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AIUB Journal of Business and Economics

Volume: 17 Issue Number: 2 ISSN (Online): 2706-7076

December 2020

Citation

Chowdhury, K.M, Challenges of Remote Working During the Covid-19 Lockdown: A Case Study of Bangladeshi Working Mothers in Mid-Managerial Positions. (2021) *AIUB Journal of Business and Economics*, 17 (2), 69-86



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AIUB Journal of Business and Economics

Volume 17, Issue 2

ISSN (PRINT) 1683-8742

ISSN (ONLINE) 2706-7076

December 2020 pp. 69-86

**Challenges of Remote Working During the Covid-19
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Abstract

Despite an increase in female labor force participation rate from 26% to 36% between 2003 and 2016, working women in Bangladesh continue to face gender specific challenges in a patriarchal society. Consequently, the immediate global shift to remote working as a preventive measure during the Covid-19 pandemic, presented some unique challenges for working women and especially mothers. Thus, through the analysis of in-depth interviews, this study uses the case study approach to identify and explore the specific challenges faced by urban working mothers in mid-managerial positions across various industries in Bangladesh. The findings suggest that apart from pre-existing notions about gender roles, several other contingency factors pertaining to the lockdown significantly hindered the ability of working mothers to work from home when compared to their male counterparts. Implications of the feasibility of remote working for mothers in the event of similar unprecedented crisis situations in the future are also discussed.

Keywords: remote work, working mothers, social distancing, lockdown, pandemic

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

The issue of working women in Bangladesh and the multitude of challenges faced by them has been on the forefront of research in gender studies for quite some time now. However, despite, the patriarchal social structure and cultural setbacks, there has been a steady increase in the number of women not only entering the labor market, but rather securing jobs in executive and top managerial levels. Prior to the pandemic, the supporting infrastructure of childcare and household maintenance which had facilitated this progress and, consequently, the manner in which the lockdown altered that, is of great significance in this research.

The repercussions of the Covid-19 pandemic extended far beyond a global health crisis, resulting in unavoidable impacts on matters of economic, academic, commercial, social, psychological, physiological significance worldwide. Bangladesh government officially declared its first phase of lockdown in late March. All non-essential organizations, businesses, and educational institutions were closed, except for pharmacies, groceries, and other unavoidable necessities. (Anwar, Nasrullah and Hosen, 2020). Consequently, the impact of the pandemic and its ensuing lockdown surfaced even in the social context of culture and gender roles.

When economies worldwide shut down during Covid-19, the unprecedented escalation of remote working globally, also resulted in the need to readdress the issues of imbalance in gender roles in Bangladeshi households, especially within the purview of assessing the situation of urban working mothers in Dhaka city. For urban working mothers, solutions and privileges which had somehow managed to blur the obvious segregation of gender roles even in modern households were now re-emerging, as rules of social distancing robbed them off the assistance they had previously relied on, with regards to household maintenance and childcare.

The Covid-19 pandemic is an unstructured crisis and therefore impenetrable through programmed solutions. Subsequently, its impact on remote working for the urban Bangladeshi mother, from a domestic perspective has not yet been researched to a great extent. In order to enhance our preparedness for the inevitable birth of future pandemics, the impact of the existing one needs to be examined from all aspects, to equip not only

economies and societies, but more specifically people and families, to tackle similar crises in the foreseeable future.

1.2. Objective of the Study

The main aim of this research was to explore the prevalence of existing gender roles even in urban Bangladeshi households along with the emergence of several unfamiliar factors during the Covid-19 pandemic which hindered the efficacy of working mothers during the global shift to working from home.

1.3. Research Questions:

The study attempts to answer its main question as stated below through in-depth interviews of 13 working mothers employed in predominantly knowledge work and service jobs.

- What are the unique constraints urban working mothers in Bangladesh have faced while working from home during the Covid-19 lockdown?

