ASSESSING COVID-19'S EFFECTS ON GENDER-RELATED ISSUES USING A PHONE SURVEY IN THE FEED THE FUTURE ZONE OF INFLUENCE IN BANGLADESH

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ACRONYMS

BCC	Behavior change communication
BDHS	Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey
BIHS	Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey
CLP	Char Livelihoods Project
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FIES	Food Insecurity Experience Scale
GFSS	Global Food Security Strategy
GoB	Government of Bangladesh
IFPRI	International Food Policy Research Institute
IPV	Intimate partner violence
MSME	Micro, small, and medium enterprise
NGO	Non-governmental organization
PRSSP	Policy Research and Strategy Support Program
PSU	Primary sampling unit
TMRI	Transfer Modality Research Initiative
TUP	Targeted Ultra Poor
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WASH	Water, sanitation, and hygiene
WFP	World Food Programme
ZOI	Zone of Influence

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Bangladesh Policy Research and Strategy Support Program (PRSSP), implemented by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), designed and conducted a telephone survey to capture the differential effects of COVID-19 on women during the first five months (April-August 2020) of the coronavirus outbreak in Bangladesh. This report provides the survey findings, focusing on changes in economic status, food and water security, empowerment of women, and domestic conflicts within the household since the start of the pandemic.

Employment, Income, and Coping Strategies

Women play a key role in agriculture in Bangladesh. IFPRI's gender phone survey results show that nearly half of surveyed women in the ZOI are engaged in one farming activity (48 percent), and 35 percent in two activities. Women are mostly engaged in non-crop activities, including livestock and poultry raising, as these activities typically take place in close proximity to the household.

There is nearly a 50-50 split on control over earnings, with 46 percent of respondents controlling how their earnings are used versus 44 percent who have joint management with their spouse. Nevertheless, most women in the ZOI earn less than their spouse.

COVID-19-induced income losses were pervasive across ZOI households (91 percent) and had severe effects on women's earnings. Over half of women who had earned income pre-COVID had their incomes *completely* cut-off in April 2020—the first month of the 'general holiday,' or lockdown. While the percentage of women who reported having no income diminished over the subsequent months, one-third of women in the ZOI continued to grapple with no income even five months after the outbreak.

Surveyed households adopted negative coping mechanisms to mitigate the income shocks in the wake of COVID-19. One-third of respondent households sold at least one asset. A large proportion of households (30 percent) reported selling income-generating assets, particularly farm animals (e.g., livestock, poultry, etc.). Although the decision to sell assets may help ZOI households recoup lost income in the immediate-term, adopting negative coping methods like selling productive assets can erode sources of income for many years to come.

Food and Water Security

Loss of income contributed to a higher incidence of food insecurity in the ZOI. Using a modified Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES), IFPRI's gender phone survey data show that the majority (78 percent) of surveyed households were food insecure at some point between April and August 2020. Not only was food insecurity present, but the *magnitude* of severity is troubling: 36 percent of ZOI households experienced moderate to severe food insecurity in the 30 days before the survey. Water security is an important factor for hygiene and nutritional status. Fortunately, between April and August 2020, water security was mostly intact among surveyed households. Over 95 percent of respondent women were not concerned about access to water and were not forced to change their behaviors around water—either drinking water or using it for handwashing during critical times.

Women's Empowerment

Women's empowerment is complex and multi-dimensional. Labor and time use have been increasingly acknowledged as key components of understanding and measuring empowerment. This is because individual wellbeing as depends not only on income or consumption, but also on how time is spent (Rubiano-Matulevich and Kashiwase 2018). Men and women spend their time differently largely because of gender roles and a relatively rigid gender division of labor in rural Bangladesh: women typically represent caregivers, whereas men are the income earners. Since the pandemic, the survey findings suggest that these gendered roles have become more imbalanced: one-quarter of women report investing more time caring for other household members since the coronavirus outbreak compared with the pre-COVID context. Although women's caring hours have largely increased, women's *working hours* have either remained the same (63 percent) or increased (15 percent). As time progressed between April and August 2020, the proportion of women who worked more hours increased, from 11 percent in April to 16 percent in August 2020.

The coronavirus lockdown inhibited mobility, which gradually relaxed over the five-month reference period. Although 55 percent of women reported leaving the household to meet family and friends in the past two weeks, other leading reasons mostly rested on women's gendered duties, such as seeking medical care (for themselves or other household members) (48 percent), collecting water (47 percent), or purchasing food for the family (41 percent).

Domestic Conflict

Economic stressors, combined with restricted movements and dealing with uncertainties, increase risk for household conflict. IFPRI's gender phone survey collected data to better understand the prevalence and type of domestic conflict happening behind closed doors. Nearly half (47 percent) of women reported some sort of domestic dispute, mostly in the form of verbal abuse. For perspective, 19 percent of women reported never having any conflicts with their spouse pre-COVID, which plummeted to only 2 percent in the last two weeks growing tensions as a result of the changed circumstances.

Phone surveys should be designed to be a reasonable length to be administered over the phone to enhance the response rate (Mani and Barooah 2020). As a result, it is difficult to ask as many or as detailed of questions that may otherwise be administered under an in-person survey. Nevertheless, the phone survey has generated useful insights on the direction of household conflict and some of the effects on women. For instance, the month-wise frequency of domestic conflict was highest in April and May 2020, which coincides both with the months of the lockdown *and* when there was the highest proportion of households that reported lost income. Although incidences of domestic conflict are likely underestimated due to the sensitive nature of the questions, these data provide a notion of women's vulnerabilities amid the pandemic, which have been triggered by economic shocks and enabled by patriarchal values. These findings underscore the fact that the coronavirus pandemic represents not only a health emergency, but a crisis that risks unravelling progress in gender equality and women's empowerment, and can undermine women's safety in their homes.

1 MOTIVATION

The coronavirus pandemic has had far-reaching effects on lives and livelihoods globally. On March 8, 2020 the first three COVID-19 cases were identified in Dhaka. In response, the Government of Bangladesh, along with other countries around the world, imposed policy measures to stop the spread of the virus. On March 16, schools were closed, and localized lockdowns began on March 18. The Bangladesh Government announced a 10-day ‘general holiday’ from March 26 to April 4, during which everyone was expected to stay home, avoid non-essential movements, and practice physical distancing, except for essential workers. The population movement measures were iteratively extended in phases through May 31. These efforts, while potentially slowing the spread of the virus, have also resulted in serious disruptions in the economy and livelihoods.

While there do not appear to be gender differences in the transmission of COVID-19, a growing body of evidence suggests that COVID-19’s effects vary by gender. Specifically, although men are harder hit by the *severity* of the disease (Jin et al. 2020), women are disproportionately affected by the social and economic impacts of COVID-19.

Research is building on the dismal effects of COVID-19 on women in Bangladesh. UN Women’s rapid appraisal in April 2020 found that women were nearly twice as likely to not have access to COVID-19-related information than men (29 percent versus 15 percent), and women shouldered the burden of unpaid work, particularly for child care amid school closures. There were increasing reports of violence against women, yet there is relatively minimal data on the extent and severity. While there are gender differences, the common ground between men and women is also concerning: two-thirds of men (66 percent) and women (62 percent) have reported negative effects on their mental health, and 61 percent of both men and women did not have access to healthcare in the weeks following the government-announced ‘general holiday,’ or lockdown. Lack of health insurance is almost universal among men and women in Bangladesh (UN Women 2020).

These statistics are particularly concerning given the significant progress in women’s empowerment and gender parity in Bangladesh in the past decade. A recent IFPRI-PRSSP study reveals remarkable improvements in women’s empowerment and gender equality in the Feed the Future Zone of Influence (ZOI) in Bangladesh. Only 31 percent of women in the ZOI were empowered at 2011/2012 baseline, which increased to 68 percent at 2018/2019 endline. During this period, the proportion of women achieving gender parity with men increased from 50 percent to 79 percent (Feed the Future 2020). These hard-earned and commendable gains are under threat due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Adopting a sound COVID-19 response requires reliable, up-to-date data. To this end, upon request from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Policy Research and Strategy Support Program (PRSSP), implemented by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), proposed to conduct a series of telephone surveys to document the effects of COVID-19 on key populations of interest in the Feed the Future Zone of Influence (ZOI). IFPRI-PRSSP designed and conducted two phone surveys—the socioeconomic and farmers’ phone surveys—to document changes in socioeconomic and food security characteristics during the months following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The socioeconomic phone survey and farmers' phone survey report were submitted to USAID in August and October 2020, respectively.

To date, there has been minimal rigorous research designed and conducted to quantify the effects of coronavirus on gender-related issues in USAID's Feed the Future ZOI. To this end, IFPRI-PRSSP conducted the third phone survey to measure the changes among women during the five months following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2 METHODS AND DATA

The sample for the phone survey on gender-related issues was exclusively drawn from the 2018/2019 US Global Food Security Strategy (GFSS) baseline survey sample. The sample region comprises of 125 villages from 21 GFSS districts.

A stratified randomization of the GFSS baseline survey sample was carried out so that households were evenly divided between ‘lower-income’ households and ‘higher-income’ households. ‘Higher-income’ households lie above the median value of the per-capita monthly household expenditure distribution at the village level (based on 2018/19 GFSS baseline data), while ‘lower-income’ households lie below the median. This sampling strategy ensures that both low-income and high-income households are adequately represented. Thus, the final sample is roughly balanced–out of the 870 households interviewed for this survey, 48.1 percent are lower-income households while the rest are higher-income households.

From September 9-12, 2020, IFPRI trained 15 female enumerators and 1 female supervisor. IFPRI’s decision to hire all female survey team members was deliberate given that (1) this survey interviewed all women, and (2) due to the sensitive nature of this survey, where female respondents may feel more comfortable communicating with female enumerators. IFPRI staff (2 women, 3 men) also contributed to monitoring the survey continuously. After the training, the survey was piloted between September 13-14, 2020, and the survey started on September 15, 2020. The survey was completed nearly two weeks later on September 28, 2020.

All the respondents for this survey were female. The survey instrument, which included questions on demographic characteristics of the respondents, their employment, decision-making over income, food and water insecurity, coping strategies, safety net/social protection coverage, empowerment indicators and domestic conflict, was pre-tested to detect any potential issues with the survey questionnaire and to serve as an end-to-end rehearsal of all content and survey procedures.

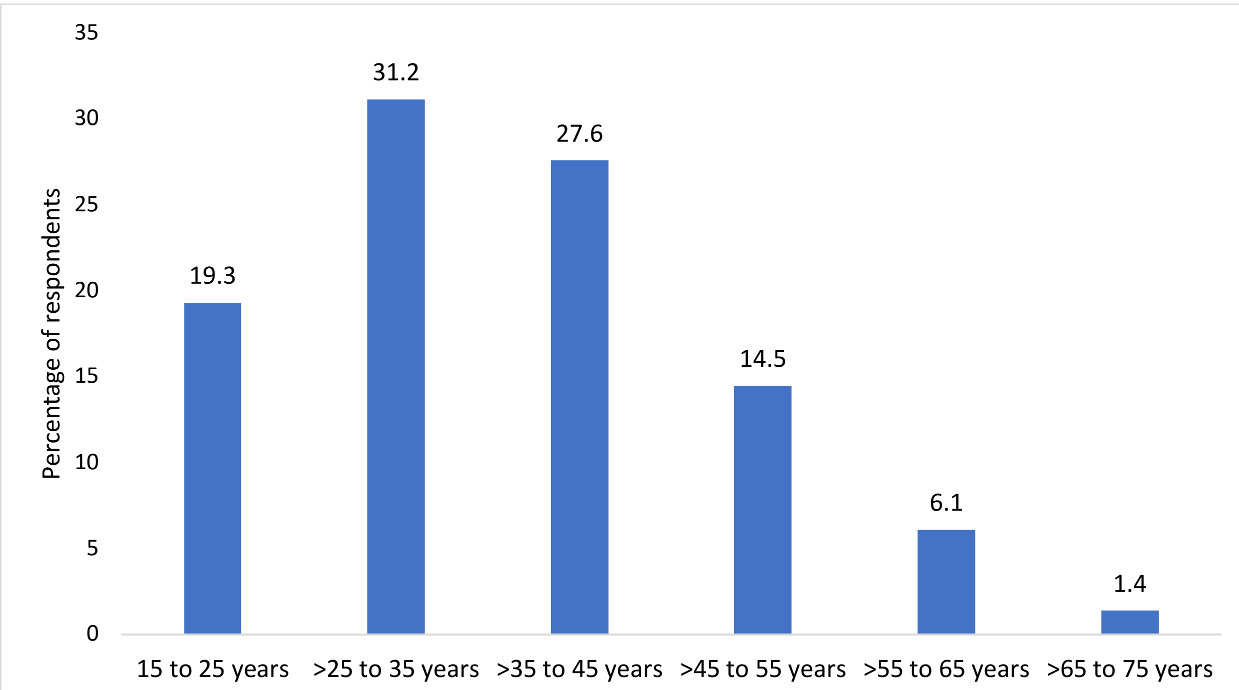
Before starting the phone survey, IFPRI-PRSSP generated a list of households and corresponding mobile numbers to contact, drawn from the GFSS sample. The survey enumerators called the households in a random order and replaced non-responsive households after five attempts, in line with the survey protocol. When a survey enumerator successfully reached a household, the survey enumerator introduced the purpose of the survey, potential benefits for the respondent, and reviewed the consent portion of the survey questionnaire. The survey on each respondent would often span over multiple phone calls and, on average, lasted approximately 45 minutes. Respondents were sent Tk 100 (US$1.20) mobile phone credit after the interview in appreciation of and compensation for participating in the research.

3 PROFILE OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS

3.1 Demographics

All 870 respondents in the gender phone survey are women. **Figure 3.1** shows the age distribution of gender phone survey respondents. The highest proportion of women are between 25 and 35 years of age (31.2 percent). Most respondents are under 45 years of age (78.1 percent).

