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## Rumors and Its Impact on Youth during COVID-19 Pandemic: The Case of Bangladesh

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### Abstract

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, rumors about the coronavirus are spreading around the world and it has hit Bangladesh as well. The paper illustrates the rumors that have been circulated in Bangladesh since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic. Besides, the study has also analyzed how youth, believing the rumors, are being infected with the coronavirus. The study is survey-based research, however, other related secondary data has been used from the Institute of Epidemiology Disease Control and Research (IEDCR) and World Health Organization (WHO). The study found that a large number of youth in Bangladesh believed in coronavirus-based rumors and ignored the government-imposed guidelines to prevent the disease. Religious issues as well as other rumors related to aging, weather, and food became quite popular among the youth. As a result, they did not pay any attention to the coronavirus in the beginning, and despite the government's restrictions, young people are roaming around and getting infected with the virus. Due to this, the level of coronavirus infection among the young population in Bangladesh is much higher. However, this study recommends some policies to the youth and the government to protect the young Bangladeshis from being infected with the coronavirus. In this case, among the other means, raising awareness amongst the youth will be an effective way to prevent the spread of coronavirus and to protect the youth in Bangladesh.

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## INTRODUCTION

In 21<sup>st</sup> century's world system, when the countries have become overly dependent on each other, the world has started to face an extreme catastrophe called coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. This pandemic, which began in the Chinese city of Wuhan (Xu & Li, 2020), is affecting millions of people across the world (Angelova, 2020; Hebebcı, Bertiz, & Alan, 2020; Niemi & Kousa, 2020; Unger & Meiran, 2020). In terms of coronavirus infections, according to the statistics, aged people are at the highest risk worldwide (Kluge, 2020). From the developed to least developed countries, its claws are everywhere. In the absence of proper treatment and cure, the entire medical system seems to be on the verge of collapse. Although some countries have lifted the current lockdown system (Peel, 2020), the coronavirus has not been completely eradicated.

In this age of globalization, Bangladesh has not escaped the onslaught of the global pandemic. Although the prevalence of coronavirus was low in the beginning, the number of infections have been gradually increasing in Bangladesh. In the whole world, where aged people are more affected by coronavirus, the situation is completely opposite in Bangladesh. According to the statistics of the Institute of Epidemiology Disease Control and Research (IEDCR) of 12<sup>th</sup> April 2020, currently, young people in Bangladesh are far ahead in terms of coronavirus infection comparing to the rest of the world (Maswood, 2020).

Several issues have come to the fore in search for the reasons behind the high prevalence of infection among the youth in Bangladesh. Firstly, Bangladesh is a country with a young majority where about 47 million people's age is less than 15 years (Streatfield & Karar, 2008). Secondly, although

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Bangladesh is a youth dominated country, large section of the population lives below the poverty line (Bangladesh: One in Five People Live below the Poverty Line, 2020). Due to poverty, they have less nutritious food in their diet, as a result of which their immune system has not developed well. Third and most importantly, young people have taken the coronavirus lightly and have become increasingly convinced of the rumors regarding the COVID-19 (Jahangir, 2020). However, this paper mainly explains the effect of rumors behind the high incidence of coronavirus in young people through answering the question: how do rumors regarding the COVID-19 assist to increase the vulnerabilities rate of the youth in Bangladesh?

The paper shows that various rumors have been circulating in Bangladesh since the coronavirus outbreak i.e, the coronavirus only affects the elderly, not the young, and the virus will not survive long in hot climates like Bangladesh. In addition, religious rumors about the coronavirus are well-publicized, especially that the virus does not infect Muslims and is a wrath of God for non-Muslims. However, as Bangladesh is a Muslim-majority and youth-dependent country, the country's youth have easily become convinced of the rumors and have accepted the coronavirus negligently. At the same time, believing in rumors, they are disobeying government instructions and wandering around. As a result, according to the paper, the number of young people infected with coronavirus in Bangladesh is increasing.

