but never does anything by herself. So does her son. I'm given an examination by them every day. Everyone in the family is my boss. […] I've been supporting the family economically. Still, I could not avoid my husband's torture and sexual abuse. I could not share it with my parents or my friends. What will people say? I feel ashamed of myself. I should have left him much earlier, but I could not. How can I live without my son [a 13-year-old]? [...] [Legally] I can't claim his guardianship.

It was not that women in nuclear families did not face male domination at all; however, they had to face fewer gatekeepers daily. They could exercise a little more freedom (e.g., doing household chores together with domestic help) that was not generally possible for women in joint families. However, except for one woman, every interview participant stated that as head of the household, a husband was the one to make every critical decision—for example, with respect to financial management. In contrast, a wife could only make minor decisions, such as those related

to children's education and family meals. In the worst cases, men did not listen to their marital partners in any way; they made all the decisions, whether major or minor.

Moreover, very 'dominant' husbands acted to prevent their wives from joining any paid work or skill development programs. Those husbands strongly believed that going outside the home would allow a woman to avoid family responsibilities and even to engage in extra-marital relations with men in the workplace. Therefore, even women with higher levels of education felt hesitant to choose an independent career, and they continued to have to live out their lives under the domination of men.

Women repeatedly mentioned that considering the importance of peace in the family and their children's future, they tried to remain silent when their husbands misbehaved. Our survey data, however, brings into focus the subtle bargaining strategies of seemingly submissive wives. For example, a few of the women surveyed (eight per cent) decided to reside with husbands and biological parents (not with in-laws), which helped them access free childcare and avoid marital conflicts. Moreover, most of the women we interviewed preferred to draw support from the parental home and female colleagues or friends to deal with emergencies that arose at the office or home and to help heal the pain of domestic conflicts. Every woman unanimously supported the view that all women should have an independent source of income. It would allow them to be 'heard' in the family and help address feelings of 'loneliness' or 'worthlessness' by becoming a part of a broader social network. Nonetheless, they considered their family responsibilities to be a significant barrier to achieving financial independence.

These interviews illustrate women's everyday struggles in a social context where family expectations, social norms, service, and infrastructural deficiencies posed considerable challenges regarding women's ability and freedom of choice (Chant, 2014). As a result, women had been pushed to live under a coordinated patriarchal system (Connell, 1987), and they faced multiple gender constraints both within and outside the home (Kabeer, 2003). It barred them from sharing the burden of unpaid care work, choosing an independent source of income, being listened to in critical family matters, or even enjoying consensual—and avoiding non-consensual—sex with marital partners.

Nevertheless, many women attempted to manage paid work and reduce conflict by seeking help outside the household and negotiating with men. We may view those efforts as reflecting women's desires to fulfil strategic gender interests. At the same time, there was a strong urge to claim the role of a good mother and wife by taking care of practical gender needs or remaining silent when faced with oppressive conditions.

Overall, although there were instances of deviant practices and subtle bargains, it is apparent from interviews that the traditional family system allowed Bangladeshi husbands to enjoy greater freedom and exert control over their wives. However, it is also a fact that, along with women, men had been hurt by the patriarchal system (Connell, 2005) that inspired them to choose a life focused on money and power concerns. They had little interest even in personal pursuits. Due to separate activity domains and different gender interests, the married couples could allot little time to see or hear from each other. As partners, they had been leading united but separate lives. In the following section, we will discuss the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on this pre-COVID scenario.

Reconstituted Labour and Power Relationships during the COVID-19 Crisis
*Family Care*

Based on the field investigation, we found that the divide between public and private space disappeared suddenly following the start of the COVID-19 pandemic as the home became the prime locus of every activity. The shutdowns of public places (e.g., offices and schools) and residential complexes prohibiting the entry of visitors following the government-declared 'lockdown' and 'stay at home' guidelines, had imposed a barrier to the standard gender division of labour within the home. Massive changes became evident after these requirements were imposed.

