



EFFECTS OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES (PWDs) IN BANGLADESH

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Abstract:

The world faces a serious and intense public health crisis due to the nonstop effects of COVID-19 global pandemic. Persons with disabilities (PWDs) are first victims among all at any types of disasters or crisis. This time it is not different and even more severe. The COVID-19 pandemic has life-limiting implications on PWDs. Despite the perplexity in identifying the total number of PWDs in Bangladesh, one thing is evident that PWDs confront many layers of deprivation in this period of COVID-19 including reduction of income opportunities and inaccessible health services. This study intended to assess to what degree PWDs are affected economically, physically, psychosocially, socially and in accessing the health services and other government interventions regarding response to COVID-19 pandemic in Bangladesh. Both primary and secondary data has been used in this study. Questionnaire survey and interview has been taken as primary data collection from the selected 200 PWDs led families from the selected 8 wards from the 8 divisions of the country. The findings from the research highlights that, PWDs are still being deprived from the COVID-19 response measures. They are mostly affected in personal, family and social level. Their earnings have been reduced even many of them have already lost their jobs. They are not enlisted properly in relief distribution lists and also, they are suffering from malnutrition for not inadequate food consumption due to low income. This research recommends some actions to be done to ensure PWDs inclusive COVID-19 response measures for present and future situation.

Keywords: COVID-19, persons with disabilities (PWDs), effects, inclusion, response measures

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1. Introduction

COVID-19 is a respiratory disease that arose in 2019 in China and stepped into pandemic status due to its very high infectious rate beyond borders occurring from individual to individual. For people with disabilities, the COVID-19 pandemic has life-limiting implications. In spite of the fact that not all disabilities-oriented people are at higher risk to become contaminated or to experience complications from COVID-19, many people with disabilities are particularly vulnerable during this pandemic. Indeed, earlier to the COVID-19 pandemic, persons with disabilities (PWDs) were at greater risk for challenges in accessing healthcare, and other services of everyday living, and maintaining financial well-being (Kweon, 2020; Lenze et al., 2001; Garberoglio et al., 2016; Gopinath et al., 2012; World Health Organization, 2001, 2011). The effect of the COVID-19 on PWD has not been well described, and it is not known whether the pandemic is disproportionately making challenges for PWDs. Usually this is why, inclusion of PWDs to the thought of COVID-19 effect on peoples' life is necessary. The research thus aims to assess the effect of COVID-19 on PWDs including identifying barriers in accessing health care services, and the inclusion status of PWDs in government interventions regarding response to COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Literature Review

COVID-19 is basically a respiratory disorder with symptoms ranging from no symptoms (asymptomatic) to severe pneumonia and death (Guan et al., 2020). The worldwide COVID-19 pandemic has moved quickly across the globe infecting millions. The first case of COVID-19 subsequently named SARS-CoV-2 were first reported by authorities in Wuhan City, China, in December 2019. As the COVID-19 virus spread, there was an ever-widening swell of responses around the world. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a phenomenal worldwide affect. WHO recognizes over worldwide 54,558,120 confirmed cases and more than 1,320,148 deaths till November 17, 2020 ("WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard", 2020).

On 8th March, 2020, the first COVID-19 case was identified in Bangladesh. In South Asia, Bangladesh is the second most affected country after India (Paul, 2020). The Government of Bangladesh shut down all public transport services across the country from 26 March till 30 May, 2020 in order to prevent the spread of this coronavirus (COVID-19) disease. (United News of Bangladesh, 2020). Between 8 March and 16 November 2020, according to the DGHS Press Release, there were 434,472 COVID-19 confirmed by RT-PCR, including 6,215 related deaths (CFR 1.43%). Bangladesh is the top 24th country within the world and accounts for 0.8% of the cases in the world. (WHO Bangladesh COVID-19 situation reports, 2020)

In Article 11 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) described that each state will receive all vital measures to ensure the protection and security of persons with disabilities (PWDs) in situations of risk, armed conflict, humanitarian crises and the event of natural disasters. (CRPD, 2006). In

Bangladesh, about 9.1% of the total population of the country lives with some form of disabilities. (Household Income and Expenditure Survey 2010, 2011). PWDs are considered as a marginalized group in Bangladesh like other low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) and frequently lack access to fundamental rights such as health, food, clothing, education and housing.