## METHOD

This paper has been conducted following the mixed method of research—both qualitative and quantitative. The qualitative method, which is descriptive in nature, has helped to discuss the appropriate situation of COVID-19 in Bangladesh. At the same time, this method has given an in-depth analysis of how much and what kind of rumors have spread about COVID-19 and its major impacts in Bangladesh in terms of affecting the youth. In the case of qualitative methods, data has been collected from various academic and non-academic journals, newspapers, and websites.

On the other hand, while following the quantitative method, data has been collected by using the survey method. In this case, the snowball approach has been followed for the survey so that the perception of people about COVID-19 and its rumors can be realized. The survey mainly includes the youth, who represent a large part of the total population of the country. In addition, since the incidence of COVID-19 in Bangladesh is high among the youth, it is possible to get a real scenario by interviewing them. Later, this data has been analyzed along with the available facts from the qualitative fields.

## Data Collection

Considering the research problem, a supple research design was made to conduct the research. To collect the data, a set of questionnaires was given to the young university-level students of Bangladesh as they are more active on social media and they have better knowledge about the COVID-19 and real situation of Bangladeshi youth during this current pandemic. The survey was open for only 48 hours where 188 respondents gave their opinions. Out of 188 respondents, 44.7 percent were male and female respondents constituted 55.3 percent of the total. Again, among the respondents (n=188), 51.6 percent's age-range was between 15-20 years, 39.4 percent was between 21-25 years, and only 9 percent's age -range was between 26-30 years.

## Independent and Dependent Variables

To conduct the study, two different variables were selected: the rumors about COVID-19 as an independent variable and youth vulnerabilities rate as a dependent variable. Rumors regarding coronavirus have been spreading in Bangladesh ever since before its onset. Since these rumors have

been spread freely among the people of the country, it has been defined as an independent variable. On the other hand, the youth of Bangladesh have been believing in these rumors from the very beginning and they have been disobeying the guidelines of the government. As a result, young people in Bangladesh are more susceptible to coronavirus than in other countries. Since there is an impact of rumors on the high rate of coronavirus infection in young people, the increasing vulnerabilities of the youth have been determined as a dependent variable.

## RESULTS

### Rumors Spread in Bangladesh Amid COVID-19

While the news regarding the coronavirus pandemic in China appeared in the media of Bangladesh, a kind of rumor spread among the people of this country. In the beginning, these rumors were viewed from a religious point of view, which was mainly propagated by some Islamic thinkers (Chowdhury, 2020). Later, when the virus spread in Bangladesh, it included religious rumors as well as various other issues. Among the many other rumors on COVID-19 in Bangladesh, according to our paper, the four main rumors –rumors regarding food, religious rumors, aged lethality, and hot weather –are identified which are quite popular among the youth and it is seen that they have given more prominence to these rumors in their walks of life during these COVID-19 days.

Of these four significant rumors, according to the survey data, about 37 percent of respondents believe that religious rumors have been the most influential. On the other hand, according to 35 percent of respondents, large section of youth population believe that coronavirus only affects the aged people whereas about 25 percent of respondents opine that the virus is unlikely to survive in hot climates like Bangladesh. According to only 3 percent of respondents, rumors regarding dietary issues are responsible for high levels of coronavirus infection in young people.

#### *Religious Rumors*

On the eve of the outbreak of coronavirus in Bangladesh, a special group is misleading the common people by spreading rumors through unscientific information and religious misinterpretations. As Bangladesh is a Muslim-majority country, religion-based rumors about the coronavirus are rife here, and the simple and religious people of the villages are easily motivated by these rumors. According to chart 1, according to 53 percent of respondents, rumors are circulating that coronavirus would not spread here as Bangladesh is a Muslim-majority country while according to approximately 20 percent of respondents, there are rumors that Muslim people would not be affected by coronavirus.