More than half of the women (60%) who participated in the questionnaire survey mentioned that their domestic workload had increased compared to when the lockdown started. The women we interviewed explained that the 'closing off of the home from visitors' restricted their ability to draw outside help. Thus, women lost access to the regular assistance provided by part-time domestic help. In addition, their occasional support system (kinship and friends' networks) disappeared. The primary family carers became a replacement for their part-time domestic help and now were occupied with the tasks previously carried out by non-family members. Moreover, their burden became heavier than before due to rising health concerns, which extended additional pressure of home cleaning, sanitising purchased items, preparing healthy food, looking after home-bound kids, and taking care of sick family members.

During this crisis, women tried to avoid extra pressures by reducing everyday chores or switching to the use of electronic appliances whenever possible. At the same time, many husbands who stopped going to the workplace appeared as their primary source of help. These men found it necessary to start cleaning the home, looking after children, or washing dishes. Moreover, they took on relatively risky tasks, such as buying groceries and going to open markets, buying medicines, and dealing with other necessities outside the home.

In other words, because the COVID-19 crisis had imposed direct constraints on the domestic labour supply, many husbands felt the need to come forward to help their wives, and their wives, in turn, acted as full-time domestic workers. According to the questionnaire survey, women spent about 3.9 hours (95% CI 3.6, 4.2) on average on daily household chores in the pre-lockdown period, while men spent about 1.9 hours (95% CI 1.6, 2.2). Under lockdown, women and men worked about 5.7 hours (95% CI 5.4, 6.0) and 3.4 hours (95% CI 3.0, 3.7), respectively (Figure 1). On average, men's household workload increased 1.5 hours (95% CI 1.0, 1.9, t (322) = 6.6, $p < .001$) and for women, it was 1.8 hours (95% CI 1.4, 2.3, t (461) = 8.4, $p < .001$) compared to the previous (pre-lockdown) period.

Figure 1

Time allotment for daily household chroes
95% CI for the Mean
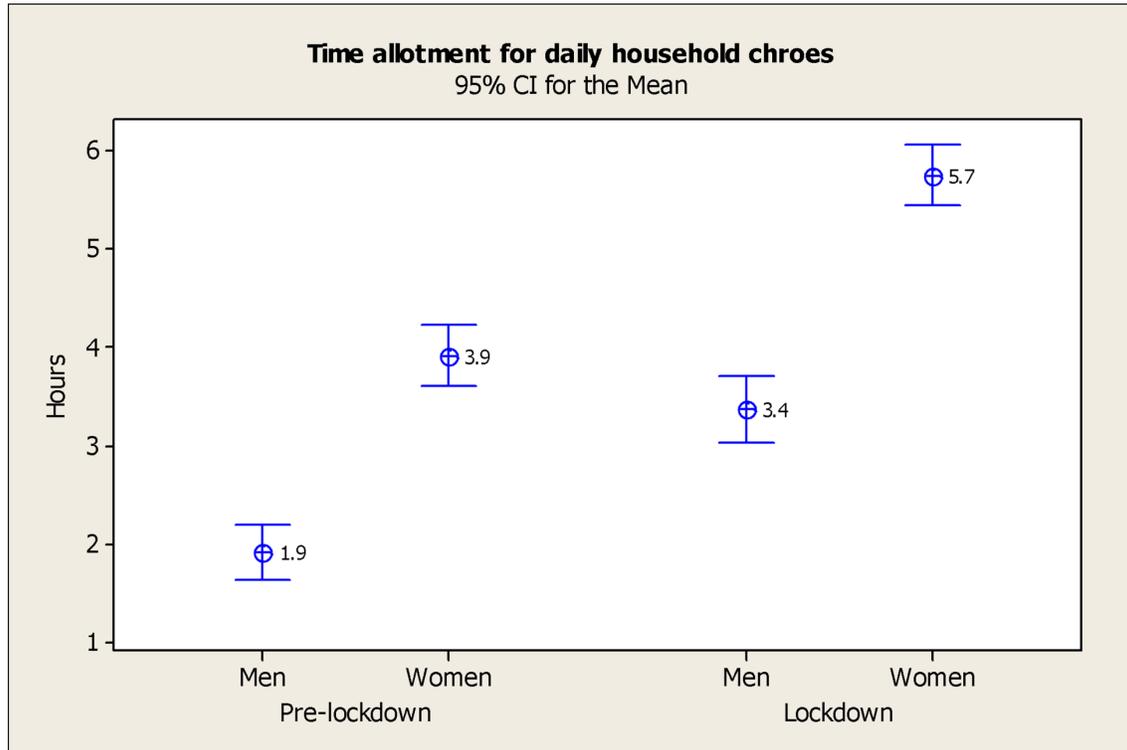
Interestingly, according to interviews, these hard times produced an unexpected benefit for homemakers (those without paid jobs) in the form of additional time. They were relieved of the children's school-related duties and the task of serving guests and relatives who previously would come to their homes frequently. It was also comforting for employed women who now had little or no office work as they could start paying extra attention to family members, especially to their children. In addition, they stated that they could manage time for activities of their own choice, such as home gardening, music lessons, or simply thinking about the meaning of life and relationships.