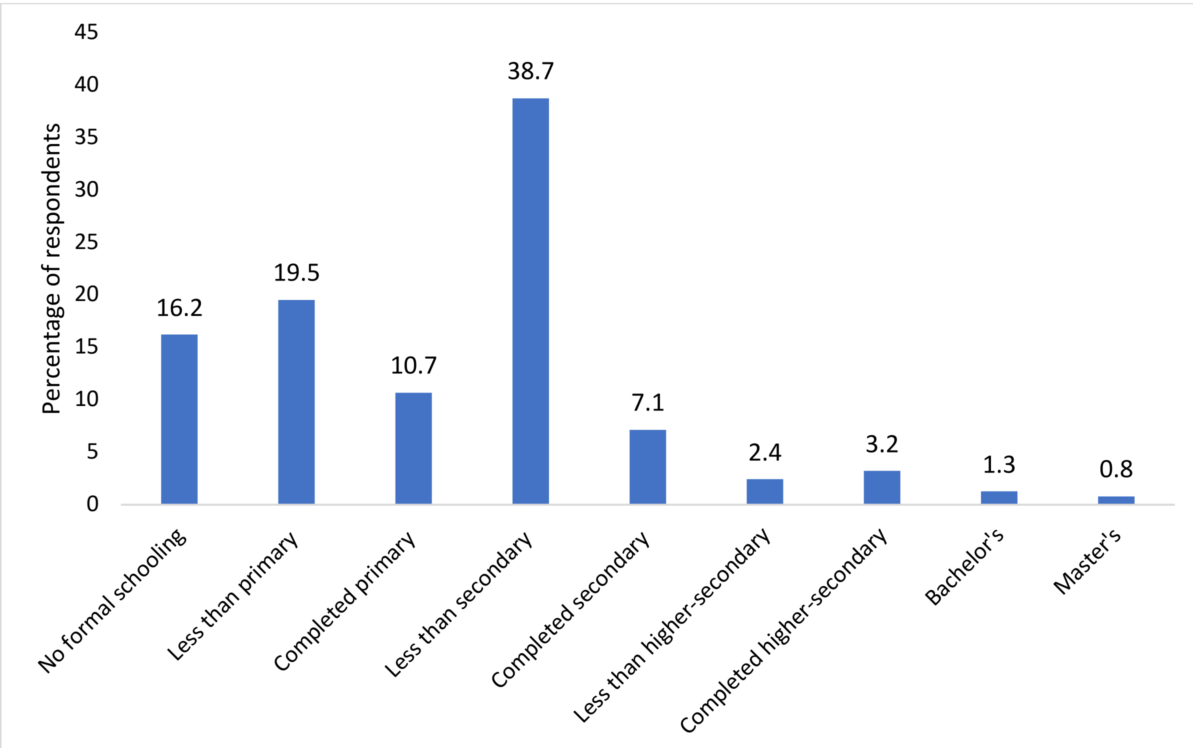
Figure 3.1 Age distribution of respondents



Source: IFPRI-PRSSP's gender phone survey, September 2020

Figure 3.2 shows the education level among gender survey respondents. The highest proportion (38.7 percent) of respondents have attained less than secondary school education but have completed primary schooling.

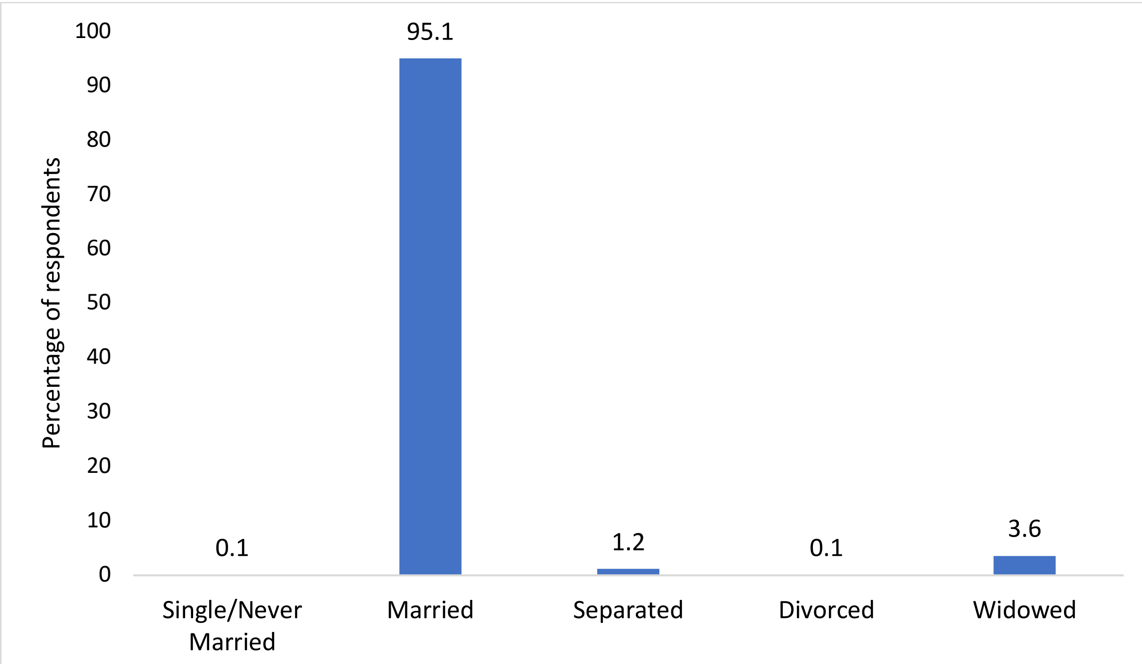
Figure 3.2 Educational attainment of respondents



Source: IFPRI-PRSSP's gender phone survey, September 2020

The marital status of the gender survey respondents is presented in **Figure 3.3**. Nearly all (95.1 percent) female respondents are married. Early marriage—that is, under age 18—is relatively common in Bangladesh. Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey (BDHS) 2017/2018 data show that 71 percent of women ages 20–49 are married by age 18, and 85 percent are married by age 20 (NIPORT 2018). Therefore, the gender phone survey findings on marital status are consistent with the BDHS 2017/2018 data.

Figure 3.3 Marital status of respondents

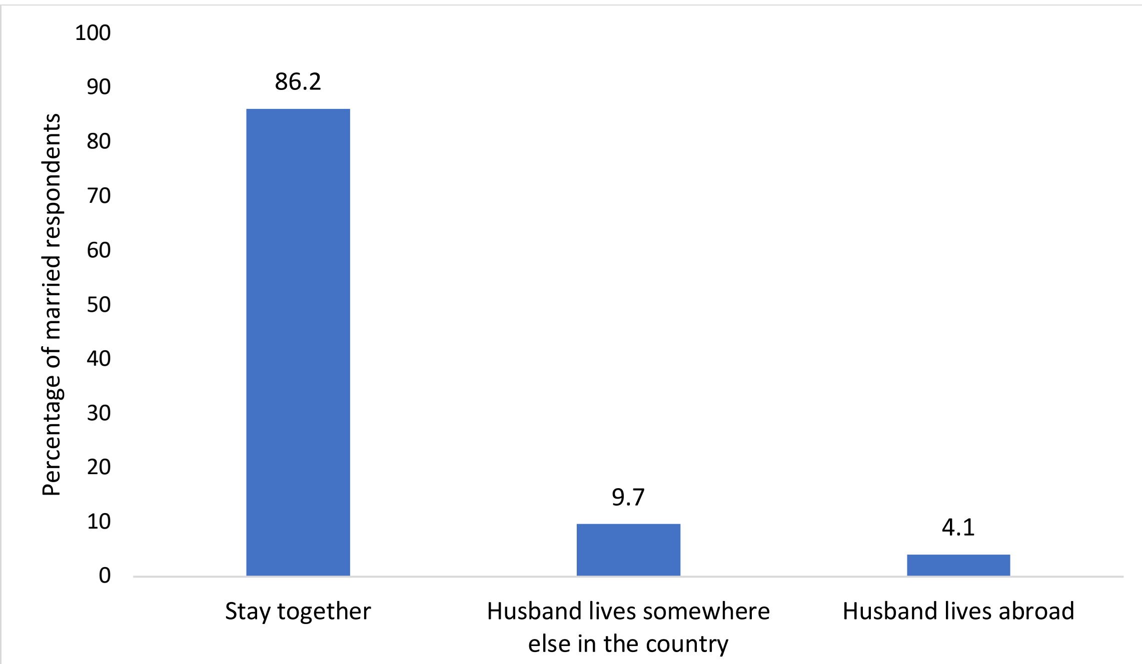


Source: IFPRI-PRSSP's gender phone survey, September 2020

Figure 3.4 shows the cohabitation status of the survey respondents. The survey results show that 83.8 percent of the respondents reported that they reside in a male-headed household, whereas the remaining live in a female-headed household. Similarly, nearly three-quarters (73.5 percent) of the respondents indicate that the household head is their spouse, while 13.5 percent self-identify as household heads (stand-alone survey result not shown in a figure).

Among those who are married (827 respondents out of 870, or 95.1 percent of the sample), 86.2 percent currently reside with their husbands. Due to gender norms in Bangladesh, where men are expected to provide and women are expected to take care of the other household members, men migrating for work domestically or internationally is fairly common among Bangladeshi households. The remaining 13.8 percent of female respondents represent migrant households, of which 9.7 percent have a husband living elsewhere in Bangladesh and 4.1 percent have a husband living in another country.

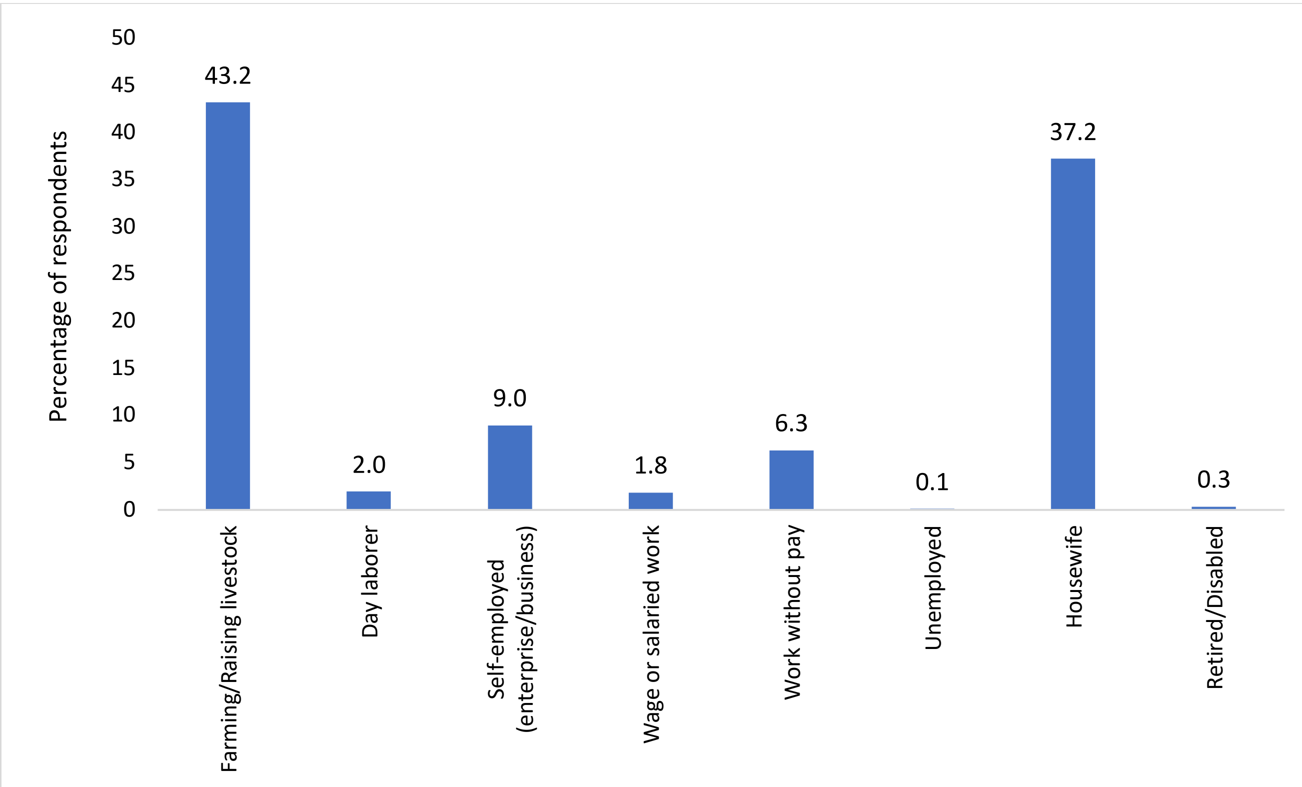
Figure 3.4 Cohabitation status of female respondents with spouses



Source: IFPRI-PRSSP's gender phone survey, September 2020

Figure 3.5 shows the occupational profile of respondents in the gender phone survey. Most respondents are either engaged in farming and raising livestock (43.2 percent) or are housewives (37.2 percent). In both contexts, women are situated mostly at home, in line with gender norms in most rural areas of Bangladesh. IFPRI's 2017 study on women's empowerment along the agricultural value chain highlighted that women's mobility remains limited, which constrains their occupational choices in the agriculture sector (Ahmed et al. 2018).

Figure 3.5 Occupation of respondents

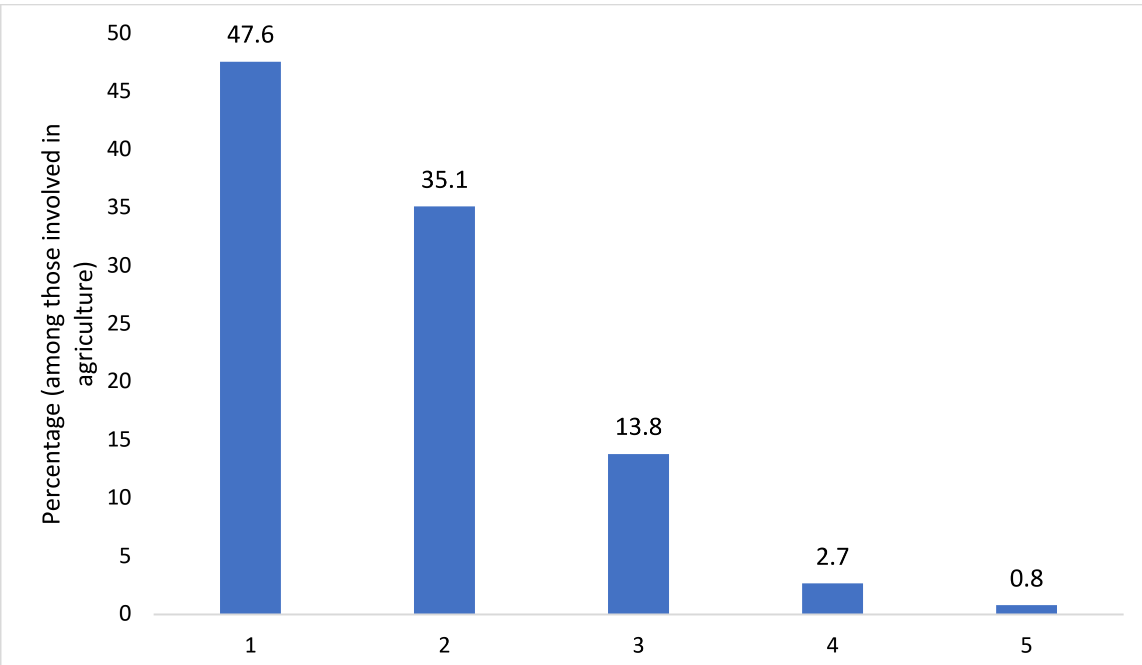


Source: IFPRI-PRSSP's gender phone survey, September 2020

3.2 Employment and Income

Figure 3.6 provides a glimpse into female respondents' engagement in the agriculture sector. 376 out of 870 respondents (43.2 percent) identified farming as their main occupation (**Figure 3.5**). Among those respondents who are engaged in the agriculture sector, nearly half (47.6 percent) are engaged in only one farming activity. These activities include staple crops, horticulture, cash crops, dairy, rearing of ox/bull or sheep/goat or poultry, etc. Women's engagement in agriculture is mostly limited to one or two activities.