PWDs are a vulnerable group who generally has more healthcare needs than others – both common health needs and needs connected to disabilities. The absence of consideration to people with disabilities (PWDs) in the COVID-19 pandemic is unconventional, however not surprising. The PWDs often stay an afterthought, living as invisible citizens. PWDs are equally marginalized in accessing health care and other services. As compared to their non-disabled peers, they are less likely to have private or employer-funded health insurance and access to preventative services, and more likely to report neglected health care needs, have lower social determinants of health (from poverty to unemployment to social separation), and, as a result, have poorer health outcomes (Yee et al., 2018).

Research to learn about individual-, familial-, and community-level challenges experienced by people with disabilities (PWDs) within the current COVID-19 pandemic will be important for creating disability-inclusive crisis preparedness plans. Ensuring disability-accessible COVID-19 information and exact reporting of disability status along with their living conditions in all viewpoints of COVID-19 could be a first and most fundamental step in settling the needs.

3. Material and Methods

3.1 Study Area and Sample Size

The research sample size is 200 hundred (25 samples from each ward) families of PWDs from 8 Wards of 8 Districts from the 8 Division of Bangladesh to represent the whole of Bangladesh. The districts include Dhaka, Cumilla, Jamalpur, Narail, Bogura, Moulvibazar, Kurigram and Patuakhali.

3.2 Data Collection

To reach out the research objectives, the research activities have been conducted by primary and secondary data collection. The information was collected through fieldwork and questionnaire survey. Secondary data has been collected from different sources such as research articles and documents, journal articles, published books and documents, information from specific websites, government and non-government research and policy documents, websites from national and international organizations, government official websites and organizations like Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), etc.

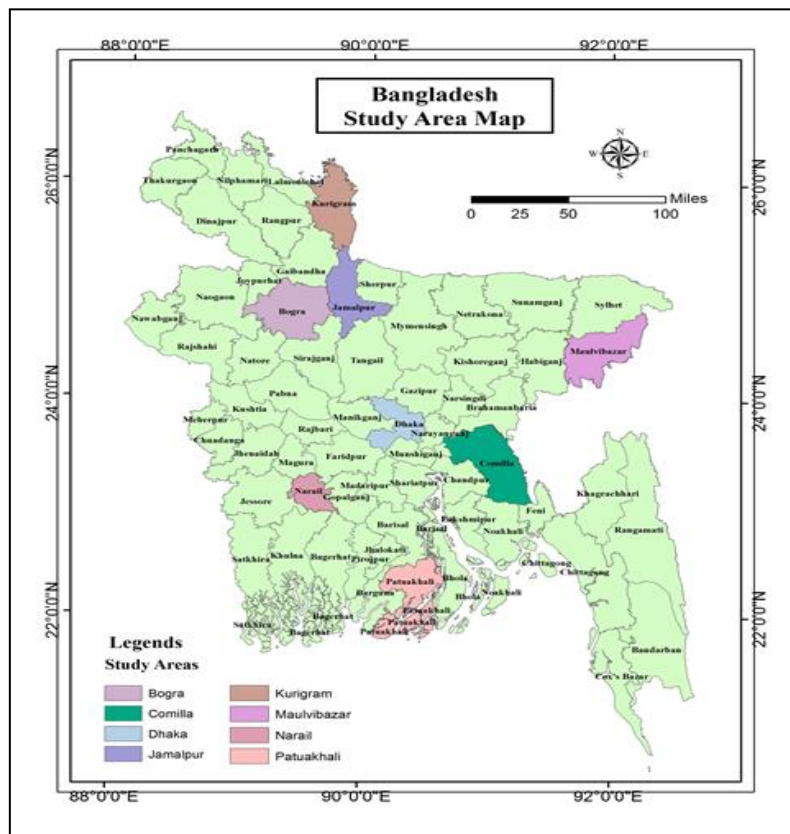


Figure 1: Study Area Map

3.3 Data Analysis

The data collected from both primary and secondary sources has been analyzed by using appropriate numerical and statistical tools such as Percentage, Average, etc. The analysis has been done using KoBo toolbox software and excel analyzer. Different theoretical frameworks have been built to develop the base of the literature review and a connection has been tried to make them combined with the objectives of the study and the collected data, by making rational analysis with the survey questions which becomes the major findings of this study.