In order to achieve the study's main goal, several sub-questions were answered throughout the study:

- What was the existing system and structure of balancing household and childcare for the working mothers prior to the lockdown?
- What are some measures they utilized in order to ensure maximum feasibility of remote working?
- What are some of the anticipated challenges of continuing remote work going forward?
- What are some positive experiences for them while working from home during the lockdown?
- What is their perspective on measures which can be taken with regards to necessary shifts in perspective of family and employers with regards to the unique constraints faced by working mothers in working remotely in order to ensure better productivity and efficiency while working from home during a lockdown?

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Family Structures and Working mothers in Bangladesh

The traditional joint family system remains the core context for socialization and other family functioning in Bangladesh. The joint family system is typically comprised of three or more generations who share a common living compound and pool their economic resources. (Hossain and Atencio, 2017). In urban Bangladesh, where a growing number of married women and mothers are employed in managerial work, this traditional system appears to have been a blessing in disguise, especially in a patriarchal society such as Bangladesh. Hussein (2017) states that with no welfare state, professional women have no state-funded childcare. In fact, in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, there are only a handful of private childcare facilities, which are extremely expensive. Some NGOs have their own day care centers, for their employees only. Factors such as health, emotional well-being, safety and hygiene are nagging concerns of working mothers when evaluating adequate childcare facilities.

According Hussein, 2017 some married participants in semi-extended and extended households are able to convert kin relations within their in-laws' family, making allies who take over participants' childcare responsibilities. The author further adds that participants with younger children are particularly keen on securing the allegiance of their MILs, so they can pursue their careers after marriage and motherhood. However, as indicated in the research by Hossain and Atencio (2017), although the central focus of social life in Bangladesh society is the family and its extended network, the nuclear family form is growing in contemporary Bangladeshi society. For dual-earner couples preferring the nuclear family living arrangements, a full support system of company provided or self-funded childcare and paid household staff is mandatory in order for working mothers to manage all ends. Yet, these are the exact necessities which were abruptly removed during the lockdown of the Covid19 pandemic.

2.2 Unique challenges created by lockdown for working mothers

Even though the labor force participation of women is now close to or equal to that of men in most industrialized countries, women continue to provide a disproportionate share of housework (such as cooking and cleaning) and childcare. (Alon, et al, 2020) Since the 1990s, urban middle-class Bangladeshi women's participation in the public domain as active economic

agents has shifted the power relations in couples and families, particularly because professional women now seek familial support systems to find a substitute for their domestic work. (Hussein, 2017) Urban working mothers fortunately, can also afford the facilities to enable them to delegate several of these responsibilities in order to maintain highly challenging corporate jobs as knowledge workers.

However, while it is standard in Bangladeshi culture for households to employ in-house or part-time maids, the Covid-19 lockdown and its accompanying threat of community transmission resulted in most households having to let go of their part-time domestic staff in order to restrict the entry of infections in their homes. This resulted in the entire burden of childcare, meal preparation and household maintenance to be distributed amongst family members. Needless to say, in most cases the burden automatically falls back on the woman regardless of her professional merits. This becomes exceptionally challenging where knowledge work, requiring complete concentration is involved. Working mothers were no longer able to send their children to school or daycare or allow them to step out of isolation for any outdoor activities. Moreover, the added burden of home-schooling their off-spring also emerged as an unforeseen constraint on their time and concentration. Furthermore, social distancing rules resulted in greater challenges of looking after the elderly family members, preparing food for the family for daily sustenance, sourcing groceries and maintaining a clean and disinfected household at all times.