Figure 3.6 Number of farming activities

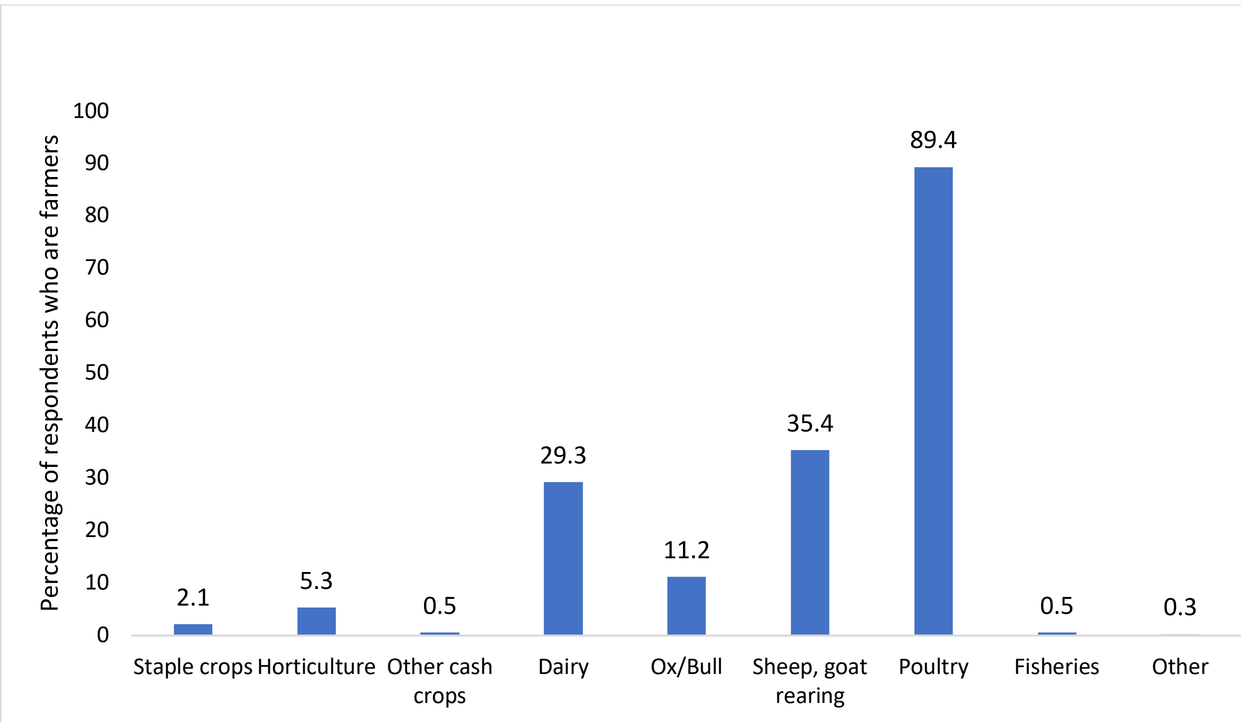


Source: IFPRI-PRSSP's gender phone survey, September 2020

Figure 3.7 shows that women in the ZOI are often engaged in a few farming activities simultaneously. Among women who are farmers, the vast majority engage in some form of non-crop agriculture. This includes poultry farming (89.4 percent), sheep and goat rearing (35.4 percent), dairy (29.3 percent), and tending to ox/bull (11. 2 percent). In contrast, women are relatively less involved in crop agriculture, particularly for staple crops and other cash crops (2.1 percent and 0.5 percent, respectively).

Noticeably, 5.3 percent of women are engaged in horticulture: while this is a relatively small percentage of women, it is higher than any other crop agriculture farming activity. This may be for a few reasons, including that homestead gardening of horticultural crops does not require travel away from the household or the use of costly agricultural machineries. Additionally, as men are traditionally involved in cultivating rice and other crops, the Ministry of Agriculture and other development programs have increasingly promoted homestead gardening among rural women.

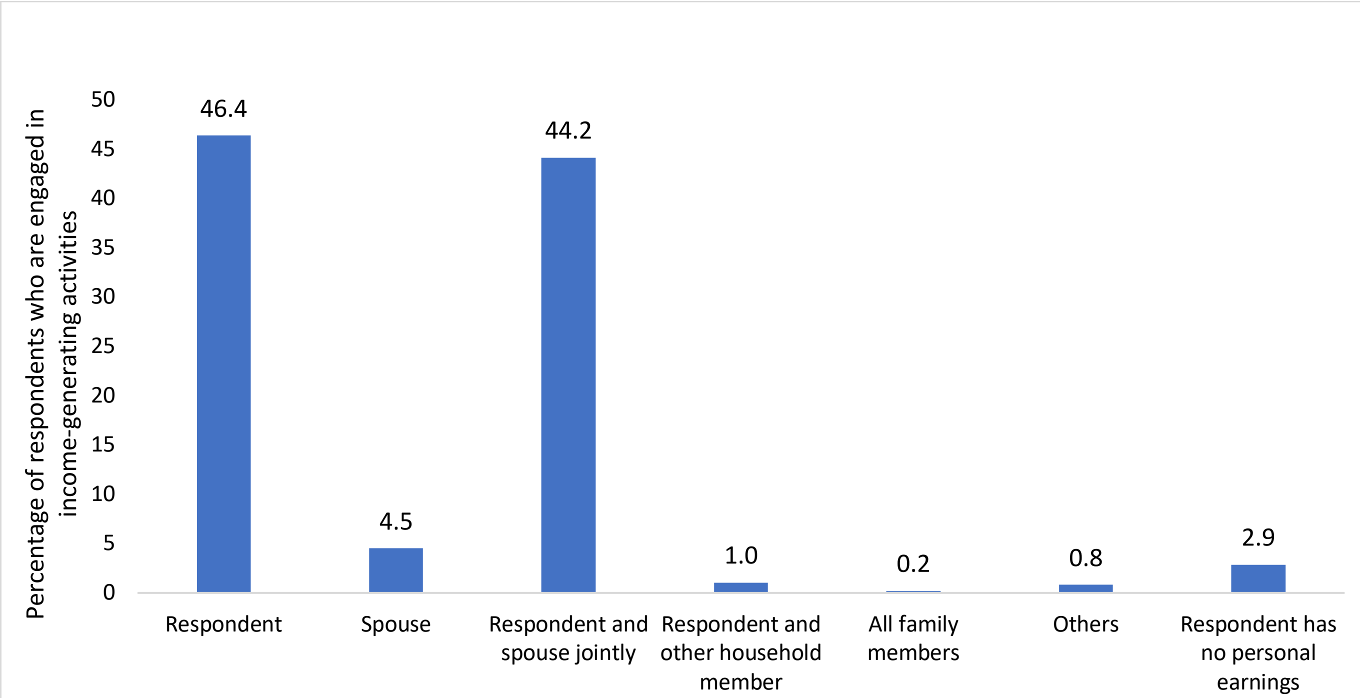
Figure 3.7 Types of farming activities



Source: IFPRI-PRSSP's gender phone survey, September 2020

Who decides how to spend the money earned by female household members? **Figure 3.8** presents results for only those respondents who are engaged in income-generating activities. Slightly less than half (46.4 percent) of women reported that they have control over their own earnings, whereas 44.2 percent indicated that they have joint control over their earnings with their spouse. 4.5 percent of surveyed women indicate that their spouse has control over how their earnings are spent.

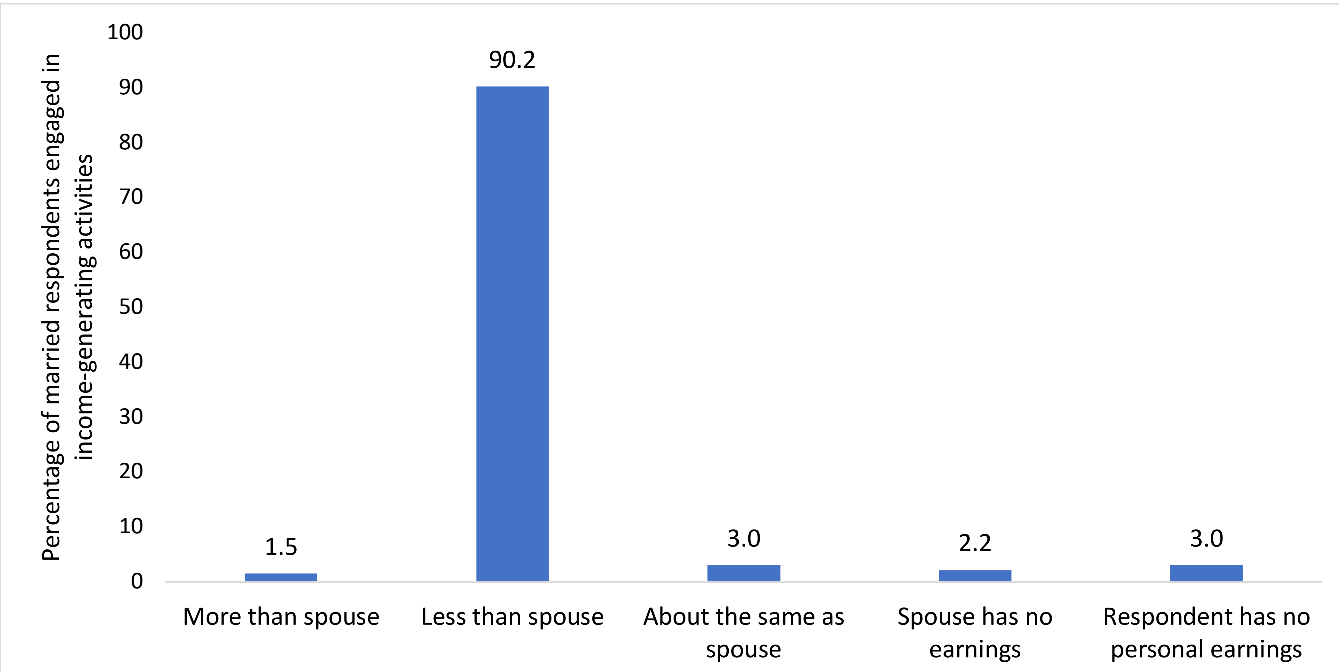
Figure 3.8 Control over earnings



Source: IFPRI-PRSSP's gender phone survey, September 2020

During the gender phone survey, women were asked whether they consider their personal earnings to be more, less, or the same as what their spouse earns. **Figure 3.9** presents results for only those respondents who are engaged in income-generating activities (farming/raising livestock, day laborer, work for self, wage or salaried job) and who are married. The majority (90.2 percent) of female respondents report that they earn less than their spouse.

Figure 3.9 Comparing earnings with spouse

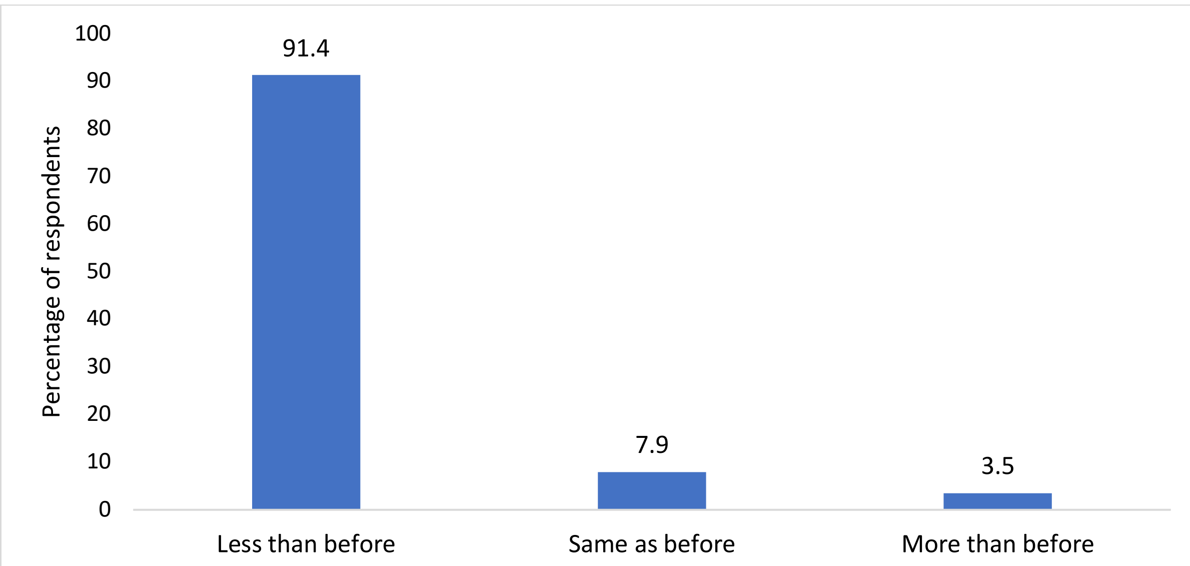


Source: IFPRI-PRSSP's gender phone survey, September 2020

4 INCOME AND COPING STRATEGIES USED

Between April and August 2020, did surveyed women in the ZOI experience any changes in income compared with the month before lockdown started? According to **Figure 4.1**, virtually all (91.4 percent) surveyed women report to receive less income during the April-August 2020 reference period compared with the pre-lockdown period. This demonstrates the extent of all affected households and includes those who might have recovered in the months after the lockdown was lifted. While it is expected that incomes would drop due to restrictions amid the 'general holiday,' these findings show the extent of negative income shocks across households at some point during the April-August period.