4. Findings and Analysis

To avoid gender bias in the findings, the combination of both male and female participants was included for the interview. Gender, age, wealth status and occupation (e.g., farmers, fishermen, vegetable vendors, etc.) were taken into consideration. Among the 200 respondents, 66% respondents were male and 34% were female. From the questionnaire survey, it is found that, 56% of the total respondents generally consists of 3-5 family members, 40% have more than 5 family members and the rest 5% consists of 2 members in their family.

4.2 Effects of COVID-19 ON PWDS

This study focused on identifying the effects of COVID-19 pandemic on the PWDS of Bangladesh. The findings highlight that PWDS are mostly affected in personal, family

and social level. 89% respondents said that COVID-19 has mostly affects their personal life, where 69% answered for social effects and 55% on family effects.

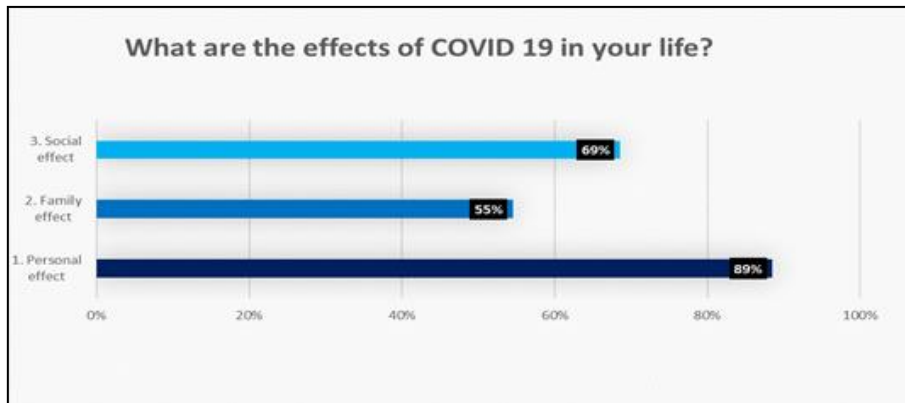


Figure 2: Effects of COVID-19 on PWDs

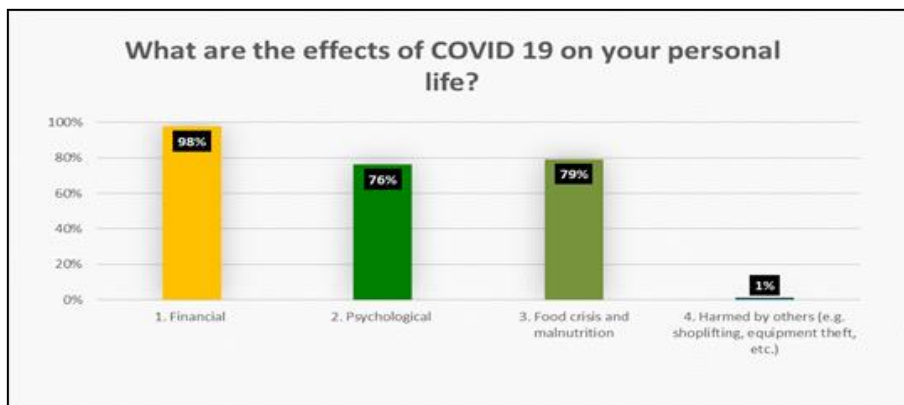


Figure 3: Effects of COVID-19 on PWDs' Personal life

4.3 Personal Effects

In regards of personal effects of COVID-19, 98% of the respondents answered that they have faced financial losses, 79% faced food crisis and malnutrition, and 76% felt psychological effects.