When the coronavirus pandemic first took shape in China, according to 12 percent (approx.) of respondents, rumors were spread on Facebook in Bangladesh that coronavirus was sent by God to punish the infidels and the disbelievers and that it was sent to China as a result of the government's oppression of Chinese Muslims. Some Islamic preachers have opined that China has suffered tragic consequences due to haram (illegal food according to Islam) eating and considered the coronavirus as a wrath which is sent by God to the Chinese (Haque, 2020).

On the other hand, according to around 4 percent of respondents, rumors had spread that if Muslims pray five times and offer special prayers, Allah will surely keep people safe from coronavirus. If Muslims pray properly, Allah will be pleased and release them from this wrath. In addition, according to 11 percent of respondents, there are rumors that if someone eats three Thankuni leaves during Fajr Azan in the morning, they will not be affected by coronavirus (Munna, 2020). Interestingly, when coronavirus has spread to Islamic countries, including Iran and Saudi Arabia, the holy land of Muslims, rumors have spread that the coronavirus was sent by God to test the faith of Muslims.

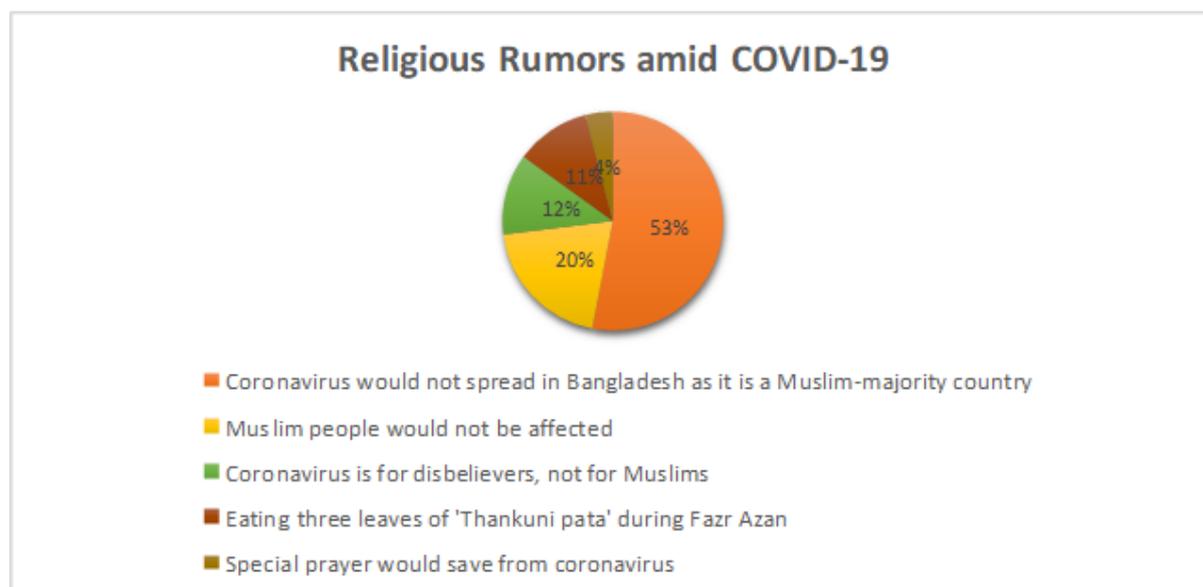


Chart 1. Religious Rumors during COVID-19 in Bangladesh  
Source: Based on the survey conducted by the authors

#### *Rumors Regarding the Lethality Rate of Aged People*

One of the most alarming and self-defeating rumors circulating in Bangladesh during the coronavirus period was that the virus infected only older people more than young people (Hossain, 2020). The majority of respondents, about 77 percent, expressed their support for this rumor and about 22 percent of respondents believe that large section of youth population in Bangladesh thought that the virus did not infect them. According to only 1 percent of respondents, rumors spread that the coronavirus infected everyone but only the elderly died. The credibility of these rumors is further enhanced when the global picture of coronavirus infection emerges in the media.