Figure 4.1 Change in household income (April-August 2020)



Source: IFPRI-PRSSP's gender phone survey, September 2020

Figure 4.2 illustrates changes in respondent women's income as a result of the pandemic. The findings show that the majority of respondents had their income eliminated entirely at some point during the months following the outbreak. This situation was more dire immediately following the outbreak and during the announced lockdown.

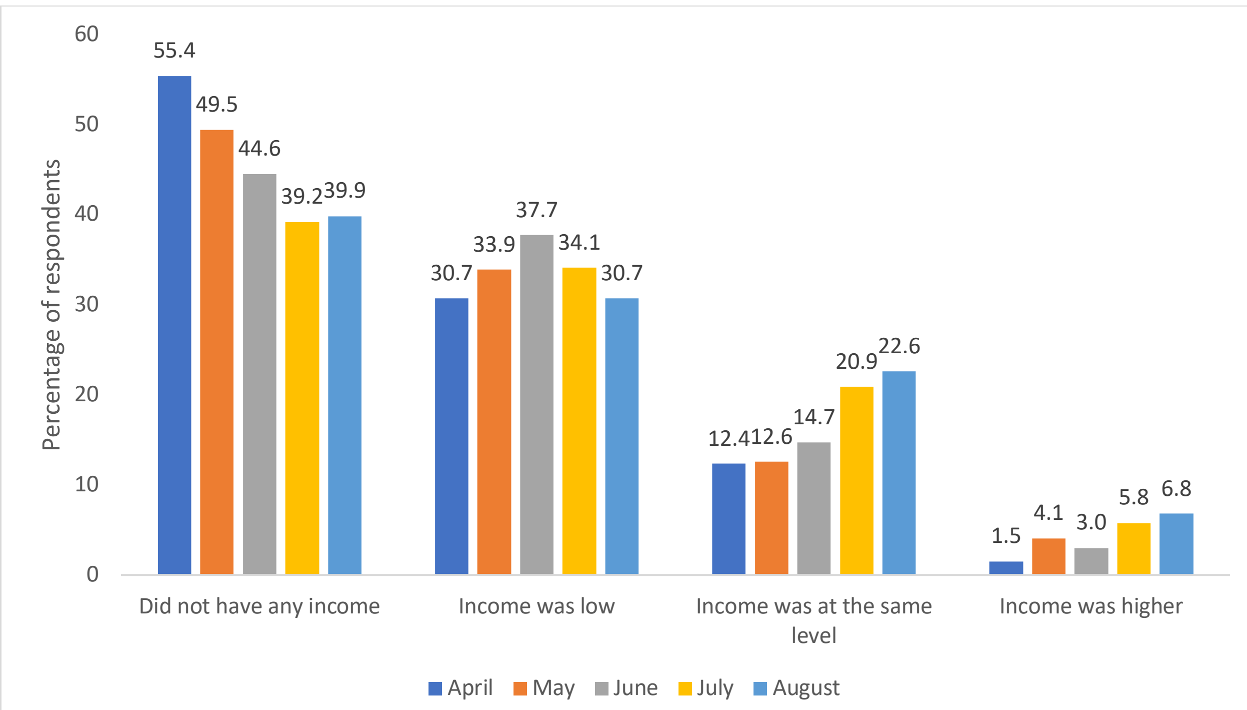
Over half (53.9 percent) of households reported that they had earned income before the outbreak in March 2020 (stand-alone survey result not shown in a figure). Specifically, in April 2020, 55.4 percent of women that were previously earning income reported no income during this time, which gradually declined over time.

The findings show that 22.6 percent of surveyed women in ZOI that earned income before the lockdown recovered by August 2020 to earning the same amount as pre-COVID, about one-third (39.9 percent) still did not have any income in August 2020. This underscores the persisting income shocks nearly half a year after the initial detection and escalation of the virus in Bangladesh.

Many women drew upon their savings to cope with the COVID-19-induced shocks. Among those who did, 32.5 percent used savings that belonged to them, either exclusively or jointly with others.

Nearly half (48.2 percent) of the gender phone survey sample represent lower-income households, defined as below the median value of the per-capita monthly household expenditure. **Figure 4.2** shows that although most households did not have any income between April and August 2020, some households' income was unaffected or increased. Since half of the sample represent higher-income households, which may have household members with more savings or work in jobs that are more insulated from the pandemic (e.g., salaried), it is likely that the households that were unaffected or benefited represent these wealthier households.

Figure 4.2 Women's change in income due to COVID-19 (April-August 2020)



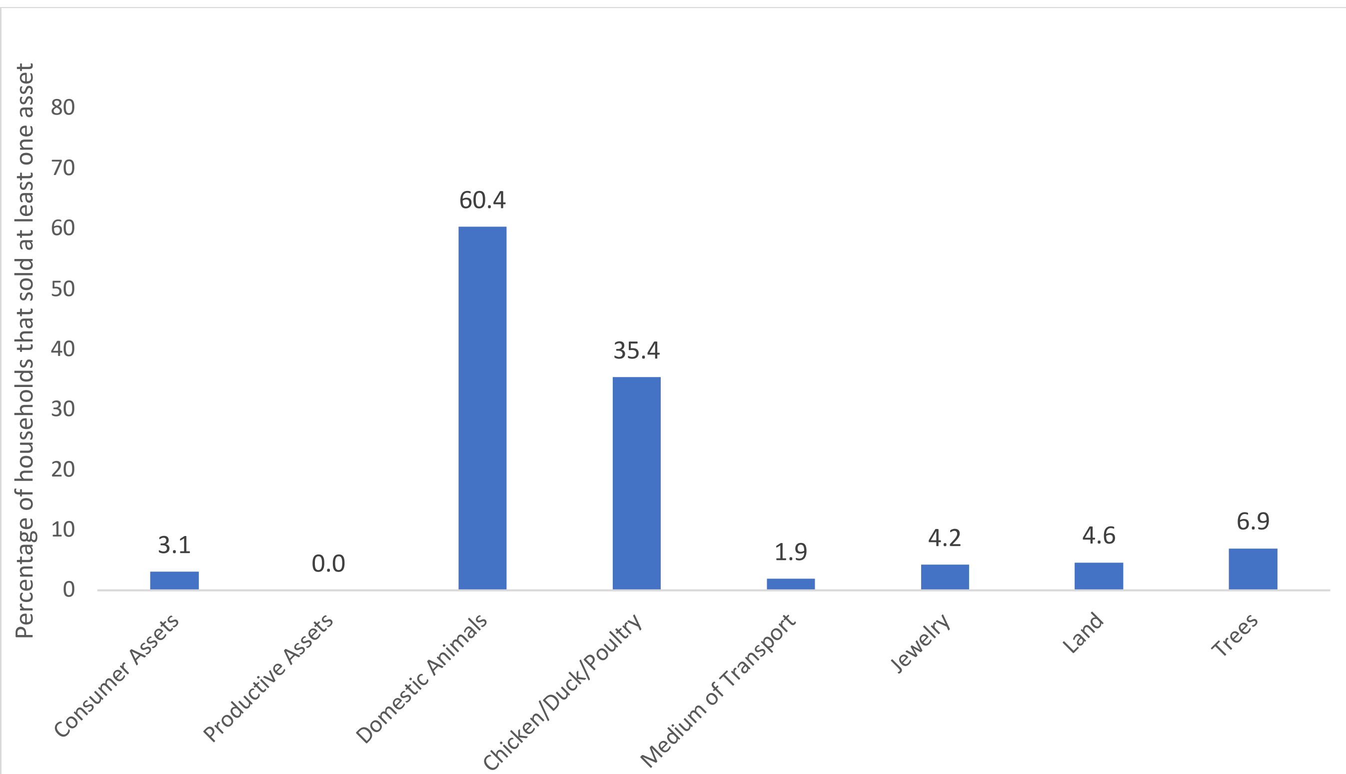
Source: IFPRI-PRSSP's gender phone survey, September 2020

During the gender phone survey, women were asked whether they had sold at least one asset to deal with the loss of income between April and August 2020. Alarmingly, nearly one-third (29.9 percent) confirmed that they had sold an asset to cope with the economic shocks induced by COVID-19. Among those households that sold at least one asset to deal with loss of income, there was an array of assets sold (**Figure 4.3**). Most of these households resorted to selling their domestic animals (cows/bulls/goats) (60.4 percent) and/or chickens/ducks/poultry (35.4 percent).

Although only 4.6 percent of ZOI households (who sold any asset in the April-August period) report selling land, the gravity and long-term ramifications of the decision to sell land cannot be underestimated. Land is the most important factor in agricultural production. In Bangladesh, land tenure arrangements represent a major determinant of socioeconomic status and technology adoption (Ahmed and Bakhtiar 2020). Therefore, providing support to these households that have already sold land and income-generating assets, as well as taking action to reduce the likelihood of any further households from taking similar drastic actions, is critical.

Among those households that sold at least one asset to deal with loss of income between April and August 2020, 59.6 percent of surveyed households sold assets belonging to the female respondent. This includes assets either solely owned by women or jointly owned with others.

Figure 4.3 Types of assets sold by households that sold at least one asset to deal with loss of income

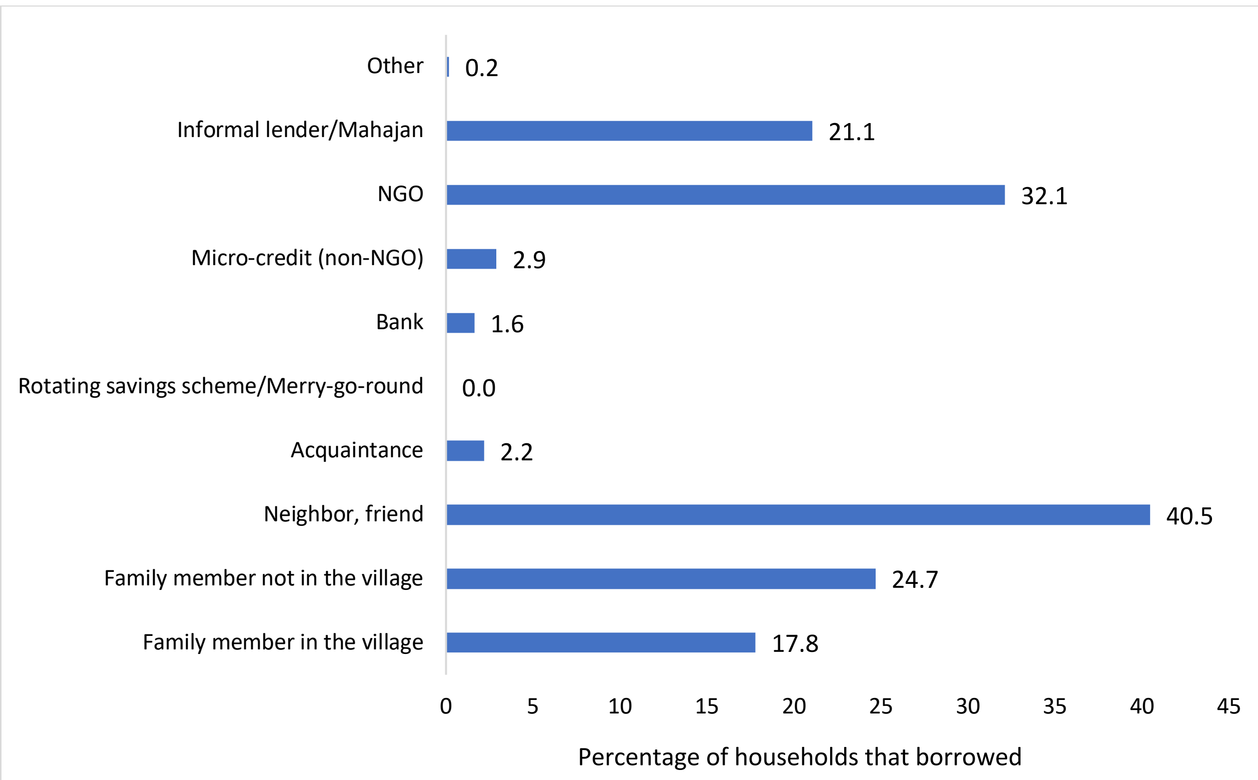


Source: IFPRI-PRSSP's gender phone survey, September 2020

Among surveyed women, 7.9 percent confirmed that their households had mortgaged out at least one asset to deal with the loss of income between April and August 2020. Among this sub-sample of households, the majority (65.2 percent) mortgaged out gold/silver jewelry, followed by land (30.4 percent). Over half (58.0 percent) of these households mortgaged assets that belonged to the female respondent, either solely or jointly with someone else.

