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COVID-19 related research findings of studies conducted by BRAC JPGSPH and BHW

[Dhaka, Bangladesh, April 18, 2020] – BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health (JPGSPH), BRAC University and Bangladesh Health Watch (BHW) unveiled the research findings of six different studies that looked at the impact of the coronavirus outbreak on the general and mental health of the population at large, RMG workers, frontline health workers, and marginalized groups – including the transgender community – in Bangladesh. The findings of the studies were shared with journalists during an online press launch today. The findings paint an alarming picture: frontline health workers such as doctors and nurses, garment workers, and the urban poor living in informal settlements are struggling to cope with the sudden effects that the coronavirus outbreak has had on their lives.

Rapid case studies of the urban poor in Dhaka city and transgender community found high levels of fear and panic among individuals about coronavirus. For most, the symptoms of corona remain unclear. Stigma, surveillance, discrimination and harassment have also increased within these communities.

Another study carried out 60 telephone interviews of frontline health workers (FLWs) involved in COVID-19 management. According to the study, the FLWs mentioned the urgent need for PPEs of appropriate quality. They showed greater preference for PPEs compared to monetary incentives such as those announced by the PM recently. Not only are FLWs physically exhausted, they are also experiencing immense mental stress due to the fear of infecting their family members.

JPGSPH is also running a multi-phase phone survey to gain a better understanding of the effects of COVID-19 on aspects such as income, nutrition, gender, and mental health. Phase 1, spanning April 6-13, reached 1,309 individuals. In terms of psychological wellbeing, households with complete loss of income (58%) are significantly more stressed than households with partial (29%) or no loss of income (13%). Similarly, 37% of the households reported that they are surviving on staple foods such as rice, lentils and potatoes. These households – that have been forced to adopt a diet lacking in diversity – showed significantly higher levels of stress.

Furthermore, the overall “quality” of the awareness and knowledge about COVID-19 paints a grim scenario. Rural and female respondents know much less about the mode of transmission than their counterparts (urban and male respectively), and only 38% of all respondents mentioned maintaining the 3-feet rule. Stigma and fears of death because of the virus, remain widespread.

The six studies came up with a range of recommendations which, if implemented, can greatly help alleviate the effects of the pandemic on FLWs, the urban poor and other marginalized groups. They include: ensuring adequate number of PPEs of appropriate quality for all FLWs who are directly or indirectly involved in the management of the COVID-19 patients, arrangement of accommodation for the FLWs near their workplace to allay anxieties, and implementation of roster and rotation of FLWs as per the 7/14 model (7 days of duty followed by 14 days of quarantine) as was followed in Wuhan.

Cash and food support for low-income groups have to be boosted and there also remains scope for more proactive awareness and knowledge campaigns, including addressing misinformation and the issue of stigma. To be effective such campaigns need to be targeted and customized to ensure optimal effect.