4.3.1 Financial Effect

PWDs are mostly affected financially. 88% of them responded their earnings have decreased and other expenses have increased, salary of 17% of them has decreased substantially, 16% found very less number of customers in their shops leading them to decrease in income, 15% replied that their sales decreased as they had to open their shops/stores for a limited period of time, 6% of them lost their jobs, and 2% had to change their profession as they had not got enough opportunity to earn in their previous profession in COVID-19.

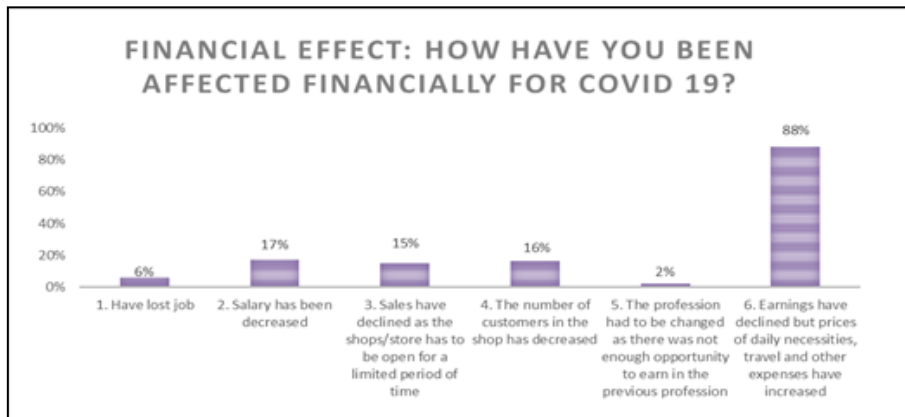


Figure 4: Financial effects of COVID-19 pandemic on PWDs' personal life

4.3.2 Suffering from Lack of Food and Nutrition Consumption for COVID-19 Pandemic

Many PWDs who depend on others for daily living find themselves without support due to movement restriction and social distancing measures. This may leave them at high risk without access to food, basic goods and medicine, and anticipated from carrying out fundamental daily activities. 98% of the respondents failed to manage daily necessities and adequate food consumption due to decrease in income or having no income, 94% opined that they are suffering from nutritional deficiencies due to lack of accessing enough food for their family and 1% answered for other effects.

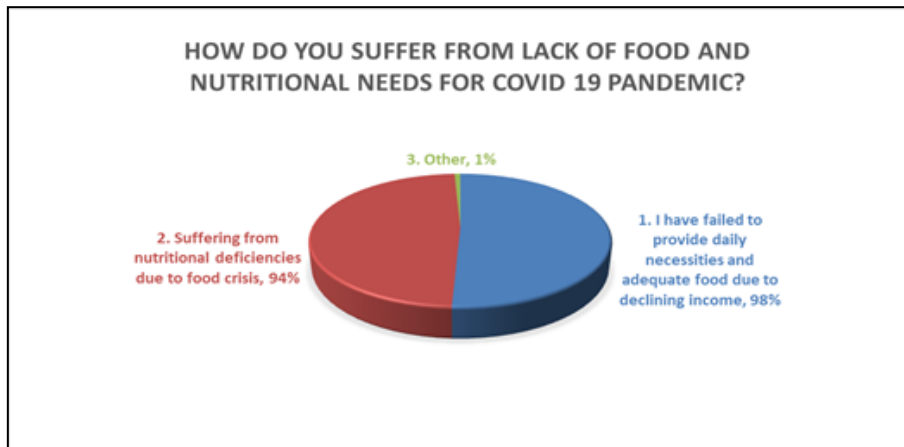


Figure 5: Lack of Food and Nutrition Consumption for COVID-19 Pandemic

4.3.3 Psychological Effect

In regards of psychological effects of COVID-19, 76% respondents answered that they feel frustrated, 61% feeling weaker than before and feeling tired without hard work. 59% of them feel like they had less stamina to do their daily work. 44% said that they are reluctant to eat and their food intake has increased. 36% are suffering from lack of sleep, 26% are used to talk less than before with their family members or others, 24% face problems in sleeping, and 18% noticing significance changes in their weights.