Results from the gender phone survey also reveal that nearly two-thirds (63.3 percent) of the respondent women reported that their households borrowed money from individuals or institution to deal with the loss of income between April and August 2020. **Figure 4.4** shows that surveyed ZOI households turned to various sources for borrowing. Among those households that borrowed, 40.5 percent sought assistance from informal, trusted networks, such as neighbors and friends. Although IFPRI's socioeconomic phone survey report found that very few households received assistance from NGOs amid COVID-19 (2.1. percent of ZOI households overall), nearly one-third (32.1 percent) of surveyed households borrowed from NGOs in the five months after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

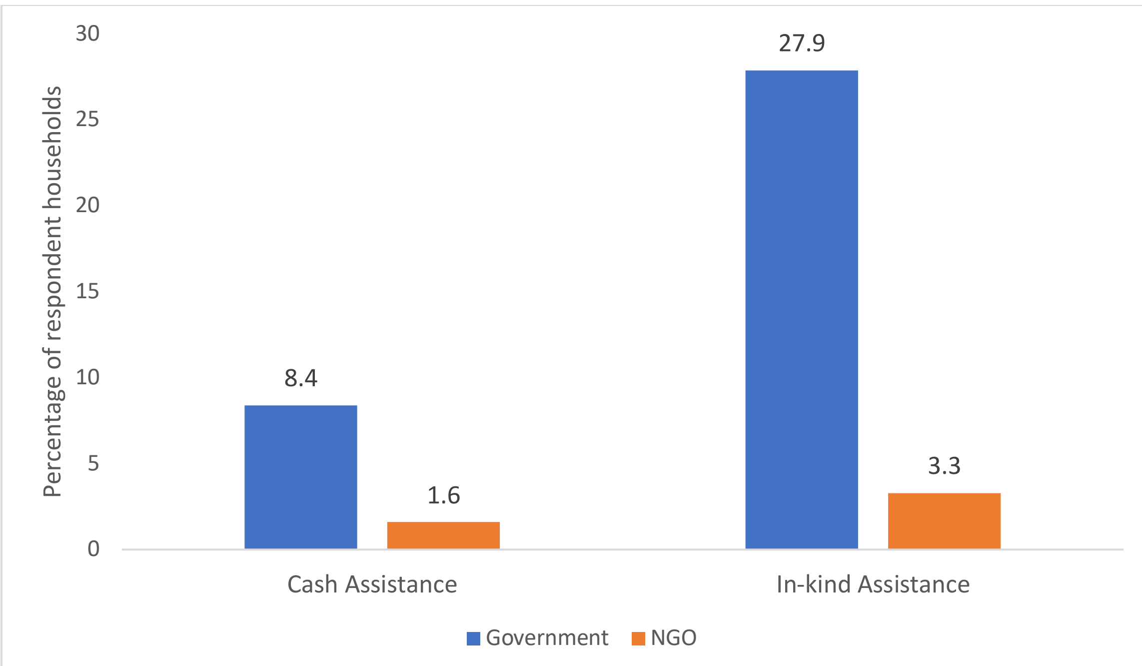
Figure 4.4 Sources of borrowing



Source: IFPRI-PRSSP's gender phone survey, September 2020

Figure 4.5 provides information on the transfer payments that surveyed households received between April and August 2020, either from government or NGOs. Overall, consistent with IFPRI's socioeconomic and farmers' phone survey findings, a higher proportion of ZOI households received assistance from the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) in the form of in-kind support. Specifically, 8.4 percent of the respondents reported that their household received cash assistance from the government. On the other hand, 1.6 percent of the respondents reported that their household received cash assistance from the NGOs during this period. More than a quarter of the respondent households (27.9 percent) reported receiving in-kind assistance from the government from April-August 2020. Conversely, 3.3 percent of the respondent households received in-kind transfers from the NGOs.

Figure 4.5 Transfers received from government and/or NGOs (April-August 2020)



Source: IFPRI-PRSSP's gender phone survey, September 2020

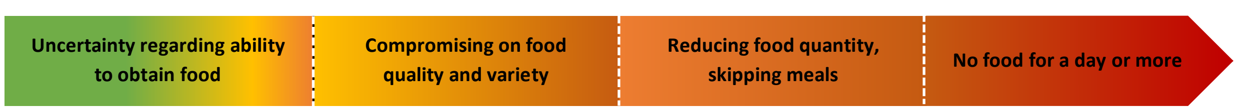
5 FOOD AND WATER SECURITY

Food insecurity is measured at the household level using a modified version of the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES). FIES is an experience-based measure of household food insecurity developed by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). The scale is measured using a set of eight questions, which ask, "During the last month, was there a time when, because of lack of money or other resources, the members of the household:

1. were worried that they would not have enough food to eat
2. were unable to eat healthy and nutritious foods
3. ate only a few kinds of foods
4. had to skip a meal
5. ate less than they thought they should eat
6. ran out of food
7. were hungry but did not eat
8. went without eating for a whole day"

The calculation of FIES entails assigning households with probabilities of falling under one of the common food insecurity classes (low, moderate and severe food insecurity) based on their raw scores.[1] For the purposes of this report, however, a *modified* FIES was adopted, which collected information on the set of eight questions presented above at the household-level, with a recall period of the last 30 days. The responses were assigned a binary value of 1 for "yes" and 0 for "no." The responses were then summed across the eight questions; thus, the possible range for the score is 0 to 8. Household food insecurity was then categorized based on the following cut-offs: (1) no food insecurity (0); (2) any food insecurity (≥1); mild food insecurity (1-≤3); moderate food insecurity (4-6); severe food insecurity (≥7). **Figure 5.1** broadly characterizes the varying levels of food insecurity, as defined by FIES.

Figure 5.1 Food insecurity based on FIES



FOOD SECURITY TO MILD FOOD INSECURITY

MODERATE FOOD INSECURITY

This person has:

- Insufficient money or resources for a healthy diet
- Uncertainty about the ability to obtain food
- Probably skipped meals or run out of food occasionally

SEVERE FOOD INSECURITY

This person has:

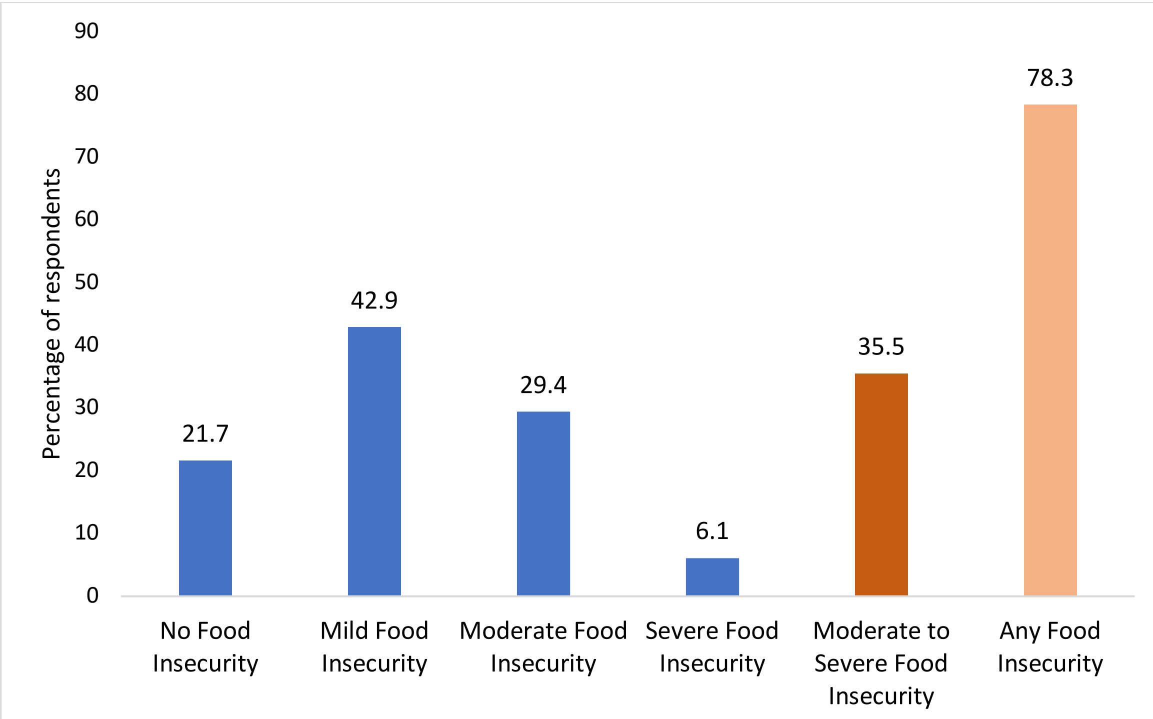
- Run out of food
- Gone an entire day without eating at times during the year

Source: Adapted from FAO

[1] For more details, please refer to the FAO website: http://www.fao.org/in-action/voices-of-the-hungry/using-fies/en/.

78.3 percent of all respondent women reported that their households experienced some form of food insecurity in the past 30 days (**Figure 5.2**). While 42.9 percent of the women reported mild food insecurity, as categorized by FIES, an alarming 35.5 percent of the surveyed women reported that their households experienced moderate to severe food insecurity in the month preceding the survey.

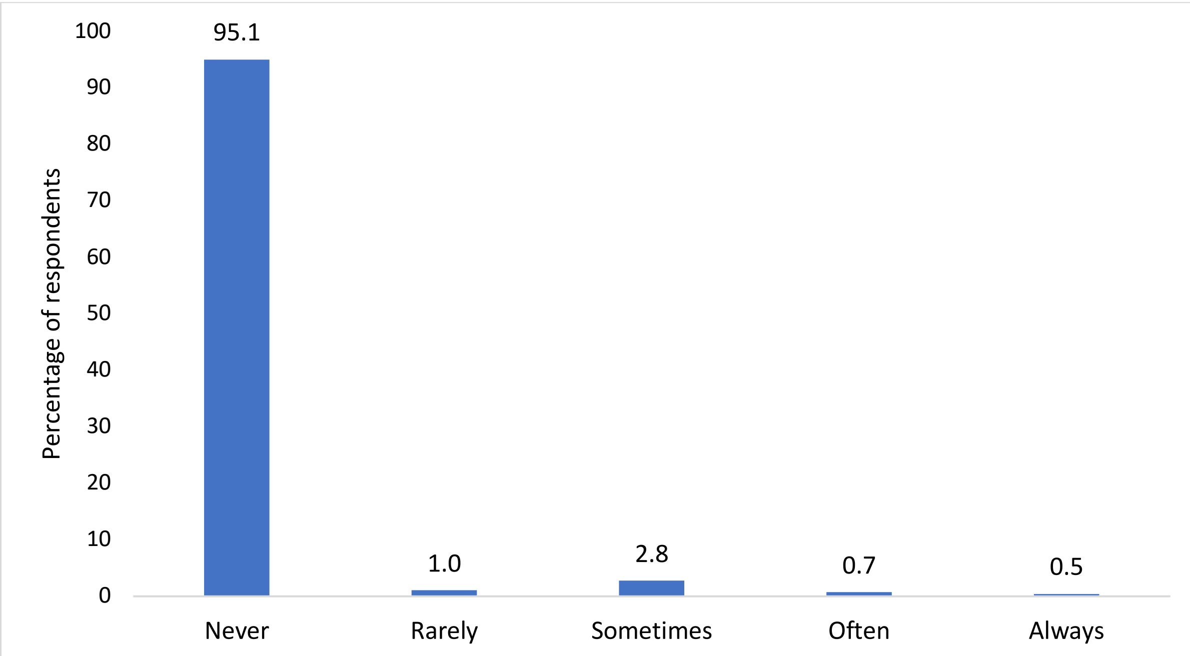
Figure 5.2 Modified Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES) (last 30 days)



Source: IFPRI-PRSSP's gender phone survey, September 2020

The survey also collected information on household's water security status (**Figure 5.3**). More than 95 percent of the respondent women never had to worry about not having enough water for all household needs in the last two weeks.

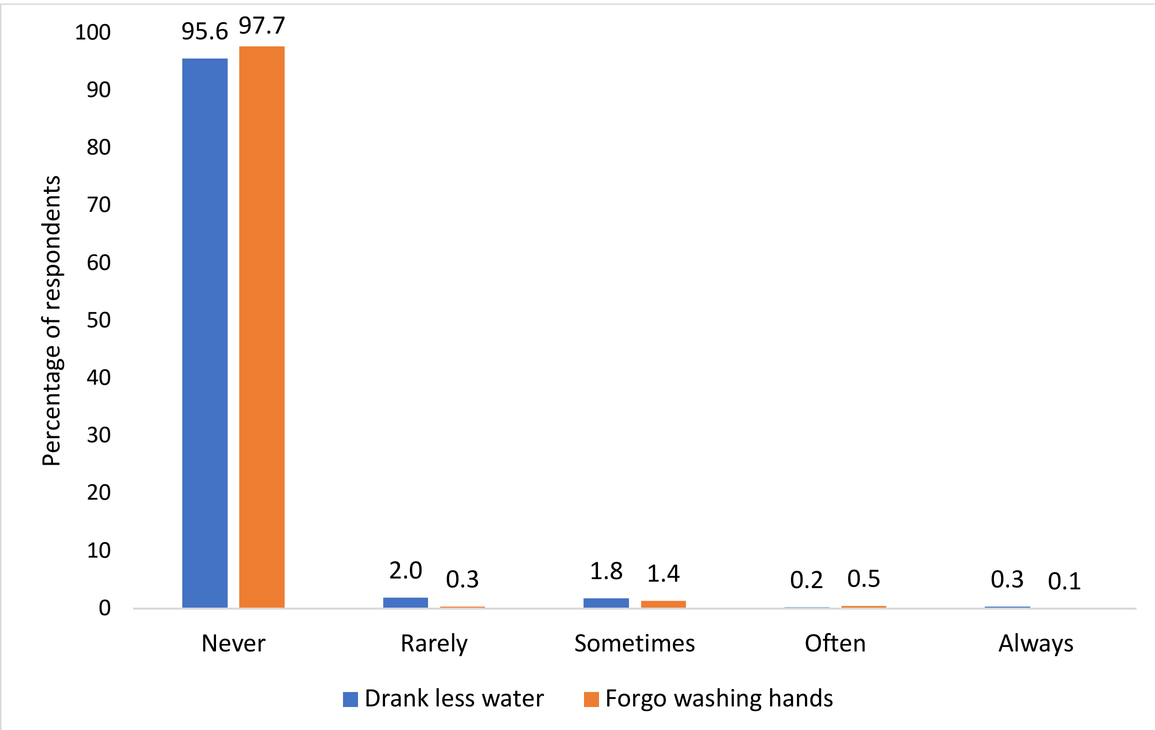
Figure 5.3 How frequently did the respondent woman have to worry about not having enough water for all household needs (last 2 weeks)?



Source: IFPRI-PRSSP's gender phone survey, September 2020

Respondent women were also asked to report how frequently members of the household did not have enough water to drink in the last two weeks (**Figure 5.4**). To this, more than 95 percent responded “never.” More than 97 percent of the surveyed women also reported that members of their household never had to forgo washing hands after completing activities related to defecation/changing diapers/handling animal dung because of problems with the water in the last two weeks. As water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) practices and behaviors at the household-level are key determinants of nutrition, it is encouraging that households have not had to sacrifice critical practices, such as handwashing.

Figure 5.4 Behavior changes related to water, April-August 2020



Source: IFPRI-PRSSP’s gender phone survey, September 2020

The survey also asked whether the respondents have heard of any recommendations to frequently wash hands, especially after going outside, to prevent the spread of COVID-19. To this, 98.6 percent of the respondents said “yes.”

6 WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Women's empowerment is defined as, "expanding people's ability to make strategic life choices, particularly in contexts in which this ability has been denied to them" (Kabeer 1999). Collecting data on women's empowerment is essential to monitor progress in addressing gender issues in agriculture and food security programming, yet the challenge is that empowerment is personal, context-specific, and therefore difficult to measure.