It has been observed that the number of elderly people infected with coronavirus is much higher in all countries –starting from China to others –where the coronavirus has taken the form of epidemics, especially in America, Europe, and East Asia. For example, according to World Health Organization (WHO), the aged people, whose age is 60 or more, are the most vulnerable group, and more than 95 percent aged people died of COVID-19 in Europe (Keaten, 2020; Lardieri, 2020). On the other hand, in China –the birthplace of the current pandemic –around 80 percent of deaths were among people who are either in the age group of 60 years and above (Coronavirus: Largest Study Suggests Elderly and Sick Are Most at Risk, 2020). This global image has helped the youth of Bangladesh to believe that they will not be affected by coronavirus in any way. Unfortunately, this self-confidence of the youth of Bangladesh has brought a lot of danger, and as a result, it is seen that they are getting more and more infected with coronavirus.

#### *Rumors Regarding Hot Weather*

When the coronavirus pandemic started to affect the people in Bangladesh, various rumors about the weather also began to spread. In the beginning of coronavirus infection in Bangladesh, some posts on Facebook said that people should be less fearful as corona does not spread in hot countries and all the germs will die during the summer (Hossain, 2020). Although not proven, many people are interested in trusting the rumors that the impact of coronavirus will decrease in the heat. In chart 2, according to 10 percent of respondents, there are rumors that coronavirus survives in the low-temperature areas only while 22 percent of respondents believe that there are rumors that coronavirus cannot endure in temperatures above 30 degree Celsius.

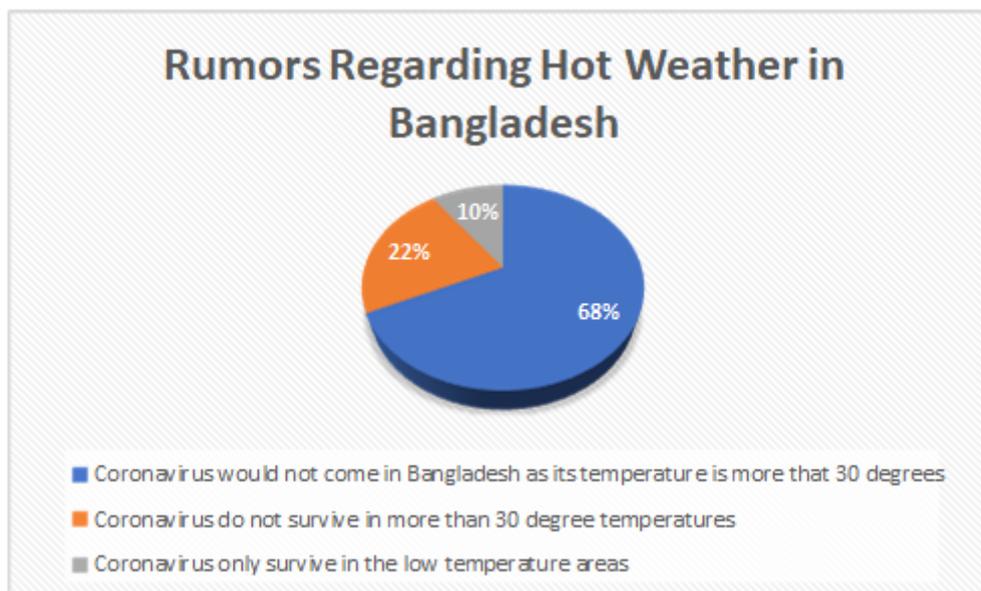


Chart 2. Rumors regarding hot weather in Bangladesh  
Source: Based on the survey conducted by the authors

Besides, about 68 percent of respondents support that there are rumors that coronavirus would not come in Bangladesh because the temperature is more than 30 degrees here. The basic premise of this belief is that the coronavirus initially spread to countries where temperatures were much lower. At the time of the spread of the coronavirus, the temperature in different countries like China, Italy, France, Japan, and America was much lower whereas in Bangladesh, at the same time, it was 25 degrees or more.