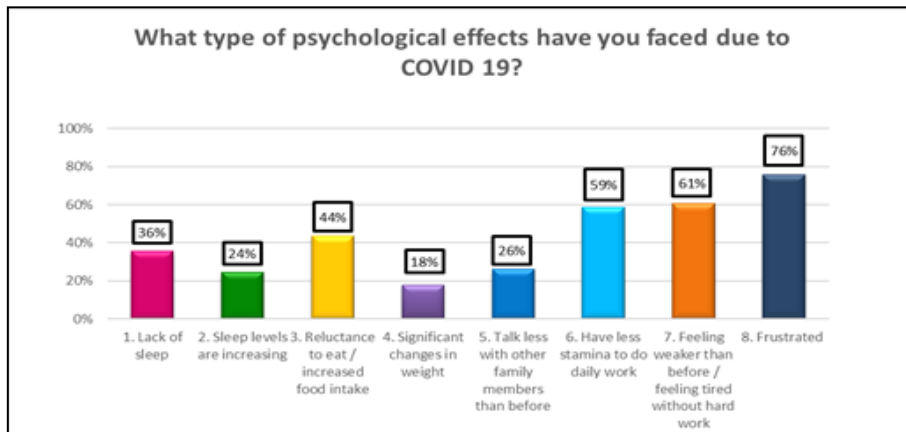


Figure 6: Psychological Effects

4.3.4 Family Effect

COVID-19 is adversely affecting the in-general income of the PWDs family. The need of income speaks to an uneven burden on PWDs and their households which typically face additional costs and consumptions related to disability pulling them more quickly into poverty. 92% said that they are facing difficulties to meet the needs of the family due to decreasing income, 75% of them having trouble to bear the daily expenses of their family, 39% can't afford the education and other expenses of their children, 26% failed to provide daily necessities of their family, and 3% showed other family effects, for example- failed to bear medical treatment of the family members.

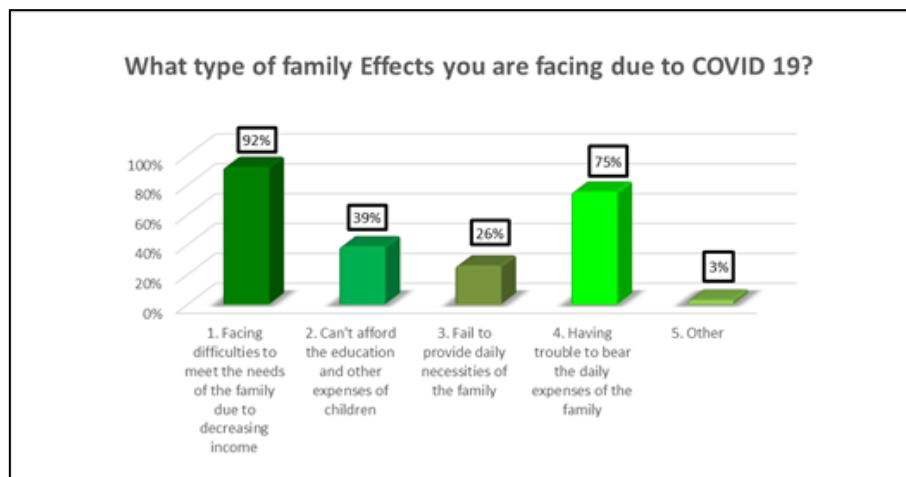


Figure 7: Types of Family Effects of PWDs due to COVID-19 Pandemic

PWDs are at higher risk of violence, especially when isolated. Women and girls with disabilities confront higher rates of gender, sexual, intimate partner and domestic violence. Regarding gender-based violence occurring in the family in COVID-19 pandemic, 19% female respondents said that they are being neglected from their family, 18% of them have become deprived from good family relationship, 13% said that they have been kept away from family matters. 8% of them has been physically abused and tortured by her husband.