This section gleans insights on relevant aspects of empowerment, including women's time use, working hours, and mobility, and how these conditions may have changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

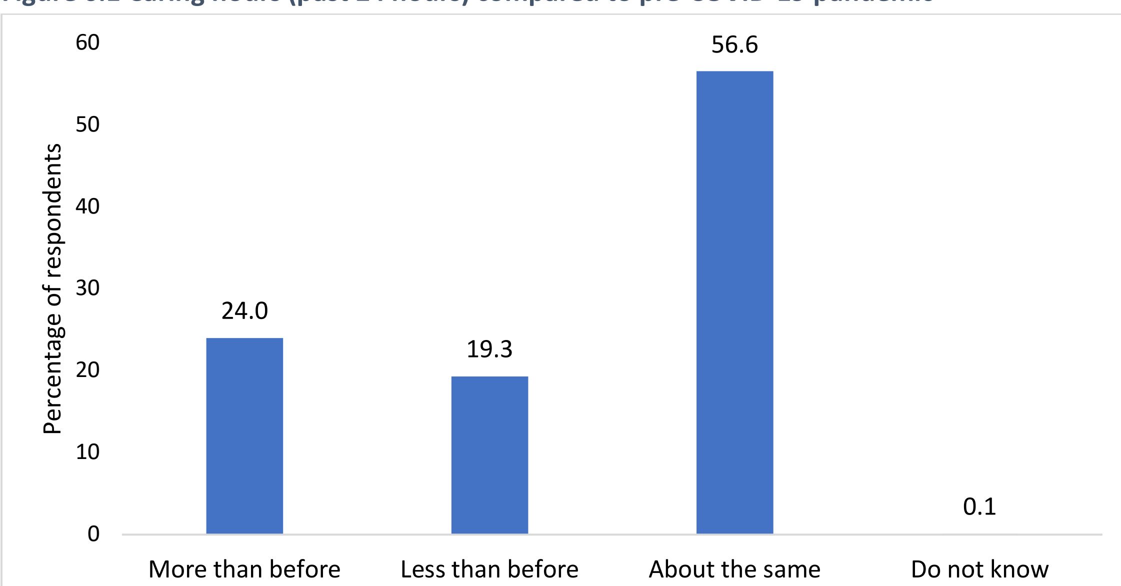
Women's Time Use

Caring Hours

According to BBS 2018 data, women performed 3.43 times more unpaid domestic care work than men pre-COVID (BBS Gender Statistics 2018). How has the lockdown affected women's time allocation?

On average, surveyed women reported spending 2.61 hours over the past 24 hours—that is, from 6:00 a.m. the day before the survey to 6:00 a.m. the day of the survey, caring for other members of their households. Although the majority (56.6 percent) reported that they were spending "about the same" number of hours caring for other household members compared with a "typical" day before the COVID-19 pandemic began, nearly a quarter of the respondents (24.0 percent) reported that they were spending more hours than before (**Figure 6.1**).

Figure 6.1 Caring hours (past 24 hours) compared to pre-COVID-19 pandemic

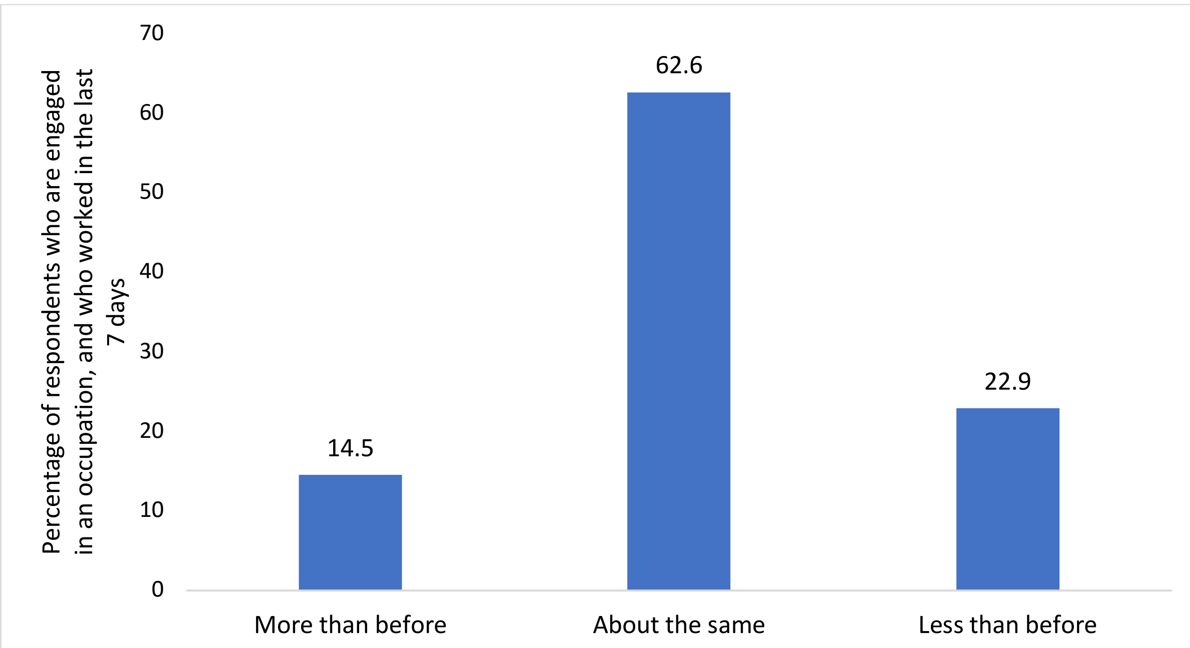


Source: IFPRI-PRSSP's gender phone survey, September 2020

Working Hours

Among women who are employed (women who are housewives, unemployed, and retired/disabled women are excluded), 90.2 percent reported working in the last seven days. These respondents were asked to compare the amount of time spent working in the last seven days versus before the COVID-19 pandemic. The results are presented in **Figure 6.2**. While 62.6 percent of these respondents reported working same number of hours as before the COVID-19 pandemic, 14.5 percent reported working more hours than before and 22.9 percent reported working less hours than before.

Figure 6.2 Working hours (past 7 days) compared to pre-COVID-19 pandemic

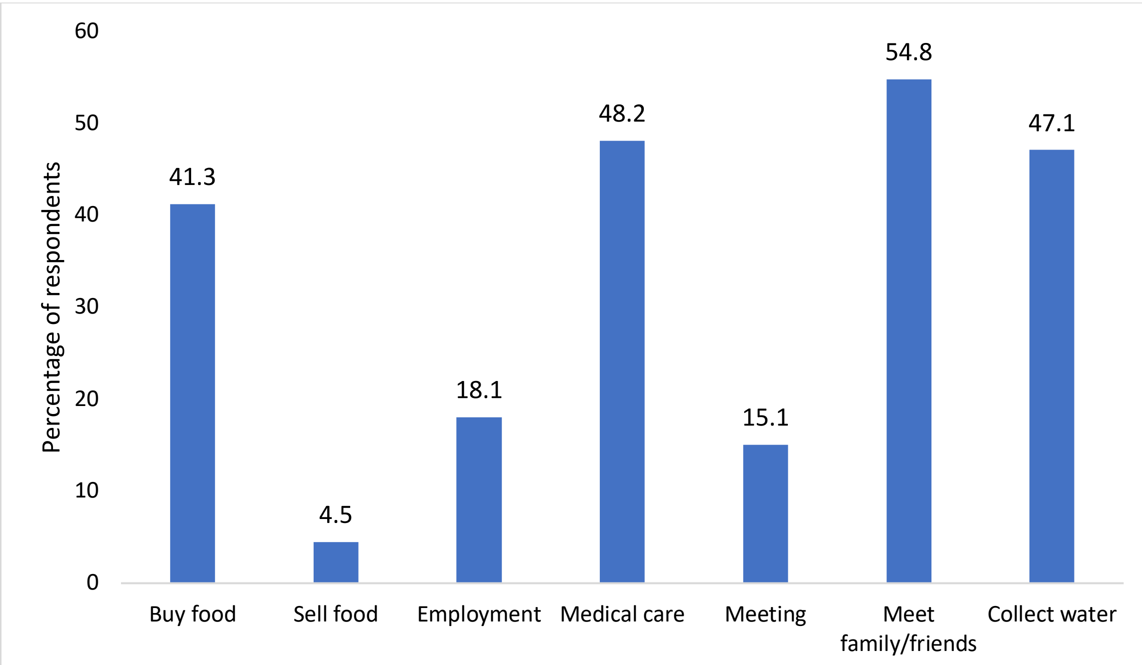


Source: IFPRI-PRSSP's gender phone survey, September 2020

Mobility

Surveyed women were asked if they left their homestead at any time in the past two weeks for various activities. The results are presented in **Figure 6.3** below.

Figure 6.3 Respondents who left the homestead at any time (past 2 weeks)



Source: IFPRI-PRSSP's gender phone survey, September 2020

Among those women who are employed, 28.0 percent left their household in the past two weeks for work-related purposes. These women were also asked to give a month-wise comparison (April through August 2020) of their level of mobility to the pre-COVID-19 pandemic period. The results are presented in **Table 6.1** below. In April, 46 percent of these women did not go out at all, while another 46 percent went outside less than before. Over time, the percentage of employed women who did not go out reduced significantly (to 8.1 percent). However, about 44 percent of employed women maintain leaving their homestead less than before even in August 2020.

Table 6.1 Month-wise comparison of mobility compared with pre-COVID-19 pandemic

	April	**May**	**June**	**July**	**August**
			% of employed respondents		
More than before	1.1	0.9	1.3	2.2	2.8
Less than before	45.9	53.3	58.3	48.0	44.6
About the same as before	7.4	10.9	24.5	37.3	44.7
Did not go out	45.6	34.9	15.9	12.6	8.1

Source: IFPRI-PRSSP's gender phone survey, September 2020

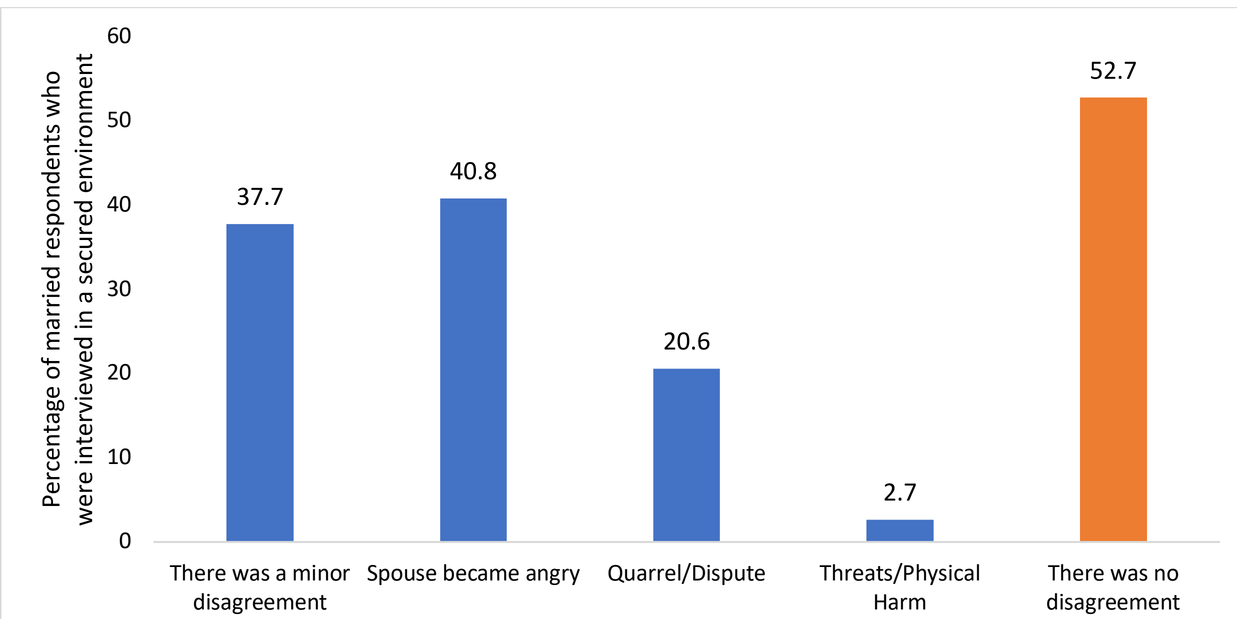
7 DOMESTIC CONFLICT

According to the United Nations, violence against women has increased significantly since the outbreak of COVID-19. This phenomenon has been coined the Shadow Pandemic. Even before the pandemic started, UN estimated that one in three women had experienced intimate partner violence (IPV) (UN Women n.d.). In Bangladesh, an estimated 66 percent of women are victims of domestic violence (Haider 2019). Since the pandemic, domestic and dowry related violence in Bangladesh has increased by 2.0 percent, between March and July 2020 (Financial Express 2020).

This section explores the prevalence of domestic conflict and violence experienced by women in the survey. The sample is restricted to only those women who are married and who could be interviewed in a secured environment at her home (this means, the speaker phone was turned off, and the woman was in a private space). The total sample size for this analysis is 787 women.

Figure 7.1 shows the different levels of domestic conflict with the spouse the respondents may have experienced in the last week. 47.3 percent of the women in the sample experienced at least one form of domestic conflict with their spouse in the last one week. The most common type of conflict experienced was "spouse became angry" (40.8 percent), followed by "minor disagreement" (37.7 percent). 2.7 percent of the women reported receiving threats (of divorce or abandonment) and/or being physical harmed by their spouse. However, it is possible that this figure is underreported.