2.3 A dire need to revisit gender roles in the household

The normative conception of middle-class women's respectability is measured against women prioritizing family above work by performing their domestic, care, and socializing roles and by maintaining moral propriety. (Hussein, 2017) The latter half of the research draws attention to the stark actuality, that with no end in sight, the system of remote working may continue for months to come for many. With that arises the need to recognize the hindrance caused by neglecting the truth about disproportionate allocation of family responsibilities in such households, a fundamental shift in the perspective of the male counterparts of working mothers, re-educating the educated class to warn them of the threat of a possible return to exploitative gender roles, highlight the areas where equal male participation is necessary. The findings from the interviews also signal towards the need for utmost consideration from employers towards working mothers in the time that it takes for this social transition to take effect.

3. Method

The exploratory nature of the study required a methodology based on the qualitative approach. A case study approach was used based on data collected through in-depth interviews conducted between May to June 2020, with working mothers in mid-level positions from various industries including telecommunications, development, banking and finance, FMCG (fast moving consumer goods), and education. Out of the 13 participants interviewed, six were from the banking and finance sector, one from FMCG, three from research and development sector, two from telecommunications and one in international education.

The interview questionnaire was prepared by the researcher including questions pertaining to marital status, number of children, living arrangements, children's level of schooling, childcare and household maintenance arrangements and time and focus commitments required in their existing jobs. As an interview-based study with a fairly specific research question, it was noticed that little new information was being generated after interviewing 10 candidates, hence the sample population was contained at 13 participants.

The participants are all employed in mid to upper level managerial or specialist positions. Recurring responsibilities observed across all professions were frequent face to face interactions, team management and coordination, strategic management, client relationship management, delegation and supervision, liaising with first-line managers, top executives and board members and corresponding with diverse stakeholders at home and abroad. The duration of the online interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 60 minutes. Interviews were recorded on an audio device and transcribed exactly from the audio files. Using an iterative approach, the interview transcripts were reviewed one by one to identify recurring themes and major findings.

Table 1. Participant Information: Designation and Industry

Participant	Name	Designation	Industry
1	Shayaqua Esha	Chief Rating Officer	Financial Institution- Credit Rating Company
2	Shireen Abebin	Owner	Research and Development
3	Ayesha S	Manager	Telecommunications
4	Raisa Raquib	Senior Manager	Research and Development
5	Shirley Chowdhury	Secondary School EAL Teacher	Education
6	Fariya Sultana	Regulatory Reporting	Multinational Financial Institution
7	Shayla. R	High level management	Research and Development
8	Tisha. M	Operations Supervisor	Multinational Financial Institution
9	Sarima Qayyum	Mid-Level Management	Multinational Financial Institution
10	Rehnuma Hossain	Lead communication Specialist	Telecommunications
11	Nusrat Nowshin	Vice President, Agency and Portfolio Asset Management, Infrastructure and Public Sector	Multinational Financial Institution
12	Fariya Mahtab	Senior Product Manager	Multinational Financial Institution

13	Roksana. M	Strategic Brand Manager	Multinational Consumer Goods
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4. Findings:

4.1 Work-life balance mechanism for mothers

Striking a work-life balance has evidently been more challenging for women and especially mothers worldwide and numerous studies have explored the common constraints working mothers especially in developing countries face in general. Despite this, women have made huge strides in establishing themselves in mid to top level positions even in countries like Bangladesh by creating a feasible support system through hiring help, sourcing daycare centers, availing on-site daycare at work or seeking the help of grandparents, which would allow them to work. According to a policy report released by the International Finance Corporation covering working women from various sectors including banking, telecommunication, education, digital marketing, healthcare and more, the need for women in higher levels of management for quality daycare was evident in their survey findings. White-collars are willing to pay a premium price for high quality, conveniently-located childcare centers with advanced early education programs. (IFC, 2019)

As the sample population of the research included women in mid to top managerial and specialist jobs across diverse industries in Bangladesh, it reflects on their ability to afford professional childcare and household staff in order to enable them to pursue their careers as knowledge workers. Product Head of a leading Multinational bank, Fariya, when asked about her existing support system supported this finding saying:

“My mother is with me and she takes care of my children. I have two maids who help for cooking and for the other things.”