However, not every woman could take advantage of this opportunity or experience any change in their usual domestic responsibilities. Their husbands stayed just as idle inside the home as they did previously, without paying any attention to their wives or children. In addition, interviewees reported that families having full-time (i.e., live-in) domestic help did not undergo any significant change in terms of the gender division of labour in family care.

Working from Home

According to the questionnaire survey, during the lockdown and rising infection rates, 41% of women and 60% of men continued virtual office work and business activities from home. Men did approximately 4.0 hours (95% CI 3.5, 4.5) of office work daily, while women did the same for about 3.3 hours (95% CI 2.9, 3.7) (Figure 2). On average, men did about 0.7 hours (95% CI 0.1, 1.3) of extra office work than women, and the difference was statistically significant, $t(266) = 2.1$, $p = 0.035$.

Figure 2
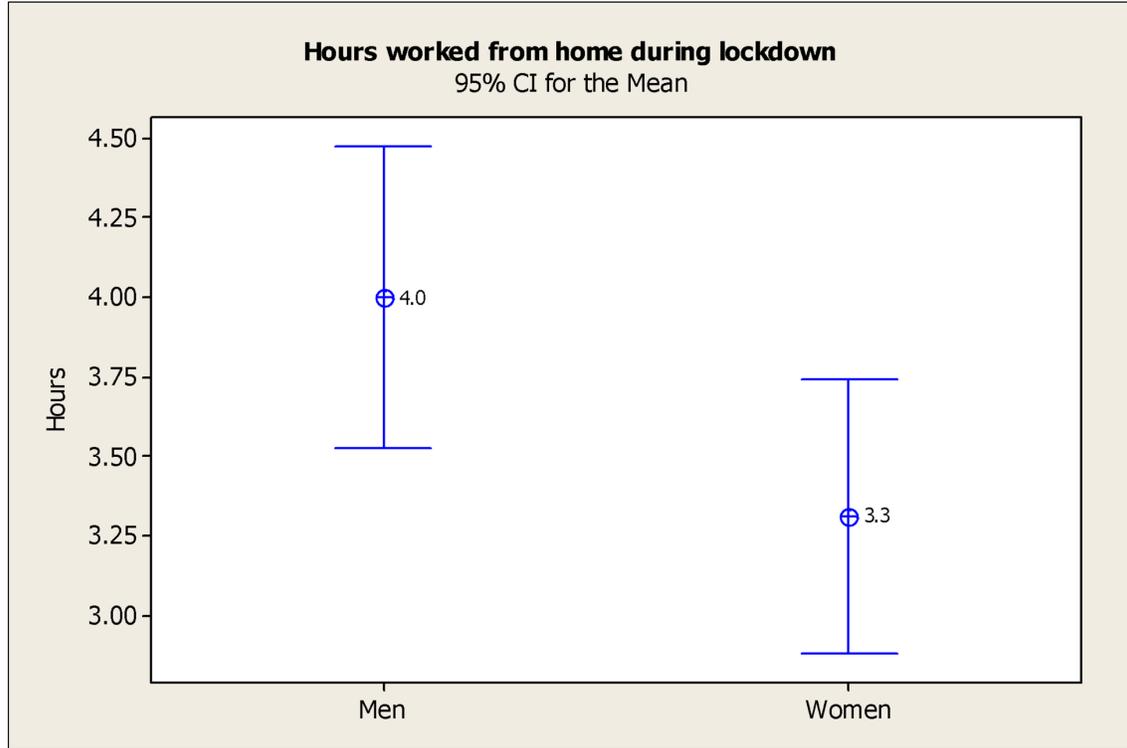
The men we interviewed stated that they could manage office or business activities from home in a relaxed way. However, not all the women we interviewed felt comfortable within the 'overlapping' home and office arrangements, and many said they experienced unbearable work pressure. A female development worker (in a nuclear family) explained this gender gap in the following way:

> There are no fixed office hours when we are working from home. As a result, we face additional pressures. […] My co-workers think that we are accessible the entire day. Their attitude is that during general holidays [lockdown], we are at home for the whole day and thus we don't have any work at all. They fail to understand our burden of household work […]. Family members, especially the kids, do not allow a mother to do office work uninterruptedly, whereas they do not complain about their father [also doing office work from home].

However, some working women we interviewed who previously had numerous activities outside the home, including frequent field visits, said they felt relaxed doing office work virtually. Working from home was not difficult for some women, particularly for those who had a supportive partner. Pointing to her privileged condition, a woman working in government office said:

> We help each other when it comes to doing work from home. Sometimes, when I am working on a laptop, my daughter creates a disturbance. In such cases, my husband handles her or takes her to a different room to ensure that I continue my work peacefully.

Moreover, interviews with these women reflect that working from home allowed them to avoid several problems, including traffic jams and sexual harassment when going by public transport. They now strongly support the continuation of being allowed to work from home in the post-COVID era.

Home-based Personal Care and Leisure Time

Based on results from the survey we conducted, 49% of men and 70% of women worked extra hours during the lockdown. They did not have enough time for rest, personal care, or leisure. On the other hand, some women (30% of those surveyed) found more free time. They used it for yoga and physical exercise, personal health and beauty-related activities, sleeping, and talking to relatives and friends. Around half of the men surveyed also had more free time than before. They utilised it for sleep, physical exercise, watching television and Netflix, surfing social media (Facebook), and telephone conversations. About one in every two respondents (49% of men and 48% of women) also devoted more time to prayer to reduce the escalating fears associated with the pandemic. Overall, despite facing difficulties and, for some, new severe developments (as will be discussed below), every woman and man we interviewed confessed that the COVID -19 crisis had allowed them to take a break from the 'treadmill' of life and spend quality time with family members in ways they had not experienced before.

Conflict and Compliance

Although there were benefits to life under lockdown, as discussed above, around 17% of women and 16% of men, participated in the questionnaire survey reported that their spouses behaved more violently during the lockdown. About 30% of the respondents said their families were under economic hardship due to the COVID-19 crisis. Of these, six per cent of men were sitting entirely idle at home, having lost their means of income. Five per cent of women stopped their home-based businesses because orders were cancelled, and others were not getting their salaries regularly. Conflicts between marital partners were on the rise, particularly in families that were hurt financially during the COVID-19 crisis. Some women expressed anger and disappointment to their husbands, the primary income earners, through escalated oral protests.

Conflicts also arose in families where home-bound women faced increased paid and unpaid care work and emotional pressures. The situation was found to be worst in families with COVID patients. A female corporate executive (living in a joint family) who established a virtual office said:

> At one point in time, I got mad at my husband and daughter very quickly. Honestly, sometimes the situation got so intense that my husband [a COVID-19 patient] and I ended up picking fights with each other. He screamed from his room, and I cried on my side.

Such narratives indicate that the crisis caused some women to confront men more aggressively. At the same time, it became difficult for some of them to avoid men's abusive behaviour and non-cooperation, particularly under lockdown conditions. These victims tended to avoid arguments and emphasised the need to follow a strategy of compliance. A college teacher (a member of a nuclear family) noted:

Now, I no longer protest my husband's aggressive behaviour. Do you know why? Because I have to stay inside our home throughout the entire day and night. If I fight with him, it's going to ruin my whole day. I might have a wrong time for the rest of the day or even the week. On top of that, there is no way I can leave my home and get to a different environment. So, I must keep myself calm for my mental peace and the wellbeing of my son.