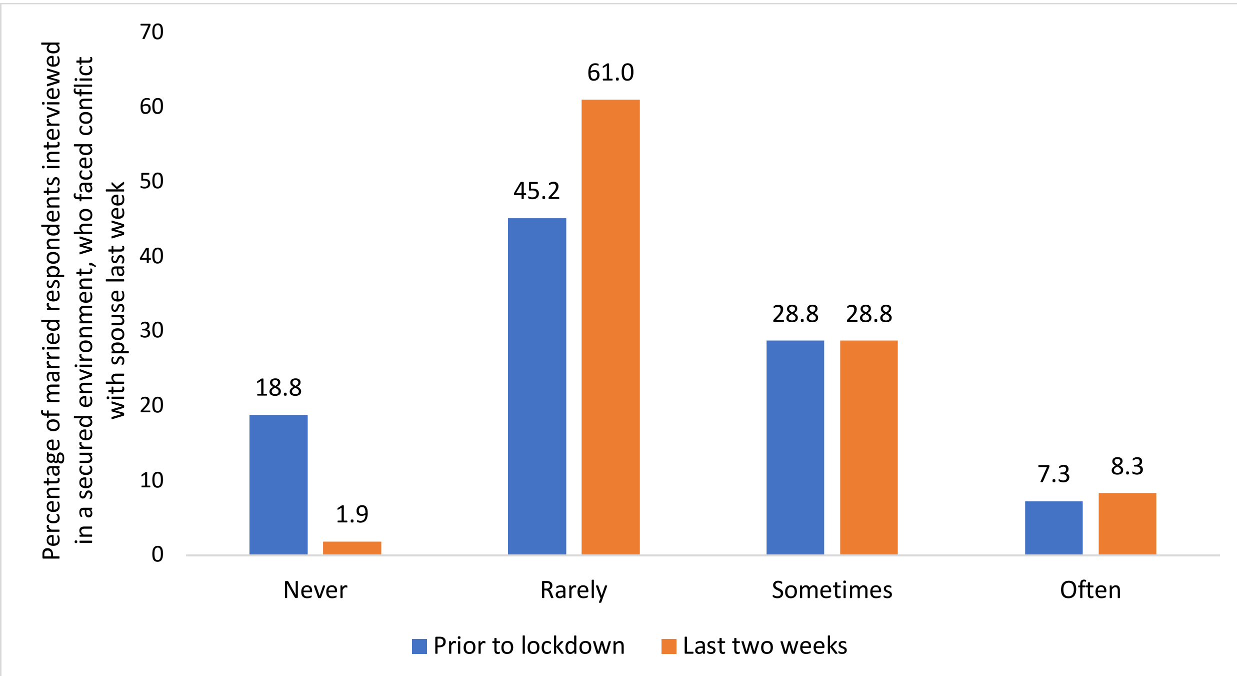
Figure 7.1 Levels of domestic conflict with the spouse (past one week)



Source: IFPRI-PRSSP's gender phone survey, September 2020

Those women who experienced domestic conflict with their spouses in the week before the survey were further asked how often they experienced domestic conflict prior to the lockdown versus in the last two weeks (**Figure 7.2**). From the graph, it is clear that the incidence of conflict has increased. Prior to the lockdown, 18.8 percent of the women reported never facing a domestic conflict, whereas in the last two weeks, this number fell to 1.9 percent, only.

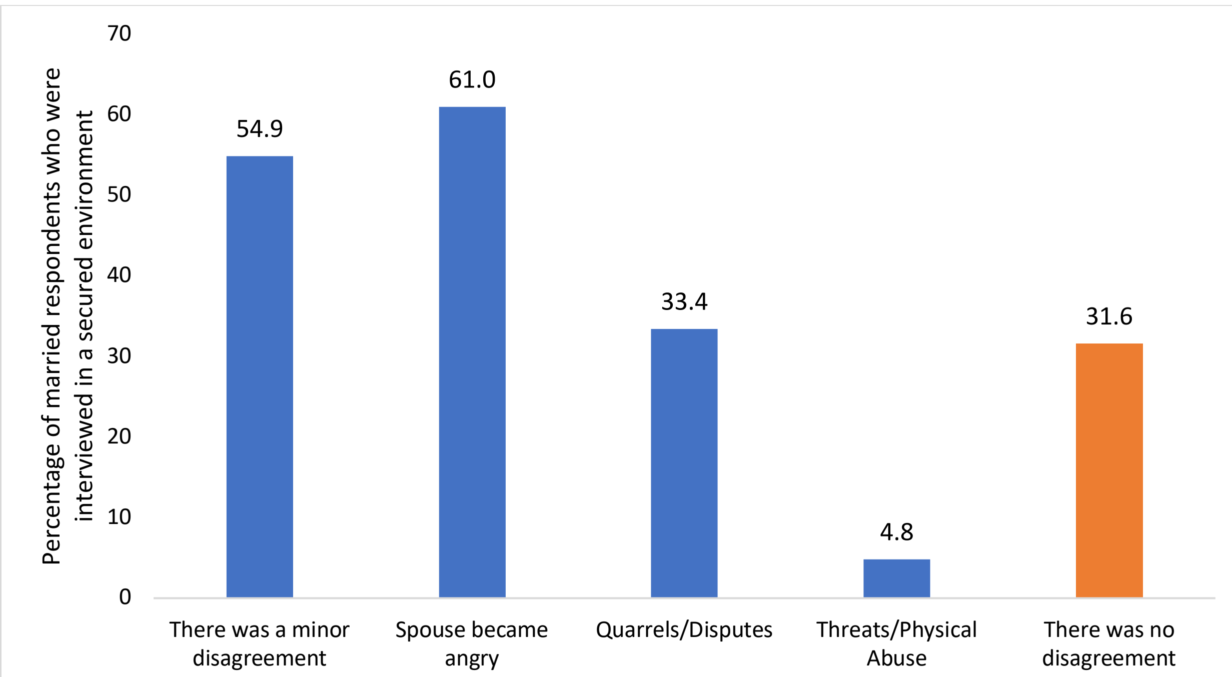
Figure 7.2 Incidence of domestic conflict with spouse



Source: IFPRI-PRSSP's gender phone survey, September 2020

Figure 7.3 shows the different levels of domestic conflict with the spouse the respondents may have experienced during April-August 2020. In the survey sample, 68.4 percent of the women interviewed experienced at least one form of domestic conflict with their spouse between April and August 2020. The most common type of conflict experienced was "spouse became angry" (61.0 percent), followed by "minor disagreement" (54.9 percent). 4.8 percent of the women reported receiving threats (of divorce or abandonment) and/or being physical harmed by their spouse. Although the survey enumerators notified the respondents that some sensitive questions may be asked and recommended for female respondents to be in a safe place where responses may be given without fear of being overheard, it is possible that this figure is underreported.

Figure 7.3 Levels of domestic conflict with the spouse (April-August 2020)



Source: IFPRI-PRSSP's gender phone survey, September 2020

Table 7.1 presents the month-wise frequency of domestic conflict with the spouse faced by respondents between April-August 2020. These data are reported only for those respondents who experienced at least one form of domestic conflict with their spouse between April and August 2020, as reported in **Figure 7.3**. The general trend of the data indicate that the incidence of domestic conflict was highest in April, 2020 and gradually declined over the next few months. However, in May the frequency of conflict increased slightly compared to April (9.5 percent of the women reported being in conflict "often" in May compared with 8.4 percent of women in April), but eventually diminished in subsequent months.

It is important to note that some of these questions involve a more-than-reasonable recall period. Despite this limitation, the information in the table below can help glean some insight into the (female) respondents' subjective 'trend' of domestic conflict over the months since the pandemic started.

Table 7.1 Month-wise frequency of domestic conflict experienced with the spouse (April-August 2020)

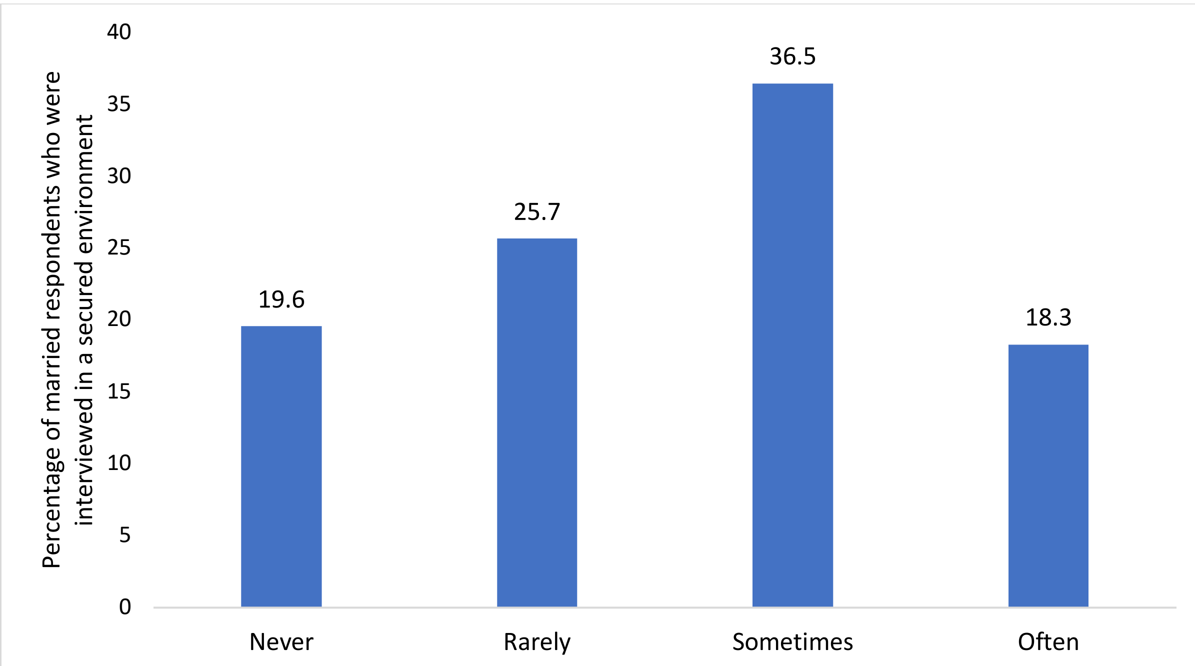
	April	May	June	July	August
			% of respondents		
Never	19.0	24.9	30.1	33.1	35.3
Rarely	44.6	42.6	38.5	40.3	38.5
Sometimes	28.1	23.1	25.3	20.8	20.3
Often	8.4	9.5	6.1	5.8	5.8

Source: IFPRI-PRSSP's gender phone survey, September 2020

Note: n = 538 married respondents who were interviewed in a secured environment, and who experienced at least one form of domestic conflict between April-August 2020

Women were asked how often they were able to work out everyday problems with their spouses. These findings are presented in **Figure 7.4**. Most women (36.5 percent) reported being able to resolve everyday problems with their spouse "sometimes."

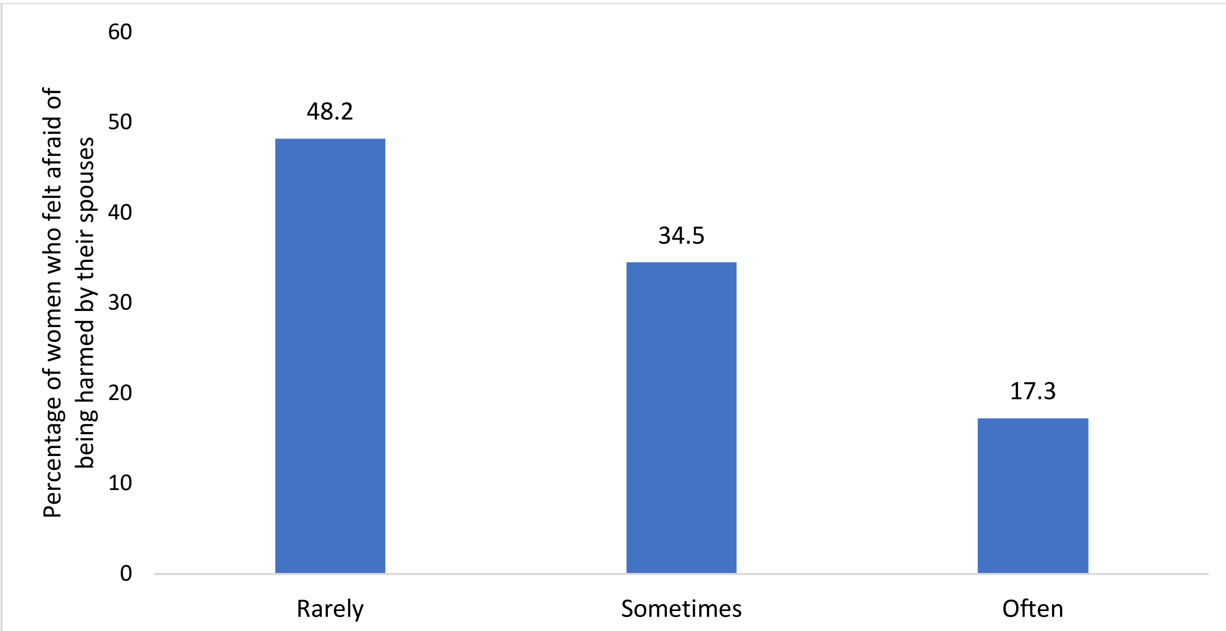
Figure 7.4 Worked out everyday problems with spouse



Source: IFPRI-PRSSP's gender phone survey, September 2020

25.0 percent of the respondents reported being afraid of being mentally and/or physically harmed by their spouses in the last two weeks. These women were then asked to state how frequently they felt afraid (**Figure 7.5**). 17.3 percent of these women reported "often" being afraid of being harmed by their spouses.

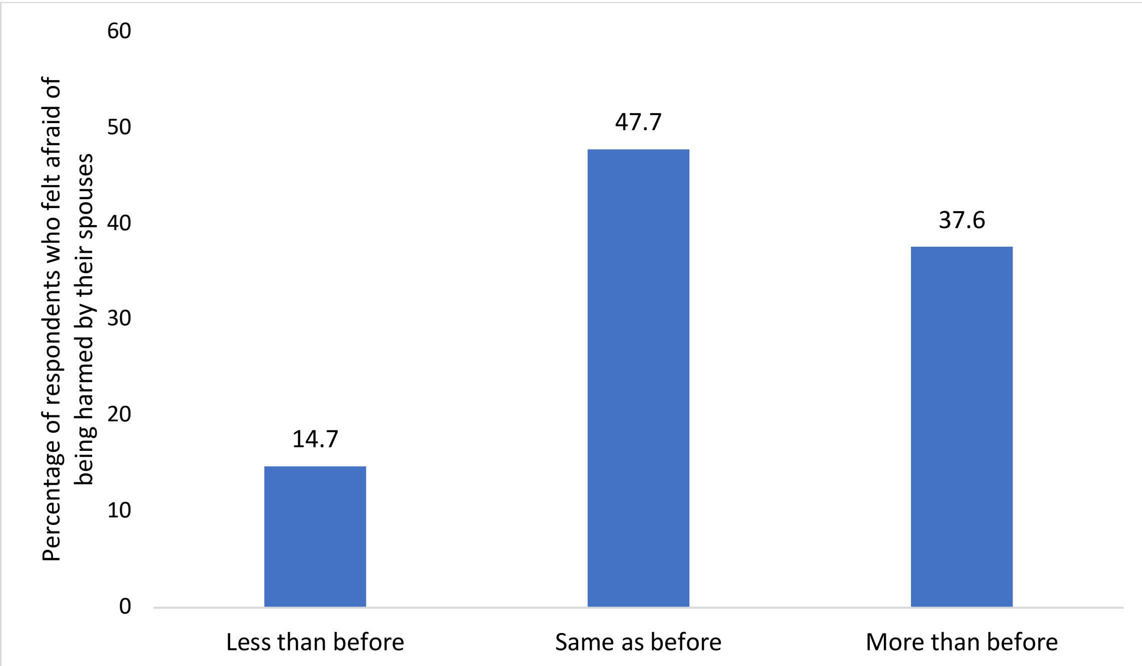
Figure 7.5 Frequency of being afraid of being harmed by spouse (last 2 weeks)



Source: IFPRI-PRSSP's gender phone survey, September 2020

To assess the situation of domestic abuse prior to the lockdown, these women were also asked to compare the level of fear they felt in the month before the lockdown (**Figure 7.6**). While 47.7 percent of these women reported "same as before," 37.6 percent of these women reported being afraid more than before of being mentally and/or physically harmed by their husband.