4.3.5 Social Effects

Because of COVID-19 response measures, PWDs confront particular obstructions in carrying out their everyday lives within the society. Generally staying at home restrictions make troubles and new risks to their independence. 77% answered that they can't go to religious place of worship for prayer, and also, they can't attend any social festivals or activities, 66% of them feel inferior to others in the society due to decreasing of their income, 53% can't come forward to help their poor and affected relatives, 29% of them said that their relationship with their relatives have deteriorated, and 5% can't arrange for marriage for their son or daughter. The data indicates that, because of COVID-19 pandemic, PWDs are confronting more difficulties in living in the society

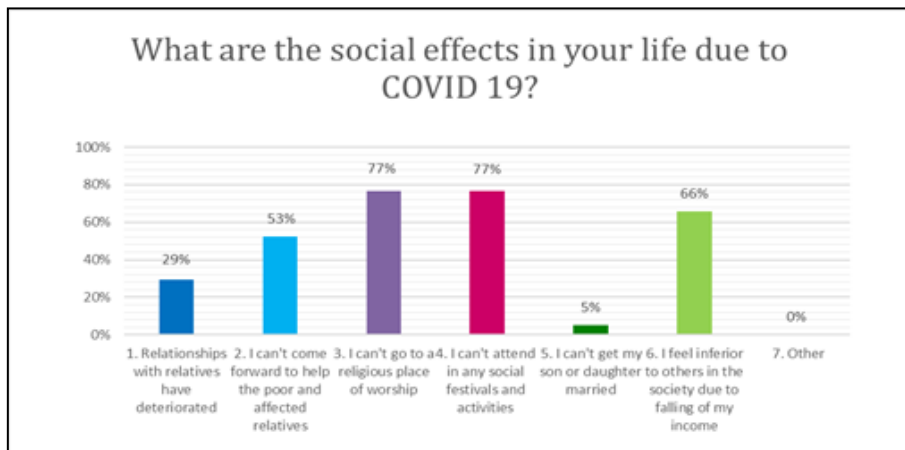


Figure 8: Social Effects of PWDs for COVID-19

4.3.6 Relief or Other Supports Distribution

The respondents were asked about if any relief or support is distributed to cope with COVID-19 situation. Among 200 respondents, only 7% answered that relief support were arranged and distributed in their area. Whereas, the rest of 93% percent respondents answered that no relief or any other support was distributed in their area.

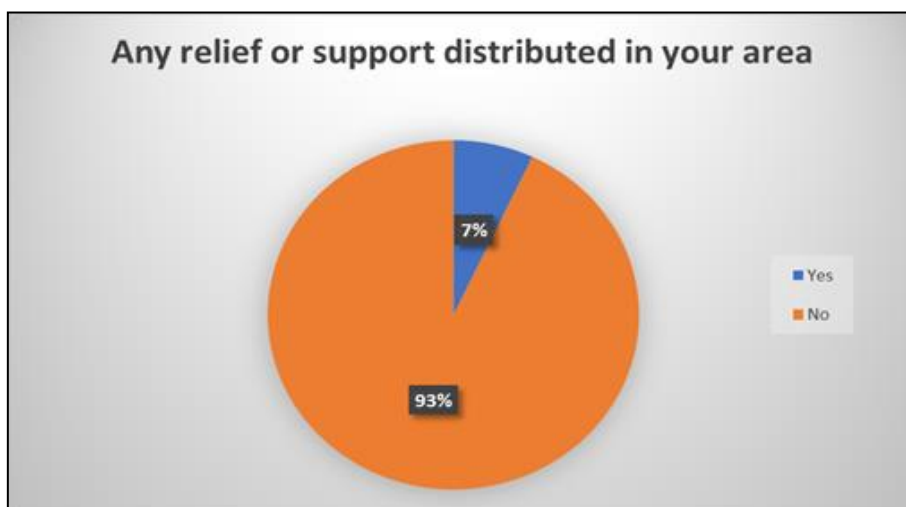


Figure 9: Percentage of Relief Distribution

The respondents who did not get or receive any distributed relief or support were asked about the reason. 96% of them responded that their name was not enlisted in the recipient list of relief distribution. 7% of them didn't get opportunity to receive the distributed relief support amidst the crowd of people crowd due to disability. 6% of them could not be present at the distribution place because of their physical disability, 4% because of the distributing point being far away from their house and rest of 1% showed other reason, for example- they didn't need any relief.

