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## Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Legal Professionals in Bangladesh: A Study Findings in Dhaka City

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### ABSTRACT

This article is focused on the various consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on legal professionals in Bangladesh. It is a primary data-based study findings. It strives to explore the socio-economic and psychological conditions of legal professionals, especially in Dhaka City, the capital of Bangladesh. Like many other countries, Bangladesh has also faced severe critical factors due to this global pandemic. Because of COVID-19 nationwide lockdown was imposed from 26th March to 30th May 2020, extending several times. The upshots of the nationwide lockdown impacted the daily life of all people in different categories not only in Bangladesh but all over the world. During emergencies, all professionals have to maintain the code of conduct while serving the client, managing appointments, and working with a limited workforce due to illness and isolation of the needed force were not accessible by the legal profession in the COVID-19 era. In that situation, those who are engaged with faced many challenges as gathering on court premises, lack of social distance, and carelessness about themselves. It hampers their professional worth and falls them into a stressed situation.

### INTRODUCTION

The effects of Coronavirus have affected all businesses, service providers, and professionals. The World Health Organization (WHO) announced COVID-19 as a global pandemic on March 11th, 2020, spreading globally. The situation was getting out of reach and more than 84,187 deaths alone in the USA (WHO, 2021). Bangladesh has also faced severe critical issues due to the global pandemic. Social, Psychological, and Economic challenges for legal professionals in Bangladesh have been explored in the study. In fact, legal professionals faced challenges in their practice due to the pandemic and nationwide lockdown. In this period, the client's demands and conducting responsibilities are not easy for legal professionals. Legal professionals have to take new initiatives and strategies to work in that situation and run the services. After analyzing the information, different social, psychological, and economic impacts on legal professionals have been explored. The professionals maintain the code of conduct during emergencies while serving the clients. The main focus of the research is to analyze these impacts on the legal professionals of Bangladesh and recommend possible solutions to avoid challenging issues or situations.

The legal professionals are unable to manage the appointments and work with limited staffing due to illness and the isolation of the needed workforce. All the factors related to the lockdown have an impact on serving the clients. How they manage the effects have been explored and analyzed through this study. In this article, the challenges of practicing legal work are analyzed in this article.

### Rationale of the Study

Firstly, scholars have studied the effects of COVID-19

from different perspectives throughout the world (WHO, 2021). Many literatures and studies have found about the social, economic, and psychological impacts of CORONA virus on various working groups such as corporate workers, health professionals and other communities but there is done limited studies on legal professionals of Bangladesh. So, it is necessary to do research on legal professionals of Bangladesh especially in Dhaka city.

Secondly, COVID-19 affects almost all the sectors of our personal and professional life. But the impact of COVID-19 is severe and significant in some specific sectors like legal professionals. Scholars should conduct a systematic study on the vital sectors of legal professionals as they are the important part of our legal system. How much they are suffered from the impacts of COVID-19 is a matter of study (Kabir, M. A., Islam, M., & Bapari, M. Y, 2017).

Thirdly, in what way the legal professionals are suffered from socially, psychologically and economically is a matter of research. It should be diagnosed, what is the highest impact of COVID-19 on legal professionals (Islam, M. Z., & Kabir, M. A., 2024).

Lastly, about 30% of people have gone under the poverty line that was not poor before this pandemic. Absolute impoverishment, identified as living on less than \$1.90 per day, is expected to impact 9.1% to 9.4% of the global population in 2020 (World Bank Group). This study will be done for the depiction of the poverty situation of legal professionals. And how this poverty arises their psychological problem and mental dilemma is a matter of study.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The first COVID-19 case was confirmed on 8 March

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2020 in Bangladesh. A nationwide lockdown was imposed from March 26 to May 30 of that year. It extends several times. The effects of the nationwide lockdown impacted the daily life and official works of all professionals, including the legal professionals in Bangladesh.

It hampers the healthcare system. Insufficient medical facilities, unconsciousness, and sharing of information in the mass media in most of cases have occurred to Legal Professionals fear and anxiety. The present study intends to analyze to get an idea of the social, psychological, and economic impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Legal Professionals (Islam, M. Z., & Kabir, M. A., 2024).

This study follows the research report, literature, and studies on the effects of COVID-19 (Uddin, M. E., Kabir, M. A., & Akter, S., 2022). Scholars have studied the effects of COVID-19 from different perspectives throughout the world (Uddin, M. E., Wahab, G. A., & Kabir, M. A., 2022). This study portrays human behavior, social relations, and the living conditions of legal professionals in their personal life and their practice fields.