However, as Bangladesh is a tropical country, people believe that the incidence of corona might be much less here. However, according to WHO, corona germs can spread even in hot areas (Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Advice for the Public: Myth Busters, n.d.) even though, there is no clear evidence that the germs of coronavirus die in the heat. Therefore, there is no scientific basis for the fact that there is no risk of coronavirus infection in warm temperature countries like Bangladesh.

#### *Rumors Regarding Food Consumption*

One of the rumors that have been circulating in Bangladesh since the beginning of coronavirus is what kind of food should be eaten and what kind of food should not be eaten to survive the coronavirus. According to the study, the most popular rumor circulating about diet is that drinking 3 cups of tea daily can get rid of coronavirus. This has been reflected in the respondents' reactions wherein about 39 percent have answered in favor. The main reason behind this is that a Facebook page that states that a Chinese doctor, Dr. Li Wenliang, who first warned about the Wuhan Coronavirus outbreak, had suggested that drinking 3 cups of tea daily can cure corona patients.

On the other hand, other notable rumors circulating about the diet are that coronavirus cannot attack the immune system of those eating Thankuni (*Centella Asiatica* in English) leaves, which is supported by about 29 percent of respondents. According to more than 12 percent of respondents, it is even reported in some areas that eating farm chickens increases the risk of coronavirus infection. At this time, accidentally, farm chickens in India started to die of an unknown disease, and Indian people have themselves refrained from eating these chickens. Interestingly, sales of chickens and eggs in India have dropped by 50 percent following rumors of coronavirus spreading through eggs. Rumor has also spread that these infected chickens are being smuggled to Bangladesh and people will also get affected by coronavirus if they eat them.

Again, since the onset of coronavirus infection in Bangladesh, according to about 14 percent of respondents, rumors have been circulating that those having Tilapia (*Oreochromis niloticus*) fish are at risk of coronavirus infection in different areas of the country whereas about 4 percent of respondents believe that the rumors that consuming Pangasius (*Pangasius bocourti*) fish in the meal would infect humans with the coronavirus infection. As a result, the people involved in this sector are facing a lot more difficult situation regarding the sale of these fishes. In addition, according to about 2 percent of respondents, there are rumors that eating garlic can get rid of coronavirus. In accordance with the World Health Organization (WHO), though garlic contains anti-microbial ingredients that increase the body's resistance to disease, there is no evidence that garlic protects against coronavirus and it does not act as an antidote to the infection (Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Advice for the Public: Myth Busters, n.d.). Even according to The South China Morning, a woman in China ate 1.5 kg of raw garlic to survive the coronavirus, but as a result, her throat become swelled and she had to be rushed to the hospital.

### Youth Vulnerabilities Amid COVID-19 in Bangladesh

The coronavirus that originated in China at the end of the last year (2019), has spread all over the world today. At first, the virus was confined to East Asia, but over time it spread to the rest of Asia, Europe, America, and all the continents of the globe. Like other countries, coronavirus has spread in Bangladesh wherein the first case of coronavirus was found on 8 March 2020. Although the number of cases of coronavirus was low in the beginning, over time and due to the negligence of people, the number of cases in Bangladesh is increasing drastically. The alarming thing is that, according to the Institute of Epidemiology Disease Control and Research (IEDCR), the highest number of coronavirus patients in Bangladesh are young people –the largest working-age people. The unconsciousness of the youth is putting them in danger in one hand, and their families on the other.

Of all COVID-19 cases, according to chart 3, as of 1 July 2020, approximately 28 percent, 27 percent, and 17 percent were aged between 21-30 years, 31-40 years, and 41-50 years respectively whereas only 7 percent were aged 60 years or above . Although young people are supposed to play a leading role in saving the country from this pandemic situation, they are being affected at the highest rate, which is by no means auspicious for the future of the country.