Figure 7.6 Comparing being afraid of being harmed by spouse

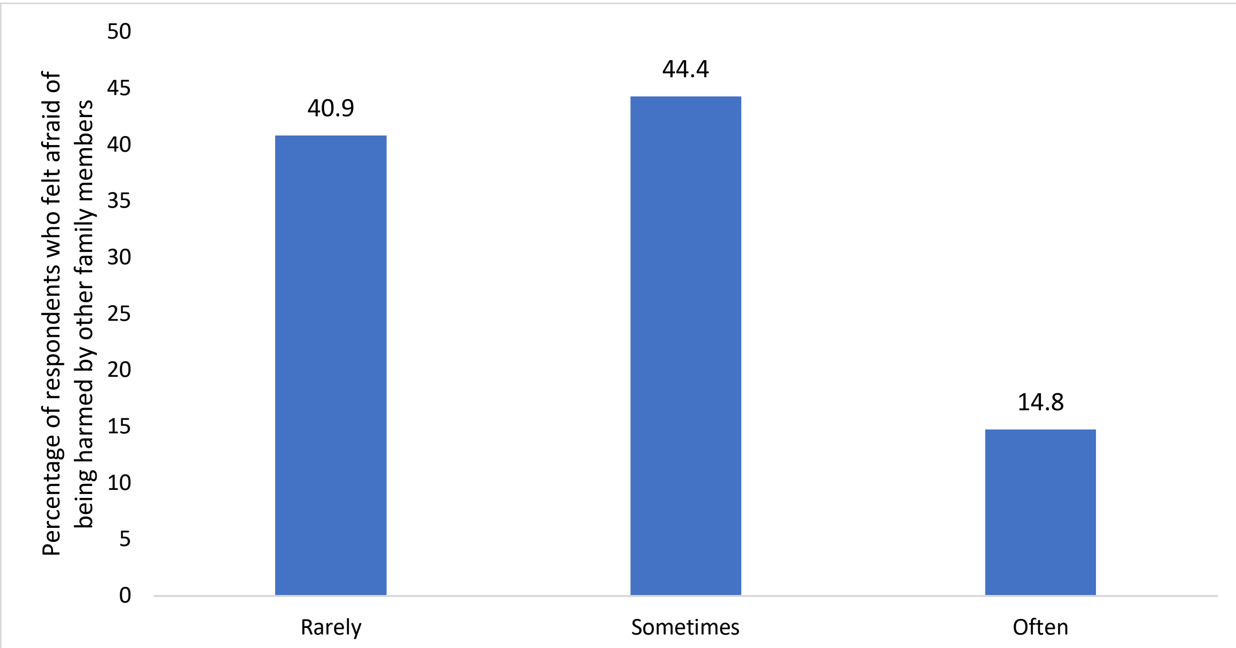


Source: IFPRI-PRSSP's gender phone survey, September 2020

After the lockdown started (April-August), 35.6 percent of the respondents reported being afraid that her spouse may mentally and/or physically harm her (stand-alone survey result not shown in a figure).

The survey also asked whether the respondents felt afraid of being harmed by other family members (not including the spouse) in the last two weeks. To this, 14.6 percent of the respondents responded "yes." Among these women, the frequency of being afraid of being physically/mentally harmed by any other family member (not including her spouse) is presented in **Figure 7.7**. 44.4 percent of these women responded being sometimes afraid of being harmed, and 15 percent of these women reported being often afraid of being harmed.

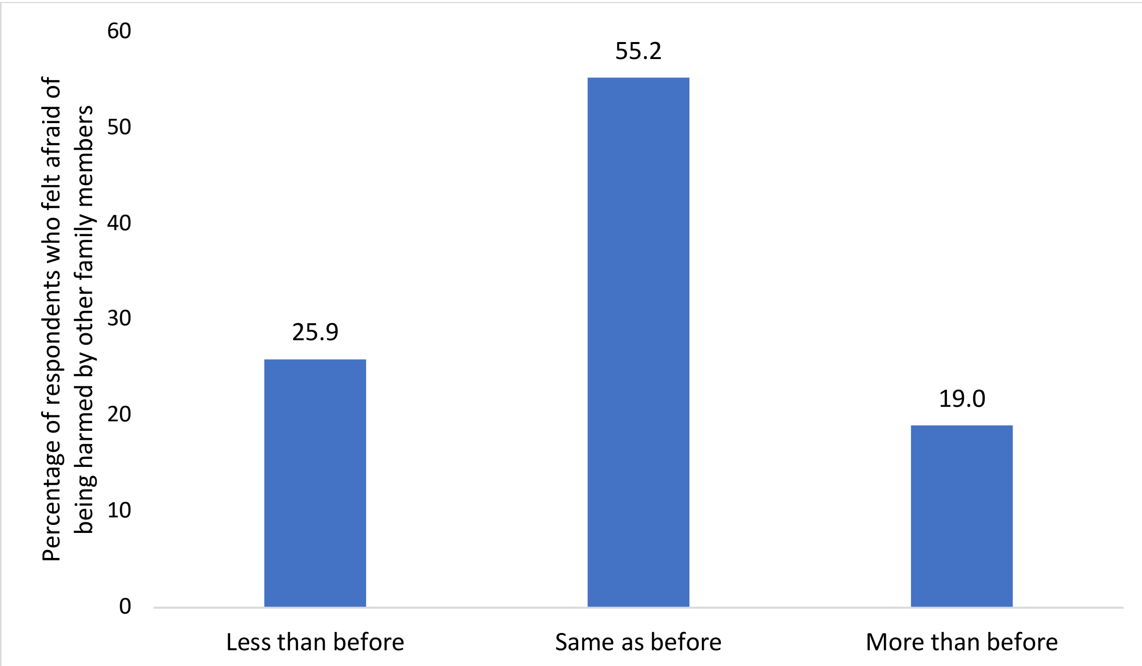
Figure 7.7 Frequency of being afraid that other family members may harm the respondent (last 2 weeks)



Source: IFPRI-PRSSP's gender phone survey, September 2020

These women were also asked to compare the level of fear they felt in the month before the lockdown (**Figure 7.8**). 19 percent of these women reported being more afraid of being harmed by other family members than pre-COVID lockdown.

Figure 7.8 Comparing feeling afraid of or being harmed by other family members, before and since the COVID-19 lockdown



Source: IFPRI-PRSSP's gender phone survey, September 2020

8 POLICY CONCLUSIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a major health and economic crisis globally. In response, the Government of Bangladesh (GoB), along with other countries around the world, imposed policy measures to contain the spread of the virus. While these measures have been necessary and commendable, they have resulted in serious disruptions in the economy and livelihoods.

Although the COVID-19 virus is gender-neutral, its economic and social stresses have disproportionate adverse impacts on women. A recent IFPRI-PRSSP study reveals remarkable improvements in women's empowerment and gender equality in the Feed the Future ZOI in Bangladesh over the last decade (Feed the Future 2020). These hard-earned and commendable gains are under threat due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

To date, there has been no rigorous research conducted to quantify the effects of coronavirus on gender-related issues in the Feed the Future ZOI. To this end, IFPRI-PRSSP designed and conducted a telephone survey to assess the effects of the disruptions induced by COVID-19 on women in the Feed the Future ZOI. The policy conclusions in this section are drawn from the phone survey findings to guide USAID's programmatic decisions.

Loss of Income

The phone survey reveals that the COVID-19-induced income losses were pervasive across ZOI households and had severe effects on women's earnings. Over half of women who had earned income pre-COVID had their incomes completely cut-off in April 2020—the first month of the 'general holiday,' or lockdown. While the percentage of women who reported having no income diminished over the subsequent months, one-third of women in the ZOI continued to struggle with no income even five months after the outbreak.

Strategies to minimize women's income losses are essential during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. One way to involve women in economic activities is through entrepreneurship. Women-owned businesses can make a key contribution to household incomes. In response to the COVID-19-induced crisis, the GoB announced a massive stimulus package, which includes loans to farmers at a low interest rate. Specific allocations can be made to small-scale female entrepreneurs. The provision of loans with flexible repayment terms and reduced interest rates for female entrepreneurs can be pursued.

The use of digital technology can be a promising a pathway to promote women entrepreneurs. Offering loans by using mobile phones can reduce excessive bureaucracy in accessing loans and increase access to finance. Women can apply for a business loan by providing information on their mobile phone. Movement and safety are among the top challenges for women entrepreneurs. A digital ordering service can reduce travel time for women to pick up goods for their business. With digital ordering, women can avoid travelling in unsafe circumstances or for long distances. Technical training can facilitate women's use of digital services targeted to their needs, including digital financial services (UNCDF 2020).

Moreover, promoting micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) for food processing is a promising way to generate employment and income for both women and men in the ZOI. Although movement restrictions have gradually relaxed in the months following the outbreak, these constraints nevertheless persist, and could be imposed again if a 'new wave' of COVID-19 infections emerge. In this context, the ability of MSMEs in the food processing sector to source raw materials and perishable foods (for example, dairy, vegetables, animal-source foods) has been limited. Therefore, facilitating forward contracts at predetermined prices and providing technical assistance to strengthen business models, including the use of online marketing and improved packaging to lengthen products' shelf life, can be considered.

Asset Depletion

Surveyed households adopted negative coping mechanisms to mitigate the income shocks in the wake of COVID-19. One-third of respondent households sold at least one asset. Among women who are farmers, the vast majority of them are engaged in cow, goat, and chicken rearing. A large proportion of households reported selling income-generating assets, particularly livestock and poultry. Among those households that sold at least one asset, 60 percent sold assets either belonging exclusively to the female respondent or jointly owned with others in the household. Although the decision to sell assets may help ZOI households recoup lost income in the immediate term, adopting negative coping methods like selling productive assets can erode sources of income for many years to come.

During economic shocks, women's retention and control over their assets are often at risk. One of the objectives of the Global Food Security Strategy (GFSS) in Bangladesh is to build resilience among ZOI households. This can be achieved by supporting improvements in the design and implementation of the social safety net system. A potential safety net intervention is targeted asset transfers to poor women in the ZOI. An impact evaluation has shown that asset transfers by BRAC's Targeted Ultra Poor Program (TUP) lead to sustained food security and livelihood improvements (Ahmed et al. 2009). Similar asset transfer programs include the Char Livelihoods Project (CLP) and SHOUHARDO. Although these programs are much more costly than other safety net programs, given the encouraging evaluation results, asset transfer programs can be implemented in economically lagging and disaster-prone regions in the ZOI to help women accumulate and increase control over assets.

Domestic Conflict

Economic and social stressors, combined with restricted movements and dealing with uncertainties, increase risk for household conflict. IFPRI's gender phone survey collected data to better understand the prevalence and type of domestic conflict happening behind closed doors. Nearly half of women reported some sort of domestic dispute, mostly in the form of verbal abuse. For perspective, 19 percent of women reported never having any conflicts with their spouse pre-COVID, which plummeted to only 2 percent in two weeks preceding the interview—a sign of tension as a result of the changed circumstances. The month-wise frequency of domestic conflict was highest in April and May 2020, which coincides with the months of the lockdown and the highest proportion of households reported lost income.

Although incidences of domestic conflict are likely underestimated due to the sensitive nature of the questions, the survey data provide a notion of women's vulnerabilities amid the pandemic, which have been triggered by economic shocks and enabled by patriarchal values. These findings underscore the coronavirus pandemic as not only a health emergency, but as a crisis that has unraveled progress in gender equality, women's empowerment, and undermines women's safety in their homes.

Women's participation in group-based programs can reduce domestic conflict and violence against women. Research reveals that group-based activities could strengthen a woman's threat point by improving her self-efficacy and self-esteem, increasing her perceived ability to change her situation (Brody et al. 2017). Social ties may reduce intimate partner violence (IPV) by improving women's threat point as well, providing outlets for women experiencing IPV to escape violent relationships (Stets 1991). There are various types of group-based programs in Bangladesh. For instance, group-based programs initiated by Grameen Bank and BRAC, which are microfinance/savings groups. Other group-based programs include some type of training, such as social behavior change communication for improving nutrition and health, business or entrepreneurial skills training, as well as awareness of women's rights, basic education, and community development training.

A recent IFPRI-PRSSP study shows that women's group membership increased dramatically in the Feed the Future ZOI across many types of groups between 2011/2012 baseline and 2018/2019 endline. Overall, women's group membership nearly doubled from 34 percent to 66 percent (Feed the Future 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, women's participation in group-based programs requires strict adherence to protective measures against the COVID-19 virus, such as wearing masks, physical distancing, sanitizing measures, etc. In contexts where in-person group meetings are not feasible, alternative modalities for engagement, such as through mobile phones, should be considered.

An IFPRI study in Bangladesh investigated the sustained effects of social safety net transfers, with or without nutrition behavior change communication (BCC), on IPV after social safety net transfers end. The analysis used data from the Transfer Modality Research Initiative (TMRI), a pilot safety net program in rural Bangladesh in which women in very poor households were randomly assigned to receive cash or food, with or without intensive nutrition BCC. The program was designed and evaluated by IFPRI and implemented by the UN World Food Program (WFP). The study found that women receiving transfers with BCC experienced 26 percent less IPV six to ten months after the program. Interestingly, women who received only transfers did not experience any significant difference in IPV (Roy et al. 2018). TMRI has informed the design of the USAID-funded Nobo Jatra project in the Feed the Future ZOI, which combined safety net transfers with nutrition BCC. A carefully designed research should be able to demonstrate if the Nobo Jatra program reduced IPV among women who participated in the program. If the research shows that the program was effective in reducing gender-based violence, then USAID may consider replicating similar programs in the ZOI.

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