In this connection a study conducted by (Sumaiya Quaiyum, Rajesh Das, and Md Rabiul Islam), the study revealed that due to COVID-19, the mental health of health professionals is severely affected. This study is prepared from Bangladesh's perspective and it identified that healthcare professionals are suffering from loneliness, depression, anxiety, and sleep disturbance. Legal professionals also suffer from psychological problems. An international conference was held Titled "the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Legal Field." These findings reveal the impact of Covid-19 on the legal professions, human rights infringements and entry regulations on border closures during Covid-19, women, and children violence during the pandemic (Valeria Saladino<sup>1</sup>, Davide Algeri<sup>2</sup> and Vincenzo Auriemma, 2020). Dr. Sumaya Khair and Dr. Farmin Islam, Professors of law, University of Dhaka; Dr. Faustina Pereira and Shahriar Sadat, Professors of BRAC University; Dr. A.K.M Emdadul Hauqe, Deputy Secretary to Government of Bangladesh, Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs were present in that conference. Participants said that due to the CORONA virus infection, the obligation of judges and lawyers to wear black coats or gowns in the High Court of Bangladesh had been relaxed for the time being. The thought has settled the obligation to wear a black coat that lawyers and judges wear on white shirts can be challenging to disinfect every day. Traditionally, the Dhaka Bar Association, the largest bar association in Asia, has played a pioneering role in tackling the plight of the Bar Association. The various reports and studies published that the Dhaka Lawyers Association carries out various activities in this period.

The Dhaka Bar Association paid TK. 20,000 to each person during the coronation period (Correspondent Staff, The Daily Star, 2020). Corona has already created the most significant economic downturn in the legal profession's history. All types of cases, including

CORONA virus infection, are being tried in the country's lower courts (Begum, M. F., Kabir, M. A., & Islam, M. J., 2022). Witnesses from different parts of the country come to the court to testify. Keshab Roy Chowdhury, general secretary of the Bangladesh Law Association, said in the first light, "I have seen in the newspaper that the association has been called to limit the activities of the court due to the large number of people including lawyers seeking justice in the lower courts." On 19 March 2020, Bangladesh's Chief Justice Syed Mahmud Hossain ordered not to present the accused in court, including not appearing in court from jail. He asked the court to grant the accuser's application for non-appearance. But it did not provide any immediate stay on the pending cases.

As a result, a study of the literature reveals that the impact of COVID-19 is severe in four distinct sectors: economic, social, healthcare, and psychological perspectives. Other unique and examined consequences are generated by the items in all of these sectors, which are also found within those reviews. However, the studied material was not written for legal practitioners. There has been little research on the influence of COVID-19 on legal practitioners. The above discussion is focused on the practice-changing pattern of legal professionals practicing in the pandemic period.

### Operational Definition of the Terms

#### COVID-19

CORONA virus causes illnesses ranging from the common cold to severe diseases. A novel CORONA Virus (nCoV) is a new strain that has not been previously identified in humans. In this study, social impact is measured by the indicators such as social status, and relationship with family members and relatives, and psychological effects are measured by stress, mental health, etc. Whereas economic impact is measured by job loss, Salary decreases, and shortage of dealing clients.

#### Legal Professionals

A legal professional or practitioner is a graduate of law, registered by the BAR association, and has practiced in the legal profession for at least five years. He is an agent of his/her client and an officer of the court at the same time. An advocate has a responsibility to his client as well as to the court. The lawyer's role is both to uphold the rule of law and serve the community in the administration of justice. In fulfilling this role, lawyers are not obliged to serve the client's interests alone but also the country as well. The crisis of Coronavirus has already impacted the national business and service sectors. Legal professionals are bound to visit court limitedly and fewer travel levels also affect client visits and communication.

The Supreme Court Bar Association (SCBA) has decided to provide interest-free loans to law professionals who are in need of financial support to keep up with the economic pressure stemming from the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. The decision was taken at a

meeting of SCBA's executive committee. The meeting was held at the association's office on the Supreme Court premises. SCBA President Advocate AM Amin Uddin chaired the session. "We have decided to provide interest-free loans for three years to those members who are not affluent enough to tackle the (economic) crisis caused by the coronavirus outbreak. We have already created a fund of Tk 50 lakh for this purpose," SCBA Secretary Barrister Md Ruhul Quddus Kazal told The Daily Star. He said the SCBA office invites applications and the maximum loan amount will be decided later (Sumaiya Quaiyum, Rajesh Das, and Md Rabiul Islam).