It is apparent from the interviews that women, especially those who belonged to economically vulnerable families, faced more frequent physical and sexual violence carried out by marital partners. During the lockdown and stay-at-home regime, it became more difficult to complain to police or seek support from any organisation, particularly given that women-focused activities were suspended,Sp and officials and organisations were primarily busy with COVID-19 management.

Empathy, Care, and Cooperation

As we mentioned earlier, in some cases, the crisis stimulated an environment of cooperation among household members who took advantage of the new circumstances and came forward to share daily household chores. More than half of the women (55%) reported that their partners were helping them with household chores and childcare during the lockdown, and they were satisfied with that help. Furthermore, they said they received support from the other family members, especially their sons (14%) and daughters (20%).

As noted above, remaining at home for an extended period had enabled most of the interview participants to develop a stronger sense of self-realisation and allowed them to begin to think about the meaning of life differently. Some of the women's narratives suggest that they now felt more emotional attachment with children and husbands and devoted more time caring for family members due to remaining at home during this period. At the same time, the revised daily practices of labour and increasing interaction within the home allowed many of the husbands to develop a more empathetic attitude towards wives. One homemaker described this change in the following way:

> My husband, who never entered the kitchen before or paid attention to how I cook, is now occasionally giving a hand in preparing snacks or observing what I do. One day, he said, 'now I realise cooking is not an easy task. You must work with fire; it is not easy to handle the fire. It is quite risky. I wish we could stop cooking at home forever.'

In addition, some of the women interviewed emphasised several positive changes in their partners. Some home-bound men had developed a stronger emotional attachment with family members; they became more attentive to childcare and looked after their wife's health issues. It helped to decrease the power hierarchy between these couples. The school principal quoted earlier noted her increased inclusion in decision-making:

> Especially during the lockdown, my husband has become more respectful toward my decisions. It is because we spend more time together. […] I would say that spending a lot of time together has made him more respectful toward me. We get time to talk more with each other and share our views.

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We have seen that conflicts arose among the married couples amid feelings of fear, loss, insecurity, and uncertainty. Nonetheless, many of them were able to reorganise the gender divisions of labour and power in a positive way. Most significantly, previous 'rational economic' men developed new feelings for their marital partners and became more active emotionally in overall 'family care'.

Continuing Hope for Gender Equality

Following the withdrawal of the lockdown, we observed that a large segment of workers in Bangladesh have been trying to get back into offices and paid work. As of December 2020, apart from the educational institutions, most of the public places had opened. At the same time, the second wave of the virus started in the country, and the fear of being infected by a new strain began to spread countrywide.

Participants in our follow-up interviews reported that some structural changes had become more visible, including increasing numbers of people conducting an online business and office activities, a more minimalist lifestyle, and more individuals staying at home for more extended periods than before. However, economic loss and insecurities continued in Bangladesh (Mottaleb et al., 2020), and as reported by one male participant, these problems often resulted in constant fights between spouses. In contrast, in the follow-up interviews, six participants (three women and three men) argued that the COVID-19 pandemic had promoted no significant change in their lives and that they had been carrying on with the old (unequal) practices regarding labour and power in their everyday lives.

Nonetheless, we should note that in the follow-up interviews, most of the research participants (17) had continued with self-discovery, feelings for their spouse, and revised everyday practices regarding structures of labour and power. Three women had decided to reject the normative family responsibilities imposed by society and focus more on a professional career. Another participant, a previously 'timid' woman, reported that she had initiated the process of mutual divorce. The narrative of a media manager (living within a nuclear family) reflects this type of transformation:

> I always ran and ran, even on holidays. […] Never had so much quality time [as during lockdown]. It changed me in many ways. […] I have entirely stopped doing the things I hate. I went back to my old life [in the office] but realised a lot of stuff. […] Life should be led on real terms, and household work has no recognition. So, I don't want to waste time doing unrecognised chores.

On the other hand, some follow-up interviews detailed the continuing sharing of household chores (although men's share had decreased with office openings) and the existence of a continuing strong bond between partners, even in some families that faced dire economic circumstances. As another homemaker (living in a nuclear family) stated:

> Our lives are full of struggles. […] My husband lost his job at the beginning of the lockdown. We try to cut down our expenses as much as possible. But I am still happy. People are dying around us. We are at least alive and healthy. […] Now we understand each other even more. It works as a strength to help us cope with all the difficulties of life. So, I have nothing to regret.