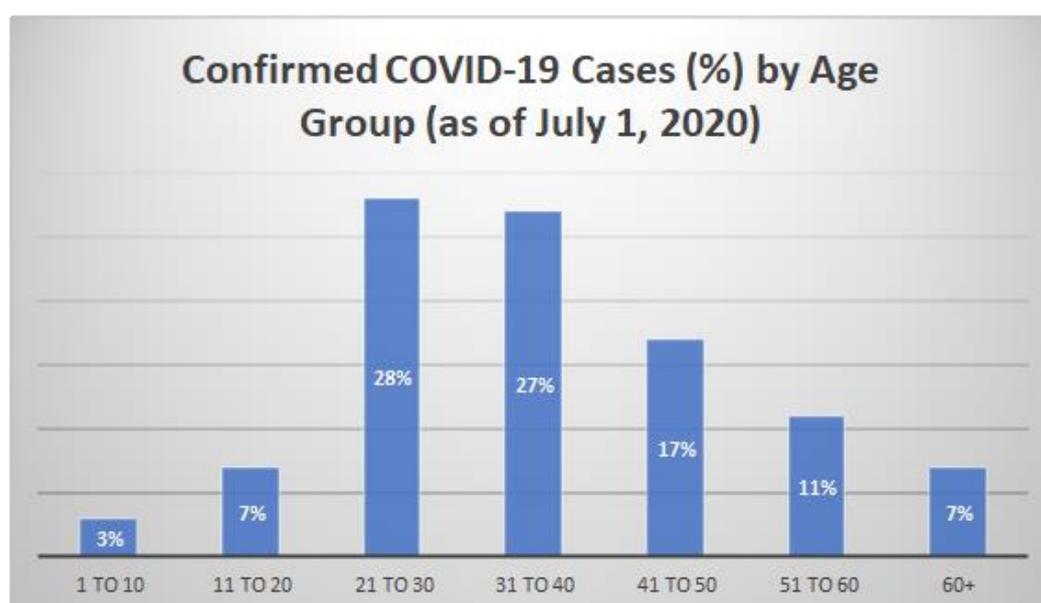


Chart 3. Age Distribution of COVID-19 Patients in Bangladesh  
Source: IEDCR (<https://www.iedcr.gov.bd/>)

On the other hand, according to the chart 4, about 49.5 percent of the respondents think that the reason behind the high incidence of coronavirus in young people is that they believe the rumors and ignore the prevalence of the pandemic.