### Objectives of the Study

The general objective of the study is to find out the social, psychological, and economic impact of COVID-19 on legal professionals. For attaining general objectives some specific objectives are taken to understand the socio-demographic and economic profile of the legal professionals to unveil the psychological dilemma of the legal professionals and their attitude toward family and society during the COVID-19 period. Some suggestions will be brought out to minimize the problems.

### METHODOLOGY

The study advanced with a qualitative approach with verbatim techniques. Dhaka city is the study area as there are almost 25000 lawyers in Dhaka Judge court and nearly 9000 lawyers in Supreme Court. Each of them was regarded as a unit of the study. To ensure the variety in the cases eighteen samples were selected considering socio-economic background including both males and females. Among 18 cases only Four cases are presented deliberately in this article. But, in the section on findings, all 18 cases are included. 18 respondents taken from the people by probability sampling (purposive sampling) which refers to selecting an example on a random basis in which equal probabilities in terms of gender and age have been ensured. To collect data unstructured interview schedule and open-ended questions are used as open-ended questions allow the respondents to freely express their facts, opinions, behavior, reaction, etc. In the interview, respondents are asked about their age, sex, the monthly number of clients, family income, and economic, psychological, and social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is associated with victimization. Data is collected through the interview schedule mainly. For this in-depth interview, face-to-face interviews and telephone interview is used as techniques. Data is collected directly from the respondents. The data is collected over a month. As the sample size is 18, data is collected by nine respondents from Dhaka Judge Court and nine respondents from Supreme Court. As a result, the data are representative, and the validity, reliability, and acceptability are conformed.

### Case Study Findings

Some cases are presented in the following para.

#### Case One

Noura Binte Alam is a 34 years old married woman. Her husband is 42 years old. They have two sons, aged 12 years and five years old. She is practicing in Dhaka Judge Court. Generally, she gets Tk. 80,000.00 over a month as law professionals, but During COVID-19, many of her clients decreased during this lockdown. They all are frustrated during lockdown with unknown fear. Maintaining a family with professional life was never easy. Her income became very poor, so she was helpless as she had to contribute to her family and parents. "During the lockdown, I needed money for my father's operations, but I had no money at that time. I was in deep tension where to get money and at last Lawyers Association gave me 1 lac money as loan" added Noura. Her husband had a business but due to the lockdown, he lost his income source and totally depended on her, so family violence occurred, and her husband's social status became lower down. He faced many psychological problems. Noura said "Sometimes he behaved inhumanly and strangely."

#### Case Two

Adv. Rifayet Ashraf is a 42 years old person who is having a difficult time during the lockdown. Mr. Ashraf is a senior legal professional. "I have been practicing for 16 years and am currently practicing in the Dhaka Judge Court during the pandemic, clients had decreased radically. I was perplexed for two months because I didn't get any cases. I had not enough money to support the family." He had to stay at home. He was supposed to pass his time with her wife and children. Sometimes wife and children asked for different things. His wife used to do online shopping but at that time he had not that type of ability to facilitate her, so they quarreled with each other. "One day I abused her physically severely and so she went to her father's house and threatened divorce" he added. However, as time passes, the number of cases increased, and his earnings also increase but it was not the same as before.

#### Case Three

Joy Deb Nath is a 35 years old lawyer who works in the Supreme Court. He has had several difficulties conducting legal services during the pandemic. First and foremost, because "I am unfamiliar with online hearings, I cannot comprehend how to conduct hearings and interact with my clients. During this time, my daughter, who is in class 9, assists me but it was very difficult. My income was decreasing day by day. So, family violence occurs, and I was obliged to move to my hometown." The level of social violence rises slightly, but solely due to the ongoing lockdown. According to Joy, social violence was raised during the lockdown. He quarreled with her wife several times due to the economic condition of the family. He could not bear his children's educational expenses and other expenses of the family so along with his family he had to move to his hometown. It brought psychological trauma to his children and wife as they were habituated to living in the capital city.

#### Case Four

Adv. Salman Ahmed is another person who faces many difficulties during the lockdown. Mr. Salman is a senior law professional, “I am practicing for 10 years in this profession and currently practicing in Dhaka Supreme Court, the number of clients decreased during the pandemic. I didn’t get any cases for two months, and I was puzzled during those months to run the family”. But now time is changing, and the number of cases also increased. He mentioned that it doesn’t impact the relationship during the pandemic instead, bondings become stronger with children during this lockdown. “I always took safety measurements in courtrooms, but it is impossible to maintain hygiene in CMM court, as it always stays crowded,” Salman added. Overall, they all are frustrated during lockdown with unknown fear. Maintaining a family with professional life was never easy.