According to interviewees, some good practices adopted by crisis-bound couples may stretch long into the future and perhaps over generations. A male NGO worker (living in a joint family) stated:

> Men may now participate more in household work, but it will not necessarily change gender power relations overnight. But I think a change will occur. My son notices his father is staying home longer and that his father is doing household work like his mother. My son will be a different man in the future. Many kids who experienced this crisis time are growing up differently.

Putting all of these research findings together, we realised that the established structures of labour and power relationships in the household had been revised significantly by many individual actors during the COVID-19 crisis. In terms of exercising choice, most of the women we interviewed opted for a strategy of conformity and cooperation with men. However, although very few, another group was able to overturn the patriarchal family structure or initiate negotiations with men. Much of this can be labelled as ad hoc responses to contingencies (Luna et al., 2017), and the changes were, indeed, based on sudden time availability. Still, it is a fact that given the new opportunity structure, some women, as well as men, have been able to embrace a deeper ideological change. Therefore, it may be the case that they will finally adapt to new ideas concerning the practices of manhood and womanhood. In these cases, there is likely to be greater equality between marital partners who were previously more unequal, and these changes will hopefully be passed on to future generations (Sullivan, 2005).

However, we should be cautious while making such claims, as our empirical data show that such empathetic ideals and material adoptions (Wilson, 2008) are evident mainly in middle-class families. In many cases, women's choices do not reflect any significant transformation within society (Kabeer, 2003). There are indications that women still perform the bulk of unpaid work and tolerate male domination, and their choices largely remain contingent on men's support. The field findings also convey that some women, especially those who belong to vulnerable or marginalised families, may become the worst victims of the crisis (Sifat, 2020; UN Women, 2020), particularly if the macro-economic conditions of Bangladesh do not improve rapidly in the post-COVID-19 period. Overall, the data suggest that diverse patterns are possible, with very positive and very negative responses to crisis conditions.

Conclusion

This article illustrates how social structures and individual actors come into play to shape gender relations in the household. Employing feminist conceptualisations of work and power and R.W. Connell's gender structure framework, the study reveals that an overarching patriarchal system prevailed in pre-COVID-19 Bangladesh that endorsed an unequal division of labour and power between marital partners. As a result, women across different occupations, families, and urban-rural locations experienced multiple constraints on life choices. Despite making a plea for gender equality, most of them were bound to live in the family under a dominant husband.

Notably, our study locates noticeable disruptions to the established ideological and material structures of gender relations following the COVID-19 crisis in Bangladesh. State initiatives, taken for addressing the public health emergency, blurred the divide between home (private sphere) and outside (public sphere) and women and men's work. Home became the locus of all activities, and the experience of staying at home for a long duration opened opportunities to explore one's

potential in a different way. The crisis ultimately brought out the best in many individuals, leading them to develop a new meaning of life, a greater willingness to help each other, and the rediscovery and redefinition of self. In the most optimistic cases, the field findings indicate differences in and new choices regarding ways of separating women and men's territories, undermining stereotypes about reproductive labour, and exercising women's autonomy and life choices. For others, the findings show that the crisis also acted to increase women's work burden, men's insecurity, and domestic violence.

Although this article features the lived experience of a limited number of people drawn from social networks that could be accessed by the researchers (given the constraints of carrying out research during the pandemic), it provides a vivid account of the complexities of responses by showing both the positive and negative consequences of the pandemic. We, therefore, argue for moving beyond the simple, tragic portrayals of the COVID-19 crisis that are commonly reflected in the burgeoning literature concerning this pandemic. While we recognise the continuing gender conflicts, divides and oppressions, and the unpredictable difficulties triggered by the pandemic (and indeed will no doubt continue as well), we want to remain optimistic about change. We conclude that some of the good practices adopted during this unprecedented crisis may be sustained if post-pandemic Bangladesh can promote work-family reconciliation policies (i.e., establishing a better work-life balance, as emphasised particularly by younger generations in other global contexts) and assist individual men and women in continuing to practice and aspire toward greater gender equality within the home.

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