Similar arrangements were observed across respondents when asked about their existing support system which enables them to maintain their careers.

4.2 Pre-Pandemic Support System

In most developing countries, the concept of hiring cooks, cleaners and nannies is not nearly as common as in the South Asian Continent, especially in countries like India and Bangladesh with the abundance of cheap labor

available. Consequently, in countries like Bangladesh, social status, financial standing and liberal perspective of family members of working mothers is known to impact their work-life balance with regards to their availability of household staff and child care providers. Working as a Strategic Manager at a renowned multinational FMCG company, Roksana, was also quoted saying:

“Being a working woman as a mother is a hard job to do and manage both things. But nowadays the country is developing in a good way and renowned companies are giving opportunities to the working mother. Trained nanny is a good option to take care of children. As a working mother I’m not available physically in the house, so at this time my family can take care of my children very well. Basically in a crowded family like having grandmother and grandfather for the child is kind of blessing for the mother.”

4.3 The sudden loss of support

While allocating designated hours for home-schooling their children, and keeping them engaged for their emotional and physical well-being seems like a mammoth task during universally depressing circumstances, to add to that, the various other areas where working mothers once had plenty of assistance had now also been taken away from them due to the pandemic. The availability of grandparents in the form of childcare, the domestic maids to handle family meal preparation and routine cleaning and laundry, all were simultaneously putting a strain on working women. The interviews revealed that most of the working mothers were by default predominantly left in charge of child care, home schooling and meal provisions amongst other household responsibilities. In fact, in her senior-managerial position at World Food Programme, Raisa quoted:

“I have no helping hand as the maid used to help me before. I have to manage my household chores and office work by myself. And in our country, women are expected to manage the household chores though she is a working

women in office if she stays at home. Along with that they have to maintain children also.”

According to Alon. et. Al, 2020, a large part of gender inequality in the labor market is related to an unequal division of labor in the household. Even though the labor force participation of women is now close to or equal to that of men in most industrialized countries, women continue to provide a disproportionate share of housework (such as cooking and cleaning) and childcare.

The case is very similar in Bangladesh’s urban community. For Sarima, a mid-level manager in a leading multinational bank, who had previously managed rather well, these are challenges she has to maneuver all over again.

“Doing work from home will not be a challenge if we have our maids helping us, but during the lockdown we cannot permit them to enter the house. As I have to do all the household chores and office work together, it is difficult to maintain both in an effective way. If everybody is working in their home together, then it would not be much of a problem.”

On the other hand, a number of respondents have reported that receiving assistance from their spouse and family in terms of childcare and household duties has helped to manage remote working with relative ease compared to single mothers or working mothers who are expected to single-handedly take on all the pressure.

“Before Lockdown, I had a better support system. Now in this lockdown I have a minimum support system. My house assistant is taking care of the child and my husband is also working from home, he is helping me with the household chores. But I have to say, as a working mother, we are not able to give 100 percent on any work whether it is doing office works, maintaining children’s or doing household chores.

4.4 Impact of School Closures

According to a UNESCO press release on 26th March 2020, over 1.5 billion learners in 165 countries have been affected by COVID-19 school closures, creating an additional burden of home schooling children in households worldwide. This has resulted in a rise in the need for childcare and due to social distancing requirements, working parents are unable to share childcare responsibilities with grandparents, extended family members or educational institutions. Thus, most families have no choice but to watch their kids themselves. According to Alon et. Al, 2020, based on the existing distribution of child care duties in most families, mothers are likely to be more affected than fathers. This is even more common in patriarchal societies such as Bangladesh and has placed new constraints on mothers with children of school-going age. In fact, Fariya, a mother of two working as the Product Head in one of the leading multinational financial institutions reported:

“In my home there are two different situations now with my two kids. The elder one who is nine years old now expects me to help her with her arts and crafts and school work. She is getting frustrated from not being able to go out. Seeing all of us working from home, she is getting disturbed by the fact that she is not getting much attention.”