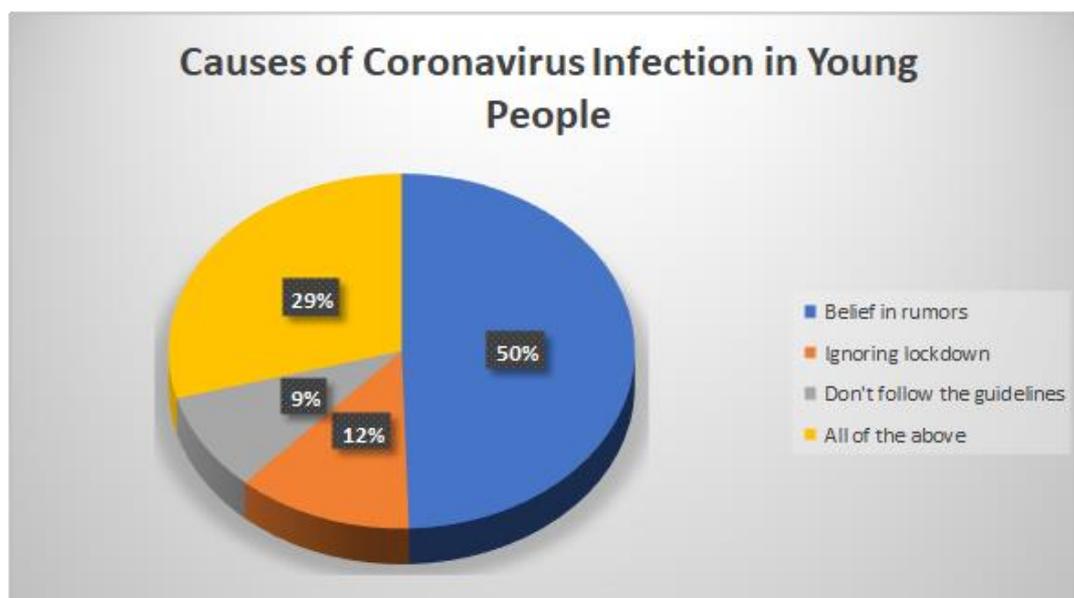


Chart 4. Causes of Coronavirus Infection in Young People

Source: Based on the survey conducted by the authors

Again, 12.2 percent of respondents think that young people ignored the lockdown and wandered around, resulting in a higher number of victims among them whereas 9 percent of respondents think that they are responsible for more of these vulnerabilities due to disregard for guidelines imposed by the government. Among the respondents, 29.3 percent believe that all of these factors are responsible for the increasing affected rate of the youth.

## DISCUSSION

This study is aimed at exploring the rumors amid COVID-19 and its impact on the youth in Bangladesh. The natural tendency of the youth of Bangladesh is to fight various disasters and no longer care about any pandemic. On this occasion, some primitive religious miscreants spread rumors among the youth in various ways. When it is rumored that the coronavirus does not harm Muslims, naturally young believers started to ignore the virus. But the reality is just the opposite as the virus does not know any religion. It is seen that the major Muslim countries, i.e. Bangladesh, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Kuwait are equally being affected by the coronavirus and as a result, the mosques of different Muslim countries have to be shut down. Besides, it has been widely circulated on social media that coronavirus cannot survive in hot weather countries like Bangladesh as the virus cannot exist in temperatures above 30 degrees. But at present coronavirus is spreading at high temperatures in many countries including Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Argentina, and Brazil. As a result, the youth of Bangladesh initially believed this rumor and disregarded the guidelines of the government and the World Health Organization (WHO).

As Bangladesh is a country with a large population –population density is about 1,104.42 (Bangladesh Population Density 1950-2020, n.d.) –the spread of coronavirus is likely to be high. Among the total population, about one-third is youth in the country (Matin et al., n.d.). On the other hand, Bangladesh is now rapidly advancing on the path of development and eyeing towards middle-income countries (Giménez, Jolliffe, & Sharif, 2014). In this case, youth is the main force behind these expectations. In 2016, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) reported that 49 percent of Bangladesh's

population was 24 years of age or younger. The percentage of people aged 60 or over is just 6 percent of the total population. The main challenge after the pandemic will be recovery of the economy and growth wherein where the youth will play a crucial role. Thus, in this context, the increasing affected rate of the youth by COVID-19 has become a serious concern.

Most importantly, the paper identifies the consequences of rumors over the youth of Bangladesh during this current COVID-19 pandemic. During any pandemic, it is human instinct to use what they hear as an effective way to alleviate the disease. One of the scariest aspects of this is that people want to move away from scientific methods to prevent disease and belief in local rumors. Since the people of Bangladesh are not familiar with the pandemic, such information regarding COVID-19 has been spread out and has created fears and anxieties and makes people believe the various rumors. Through these rumors, young people become misguided and disobey the guidelines imposed by the government, resulting in a higher level of infection.