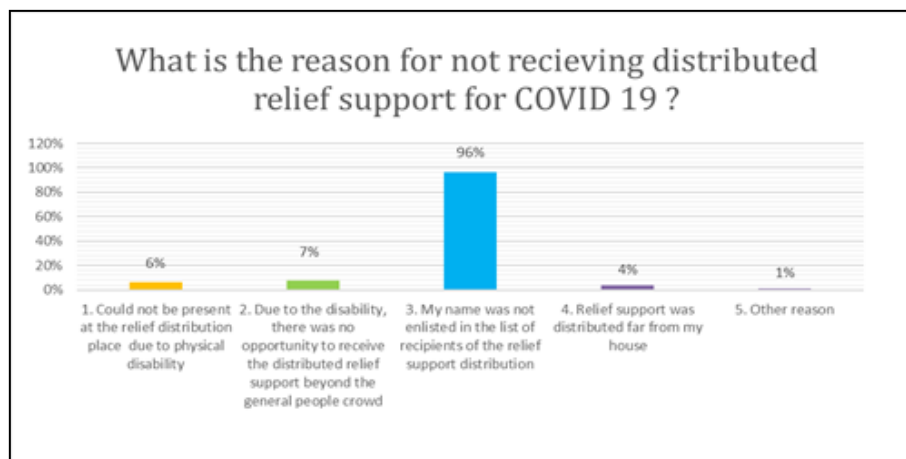


Figure 10: Reason for not Receiving Distributed Relief Support for COVID-19

5. Key Findings

The overall key findings of the research have given in points below:

- PWDs are mostly affected in their livelihood activities as such substantial reduction in income, losing jobs, inability to earn minimum income for meeting family expenses on daily food commodities and medicines because of COVID-19 pandemic.
- Lack of food for daily consumption and financial inability to maintain nutritional food intake are another key triggered effect of COVID-19 on PWDs.
- Only a few numbers (7%) of the PWDs respondents received relief or support.
- Most of them were not enlisted to receive relief distributed during lockdown period in COVID-19 emergency response;
- No specific measure has been taken to address the basic needs of PWDs that leading them to be left-out from inclusive and participatory COVID-19 emergency response mechanism;
- No specific food or cash supports were designed solely for PWDs to mitigate the adverse effects of COVID-19 though most of them live below poverty line and in ultra-poverty.
- Most of the PWD respondents of the research are expecting to receive capital supports and relief from governments, NGOs or any other public or private sectors to minimize the effects of COVID-19 and manage the financial losses they are facing due to COVID-19 pandemic.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The current COVID-19 pandemic, poses numerous effects and challenges, including healthcare access, to the life of people living with disabilities. These serious effects can be minimized through inclusive administrations arranging, including PWDs, caregivers, family members, and healthcare providers, along with the community to a large extent. The government or any other organizations can take the lead to start such a disability inclusive approach together with progressing healthcare access while planning for pandemic responses. This research proposes some recommendations while responding to the COVID-19 pandemic within the setting of some key factors as-

- Capital support to unemployed PWDs or whose income has decreased can enable the COVID-19 affected PWDs get back better.
- Any kind of emergency response including COVID-19 focused relief, capital or other supports distribution process should be accessible and inclusive to all types of PWDs so that they can't be left out, deprived or face any discrimination.
- Actions should be taken to stop gender-based violence and abuse. Specific research should be designed to find out gender-based violence arouse in COVID-19 pandemic situation.
- More research should be undertaken on the effect of COVID-19 on the PWDs to highlight more about their problems and to ensure effective disability inclusive response of COVID-19.

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