This was also in line with remarks by Hossain, lead communications specialist at one of the nation’s leading telecom giant who asserted:

“Well my child is only 5 and a half so he still relies on me for a lot of help with school work and basic tasks. But yes I can imagine, over the age of 10, children are a lot more self-reliant and independent so they would interrupt less I guess.”

However, the degree to which home-schooling posed a threat for working mothers depended on the age of the child, as the interviews revealed. For instance, mothers of young teenagers have reported that it is rather easier for them to work from home as their children are also attending online classes and tending to their assigned work. Shirley, a Secondary-School EAL Teacher of one of the leading International Schools in Dhaka, when asked about interruptions from her teenaged daughter, said:

“She never disturbs me during work time, she understands the boundaries and hardly wants my attention. Because she has her own boundaries and she is also doing her online classes which keeps her very busy.”

4.5 Illimitable Working Hours

An unavoidable observation from all the interviews conducted, revealed that working from home during the Covid-19 lockdown led to a dramatic increase in working hours of the respondents. A number of reasons were cited for this. First and foremost, the unprecedented circumstances of the pandemic gave very limited time for organizations to prepare ahead for a total transition to remote work, resulting in various problems in getting all employees' schedules in sync, owing largely to various contingency factors impacting each employee in their household. Second of all, since employees were at home, it was assumed that they were available for work. Time zone differences also created problems for globally engaged employees, while frequent interruptions created unwarranted extensions of their workday. The same inconvenience of increased hours echoed in various responses amongst the respondents. Working in a supervisory role at a leading multinational, Tisha stated:

“But now online communication has increased and I have to maintain extra office hours nowadays. And we have to do meeting with the boss at night and it is a new thing for us. Usually in office, we had to work within the office hours but not the practice of this system is little bit changed.”

A key finding of the interviews was that knowledge work across diverse industries now require interactions which extend far beyond geographical boundaries. It was not only women in development organizations, multinational telecom companies and global financial institutions but also teachers of international schools who were required to make themselves available round the clock to tend to stakeholders who already resided or had returned to their home countries due to the pandemic. When asked about working hours, IB school teacher, Shirley replied:

“It has increased for now. Because my students have basically returned abroad so I have to work with them during their time

zones. My boss or colleagues abroad also want to connect with me on their flexible timing. So I have to talk with my students and colleagues in different countries and time zones.”

5. Discussion

5.1 Existing mechanism used for remote working

According to the observations from the interviews, a designated work area has been essential for productivity for the respondents. An enclosed office space, or separate room has enabled working mothers to set boundaries regarding their office time and put limits on their physical availability to family members and household maintenance responsibilities during designated office hours.

5.2 Self-help measures needed for feasibility

The system of being available on all fronts at all times has deeply affected the mental and physical well-being of working mothers leading to stress, fatigue, lack of mindful eating habits and the total lack of a schedule or discipline. For Nusrat, managing a role in Agency and Portfolio Asset Management can be a tremendously challenging job and when asked about the measures needed to ensure feasibility in continued remote working she said:

“I will need to manage my sleep schedule. I will start doing exercises because when I used to do work in office, I used to go to the gym and it is totally missing now. So I will start all over again with the exercise routine at home properly. Normal food habit is highly needed in this situation and I am planning to maintain this also as a daily routine.

Furthermore, working mothers have stressed on the need for additional support and understanding from partners and family members which involves recognizing the importance of their jobs and allowing them the space to work effectively as mentioned by Shireen, who is currently the managing her own research firm:

“The changes we all need is to set down our boundaries because even if you are working from home you cannot work 24/7 by yourselves. So we have to maintain a disciplined timeline and this is the time you

have to set yourself during the working hour whether it is 9-5 duration. You have to set your boundaries on that and have to find your best out of it and setting down your limits are also important.”