#### Case Five

Akter Hamid (54) is a senior advocate in Dhaka Judge Court. He is one of the prominent lawyers in Bangladesh. He said during the covid-19 period, especially when the government announced the lockdown, cases became incredibly low. He said “I have little knowledge about online platforms. I was puzzled as I could not familiar with online streaming. So, conducting online hearings was a bolt from the blue to me. There are some fellow mates to me who also face the same complicated situations”. He added that “I faced many hurdles due to my low income as I didn’t keep pace with the new virtual system. It brings a rapid negative change in my lifestyle so, I have to live from hand to mouth.” Jamal Ahmed said his status deteriorates. He was unable to bear the family expenses properly so there is a conflict among the family members. He has to reduce gathering into a different program. He always takes safety measures in courtrooms for his safety. Maintaining safety always was a challenge for him as he has many respiratory diseases.

#### Analysis of The Findings

After analyzing data in the above part of the discussion it is clear that COVID-19 puts a number of effects on legal professionals. The data from the interview also demonstrated the social, economic, and psychological effects of COVID-19 on legal professionals in Bangladesh.

#### Social Impact of COVID-19 on Legal Professionals

From the analysis of the information of the respondents we get social status become lower because many legal professionals are leaving Dhaka city and compromising their social status, social violence has increased particularly women harassment and torture have increased, and Cases of social violence and divorce have increased (Khanam, S. J., & Kabir, M. A, 2023). Here, all the respondents expressed a negative view except a positive social effect of COVID-19 is identified from the opinions of some respondents. About 40 percent of respondents expressed

this type of opinion (Islam, M. Z., & Kabir, M. A., 2024). In Bangladesh, the majority of families in Dhaka are nuclear families. Dependence on a single individual does not deplete the other family members. As a result, their connection with his other family members remained unchanged. Some newly graduated legal professionals have a negative influence on their families. In the worst-case scenario, they would have to return to their hometown (Uddin, E., Wohab, A., Kabir, A., & Kobra, K. , 2024).

#### The Economic Impact of COVID-19 on Legal Professionals

From the analysis of the information of the respondents, we get monthly income decreases by at least 50% for every legal professional with a reduced number of clients. But their daily expenses are gradually increasing day by day. It has been reduced to one-third for average legal professionals, delayed payments from clients and government boards, and shut down of private chambers and consultancy firms. These factors come out in negative forms from the opinions of all 18 interviewees. All the respondents have gone through at least one of these factors or all during the pandemic. The finding shows that persons in the middle and lower middle classes suffered the most during the pandemic.

They are concerned about the post-pandemic environment, despite having some minor funds. On legal practitioners, a similar effect might be found. Longer-serving legal professionals are less trouble dealing with the pandemic crisis because of their work expertise and length of service. Clients of experienced lawyers are more devoted, regardless of their social situations. As a result, despite the pandemic, the experienced ones received the money in their account. New lawyers, on the other hand, had to struggle financially due to a lack of savings. Despite the fact that they could survive the pandemic, their minds were filled with a great deal of Violence spiked during the pandemic. As a result, the number of police cases. As a highly populated country, any form of financial crisis causes a rise in violence. During the pandemic, lawyers could run their businesses online. They could even handle case hearing via the Internet. As a result, experienced lawyers had a much lower financial impact. With their own influence, they could even go to their office according to their need.

#### The Psychological Impact of COVID-19 on Legal Professionals

According to the information provided by the respondents, boredom, depression, and anxiety grow with the length of time spent at home, as does the probability of self-harm or suicide, psychological strain impacts family relationships, and long-term psychological susceptibility. They all expressed their dissatisfaction with the situation. COVID-19 has a significant impact on legal practitioners, with 95% negative consequences. COVID-19 has had detrimental effects on legal professionals’ economic,

social, and psychological aspects, according to the interviews with professionals who were recognized by COVID-19. It alters their economic range, degrades their social standing pattern, and worsens their psychological position. They are afraid of their lives as well as constraint of the normal practicing in the court premises. So, their income and normal living conditions are not fluctuating in these circumstances the respondents are in most cases traumatic conditions. Although they mentioned some beneficial benefits, such as closeness with family members, natural rejuvenation, and a new working system structure, they all agreed that COVID-19 has had a bad impact on the overall scenario. The same has been discovered in this report. Above all, they do not anticipate another pandemic catastrophe that radically alters their daily professional and personal life.