On the other hand, due to the inclination of the youth towards the internet in Bangladesh and the availability of social media, a large number of young people are now using internet-based social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, etc. With the help of this social media, various news and events are easily known. Of these, Facebook is the most popular among the youth of Bangladesh and due to the lack of proper supervision, the news spread through this medium is in many cases false and fabricated. In the wake of the current pandemic, a large part of the rumors about the coronavirus has spread through Facebook, especially rumors regarding hot weather and religion. Besides, a group of people spreads all kinds of wrong information to get more publicity on Facebook, and the youth steeped on it. As a result, the youth of Bangladesh continued their normal life without heeding the strategies of the government and started infected by the coronavirus.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Apart from the increase in the number of patients infected with coronavirus, another issue that is on the rise is rumors. Rumors about the coronavirus are spreading around the world and it has hit Bangladesh as well. Due to the lack of information, lack of awareness of people, and low rate of education, any rumor including coronavirus spreads very quickly in Bangladesh. But the fear is that the young people on whom the country's economy and development depended, are increasingly believing in these rumors and as a result, they are ahead in terms of coronavirus infection.

Due to the lack of proper management and monitoring by the government to prevent coronavirus, a group of people is spreading rumors about coronavirus through various means –especially through social media. As a result, especially devout young people who believe in this rumor are easily ignoring the restrictions imposed by the government and the consequences are dire.

This paper, however, suggests some recommendations to both the youth and the government on how to counteract this rumor by protecting a large part of the country's population from the COVID-19.

### Recommendations for the Youth

Firstly, there is no substitute for public awareness to counter the rumors circulating about COVID-19. In this case, the youth have to come forward because only they can take up awareness activities in the country through stimulating their actions, particularly using social media like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc. The role of the youth is paramount in freeing the country from the scourge of the current unintended coronavirus. In this regard, by raising awareness, the youth of the country need to be made aware that none of the highly hyped rumors circulated are scientifically sound, but that these rumors are putting their lives at extreme risk. Particularly, as rumors are spreading more on social media, the youth need to be more cautious against these through social media and spread more awareness about the horrors of rumors.

Secondly, young people must follow government guidelines to prevent coronavirus. In this case, one has to be aware of oneself and also make others aware. More attention should be paid to prevent any kind of rumors about the coronavirus and to inform the law enforcement agencies of the country if necessary. As religious rumors are spreading more in the country on COVID-19, young people need to inform the public about the unscientific nature of those rumors and the fact of the virus and ensure that they do not harm themselves by believing the rumors.

### Recommendations for the Government

Firstly, since the economy of Bangladesh is largely dependent on young working people, the government has to play a very effective role in the interest of the country so that the youth are not infected with the coronavirus at a high rate. Since, according to the survey data and research knowledge, one of the reasons why young people in the country are infected with coronavirus is because they believe in rumors, so the government and the law enforcement agencies have to play an active role in preventing such rumors and bring those who spread these rumors under the law.

Secondly, it is imperative that the people of the country fully comply with the government guidelines –washing hands regularly, stay hygienic, and maintain proper social distance –for the prevention of coronavirus. At the same time, it is necessary to ensure that the grants or incentives given by the government are distributed in a balanced. In this case, the government has to crack down on any kind of corruption. And if necessary, the cooperation of the law enforcement agencies should be taken.

Thirdly, since rumors of coronavirus are playing a big role in affecting young people, the government needs to mobilize the youth as well as the public to raise awareness among them. In addition, government agencies should publish leaflets on rumors and ways to prevent or get rid of coronavirus on their respective organizations' websites. Moreover, as per the government's directive, the negative consequences of coronavirus related rumors should be publicized in various media so that the youth can be aware of the danger of the virus.

Finally, since the young people in the country are the driving force of the economy, they are entrusted with the responsibility of their own families. Especially in the garment sector, which is known as the main export sector of the country, most of the youth are involved. This huge number of young people, who also face other challenges such as poverty, is being forced to join the work at this extreme risk. As a result, they are easily persuaded to believe the rumors and are forced to leave the house at the risk of their lives, ignoring the truth and not accepting the lockdown. In this case, the government should provide incentives to these young workers and take care of them so that they do not suffer from depression. Besides, it is necessary to strictly monitor those other institutions including garments whether they are following the guidelines of the government properly.

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