5.3 Support from Employers

The participants were also asked about the nature of support they require from their workplace in order to assist them in remote working with children at home. The responses which were uniform across respondents centered around a greater understanding from employers regarding the unique challenges of mothers, strict maintenance of work hours which do not encroach upon their personal time and the flexibility to rearrange or postpone non-essential work based on urgent needs of their children. Hossain, a lead communications specialist in the telecom sector, who routinely has to manage correspondence with internal and external stakeholders suggested:

“As for employers, they will need to accept that when there are young children at home, interruptions are inevitable and that should not undermine an employee’s professionalism in any way. It should be expected and accepted”.

Corporations have required that their employees working remotely are still available during their pre-set working hours, even though the interviewees all discussed how the hours extended far beyond regular office timings. Going forward, this has been cited as an important adjustment which needs to be made in order to assist working mothers. Fariya, who is a Senior Product Development Manager at the multinational bank quoted:

“In my office, if the office hour is seven hours then when working from home it should be eight hours. If Time schedule is highly maintained, then it will be easy for us. As everything is unstructured now, we need to make things more structured.”

5.4 Positives of Remote Working for Mothers:

Dhaka city has been notorious for its traffic problems in the recent decades. According to Hossain et. Al, 2017, other than being late in the offices, work

places or on any scheduled appointments, mental stress, exhaustion and loss of effective man hours are an unavoidable loss of the resources of the whole country. Unremarkably, not having to waste valuable time in commuting to the office was the most frequently cited positive impact of remote working according to the interviewees. On average, the respondents reported spending 2 to 5 hours of time lost on the road while commuting to and from work. Additionally, mothers of younger children reported being able to invest time and attention on their children's needs as a strong positive factor. The respondents appreciated the time to be actively present and participate in the developmental milestones of their toddlers during the lockdown. Moreover, spending more quality time with family members, investing in better meal preparation and engaging in recreational family activities have been cited as other gains which working mothers enjoyed during the lockdown.

6. Limitations

Due to the extreme lockdown and social distancing restrictions which were in place during the time of the research, there is a lack of diversity in terms of the industries and organizations from which candidates were sourced. Additionally, as highlighted and shown in the research, the candidates themselves had their own time constraints while trying to schedule the interviews between managing the household and their full time jobs. It must also be mentioned here that widespread termination and layoffs during the pandemic resulted in obvious job insecurities amongst employees worldwide and that may have affected the extent to which candidates were willing to discuss the challenges they were facing in their current jobs, despite the assurance of non-disclosure being in place in the interview consent clause. Moreover, certain multinationals also had strict protocols in place due to which a select number of candidates were unwilling and unable to participate in the study. The researcher therefore had to rely on sourcing interview candidates through networking on social media alone.

7. Conclusion

In the past decade Bangladesh has made significant strides towards combatting gender disparity and that is evident in the growing number of female knowledge workers, upper-level managers, executives and entrepreneurs in the job market. Growth in the service sector, including entertainment and recreation facilities, home delivered maintenance services and nanny services, countless dining options, availability of tech-based security devices. and the provision of on-site childcare are amongst the variety of facilities which had largely contributed to urban development, enabling working mothers to rely on this assistance and focus on performing to their highest potential in challenging jobs. However, the pandemic and the ensuing lockdown withdrew all of those benefits and reverted things right back to a point where working women were continuously falling behind in their careers while struggling to manage all fronts of household and family care. The research sheds light on this issue and narrows in on the specific yet common constraints faced by working mothers in various sectors and positions.

With or without a global pandemic, remote-working is sure to become increasingly commonplace for a multitude of reasons. Therefore, in order to better prepare for similar challenges in the future or to derive the economic, social and personal benefits of remote working for both genders, extensive research coupled with perception and paradigm shifts and implementable actions are certainly needed, especially in the context of Bangladesh, where there is tremendous need and potential to increase the participation of working mothers in managerial jobs in every industry.

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