### **Challenges of Legal Professionals in the Pandemic Period**

There are so many challenges of legal professionals, some challenges are mentioned here:

#### **Individual Level**

At the individual level, a person has to suffer a lot and has to struggle for survival. A legal professional has to face many problems and suffers a lot. He has limited or no income at that time. He faces difficulties in maintaining family affairs. Sometimes a legal professional has stopped his children from school because of high expenses. In many cases, they are unable to afford nutritious food for family members because of low income which leads to a psychological dilemma. Personal relationships are distorted among family members. As an individual, a legal professional endures more.

#### **Practical and Professional Field**

In the professional field, their suffering is notable as there was a reduced number of clients. The court was closed in the first phase then the virtual court started. The aged lawyer faced problems because of the introduction of the new system as they could not adapt to the system. Moreover, the clients are also new to this system, and some were uneducated as well, so problems are persisting both among legal professionals and the clients. So, there are limited clients and limited income. These reduced earnings led to their social standard degrading, so they faced economic and psychological problems.

There were 18 people that take part in the interview for the study. The respondents ranged in age from 30 to 60 years old, and the average number of family members was four for each respondent. The number of clients and the amount of money earned vary depending on the lawyer's age and experience. The same questions are posed to all the respondents, and the responses are practically identical. To assess the survey, each respondent is asked roughly 13 questions.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study has analyzed the effects of COVID-19 on legal professionals in Dhaka city. It is the responsibility of the government and the authority of the Supreme Court to help legal professionals in order to overcome the harmful effects of COVID-19. In developed countries, governments and respective authorities have undertaken various programs and packages to protect their legal professionals from the severe effects of this pandemic. Our government has also undertaken a such project for mass people, but we think that there should be a separate package for legal professionals. In accordance with the steps taken in other countries to protect legal professionals, we are providing here some suggestions to help our legal professionals to overcome this pandemic situation.

#### **Separate Stimulus Package for Legal Professionals**

The USA has declared their stimulus package named CARES, in which there is a specified amount of monetary package for the assistance of legal professionals of their country. They announced \$7.5 million to support the federal courts and their staff. This amount will provide financial aid to legal professionals and use in US Supreme Court to enhance its teleporting capability. We also identified the lack of efficient technology in conducting virtual courts during the lockdown in our country. This type of combined package is necessary for our legal professionals to reduce the adverse effect of COVID-19 on their individual and professional lives.

#### **Recovery Loan Scheme by the Government for Legal Professionals**

UK announced RLS on 6th April 2021 for lawyers whose private business or consultancy chamber has been closed down during the pandemic. This scheme will help them to restart their business. Our country can initiate this type of scheme.

#### **Financial Assistance from Supreme Court Bar Association**

In our neighboring country India, Supreme Court Bar Association is providing an 'interest-free loan' of TK. 25000 for its members repayable in 2 years. In our country, Supreme Court Bar Association can undertake this type of initiative.

#### **Providing Mental Support and Training**

This report found that our legal professionals have faced problems in using modern technology in virtual hearing and courtroom systems. A training system can be initiated in this regard. A mental support center in the Court building can be established to provide counseling to lawyers who are mentally distressed because of depression.

This set of suggestions can be helpful for legal

professionals in fighting against the effects of COVID-19. Already the normal activities of the Supreme Court have been started. It can be wished that our legal professionals will soon overcome this situation. Although this study provides information about the socio-economic and psychological effects of COVID-19 on legal professionals. This report has some limitations. The study area is only Dhaka city, so this study is not robust to demonstrate the original scenario of the effects of COVID-19 on legal professionals. This study is conducted in a limited scope however it has identified the adverse effects of COVID-19 on legal professionals. They are harmed financially, socially, and psychologically. Nonetheless, this study will help to create awareness among our scholars and policymakers to take the necessary initiatives to resolve the issue.

### CONCLUSION

According to the research findings, legal professionals are primarily impacted financially and mentally. Because they are uncertain in the job field. Since societal violence escalated their life and relationship during the epidemic period. Though they managed to do their work on an online platform their economic standard was drastically changed which bring misery to their lives. The message of this study is unmanageable client dealings, and it is counted for the pandemic situation. In the prevailing circumstances, every professional is alert about their duties and responsibilities in this connection. Moreover, the study finds the worst situations and hazards of the professionals dealing with the client.

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